

REVIEWS

Tracy Bridgeford, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Editor

***Multiliteracies for a Digital Age.* Stuart A. Selber. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. 269 pp.**

Reviewed by Douglas Eyman
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In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Stuart Selber proposes a three-part framework for building curricula for students who engage in reading and writing in digital environments; he situates this framework as modes of literacy instruction designed to further the development of the engaged and informed citizen-student. Selber proposes that students need to be equally immersed in functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies to fully understand and use digital technologies—these three literacy practices can help students move from uncritical users of technology to actors and producers in their own right. The text is divided into five chapters: the first introduces the three-part framework; the second, third, and fourth address each of the three literacies in turn, and the final chapter, “Systemic Requirements for Change,” suggests methods for integrating the framework on a programmatic level.

The first chapter, titled “Functional Literacy,” provides systems for learning how to learn about technology and how to develop learning strategies that can be used when encountering new interfaces or media. Within this framework, Selber identifies five parameters that define the functionally literate student: use of technology to achieve educational goals; an understanding of the social conventions that help determine computer use; facility with using the specialized discourses associated with computers; effective management of online environments; and access to strategies for effectively overcoming technological impasses (p. 45). One of the key benefits of this formulation of functional literacy is that it moves from a purely instrumental approach of skills acquisition to situating the use of technologies within a rhetorical framework that asks students to see their computer use as tied to networks of literacy, power, culture, and context.

The second literacy framework, critical literacy, asks students to analyze the contexts of the technologies they use as well as working to make themselves aware of the function of these technologies within communities and cultures, including

an interest in power relations and the normally tacit assumptions made by technology developers. As with the functional literacy framework, Selber delineates several defining parameters that represent the critically-literate student, including an awareness and critical reading of the dominant cultural practices that “shape computer design cultures and their artifacts,” cognizance of the use contexts of technology; an understanding of how institutional forces shape computer use, and scrutiny and questioning of representations of computers in popular culture (p. 96).

The final framework, “Rhetorical Literacy,” moves students from the position of critically-engaged user to the activities of the producer, and in the process, engaging rhetorical practices (audience analysis, purpose, genre) to produce new works. These new works will be the product of the critical reflection that is the hallmark of critical literacy (in his schema) as well as the instruments of design engaged in when developing functional literacy. Perhaps the key element of rhetorical literacy is that interface design is constructed as social action rather than technological practice.

These frameworks are powerful heuristics for understanding and teaching computer literacy, and Selber does an excellent job of synthesizing a wide array of previous work to support his project. Nonetheless there are some minor flaws most likely introduced by the audience he most wants to address—humanities scholars who have not yet committed themselves to the important practices of engaging technological literacy as rhetorically grounded. One problem is the focus on computer literacy, as opposed to a larger view of technology literacy or digital literacy, which I believe unnecessarily limits his examples to a very specific material interface. And the section on rhetorical literacy looks primarily to hypertext for a model of critically-engaged production using digital tools; this is a good starting point, but examples and heuristics that include multimedia would have been useful.

I must admit that I was also disappointed that the text did not address multiliteracies as it is discussed within literacy studies—that is, the title leads one to expect that the text will consider issues of multimodality, building on the work of the New London Group, but aside from a passing reference to an essay in computers and composition studies by Gunther Kress, no mention of these established theories of multiliteracies appears in the text. Of course, *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* is a much catchier title than *Multiple Literacy Frameworks for a Digital Age*, although the latter is more accurate.

Finally, this text occupies an interesting disciplinary space: it speaks specifically to scholars and teachers in the humanities, providing arguments for the appropriateness of including technology in humanities-based courses, but the theory he proposes would be equally useful for those who teach professional and technical writing. Indeed, most of the examples of assignments that support the different modes of literacy practice are drawn from technical communication courses, and many of the citations and theoretical groundwork will be recognizable to readers of *Technical Communication Quarterly* as coming from technical communication

scholars. Despite the fact that this text is specifically addressed to scholars in English Studies, the three-part framework is certainly useful for any writing program, including professional and technical writing curricula. The theoretical framework and the heuristics Selber has developed are powerful, and his elucidation of them is both rich and accessible. I would suggest that any scholar or teacher whose goal is to engage students as critical users of computer literacy should consider this a key work, regardless of disciplinary affiliation.

***Online Education: Global Answers, Local Questions.* Kelli Cargile Cook and Keith Grant-Davie. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, 2005. 336 pp.**

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How do we create and sustain online programs and courses? How do we create interactive, pedagogically sound online courses and classroom communities? How should we monitor and assess the quality of online courses and programs? How is online education challenging our assumptions? These are the questions that organize an important new book edited by Kelli Cargile Cook and Keith Grant-Davie. Although computer-based instructional activities still raise more questions than answers, the authors provide thoughtful, informed responses (in 18 chapters) that are not only rhetorically sensitive but also institutionally astute.

As the editors note in their introduction, the first published work on distance education appeared in our professional journals in 1994. Since then, much has happened: Academic institutions have formalized their online efforts at all levels, from the service course to graduate programs, including PhD programs; numerous instructors have had a chance to teach classes with a computer-based component. With increasing frequency, these instructors have either conducted systematic studies or engaged in reflective activities, some of which involve student experiences; and software programs have consolidated around the capabilities of the Internet, creating a relatively stable and somewhat predictable infrastructure for online education. However, something more profound has happened over the last decade or so: Education itself has become more and more fragmented. It is not so easy anymore to distinguish between resident and distance instruction or between traditional and nontraditional students. Cargile Cook and Grant-Davie present a number of (now) ordinary situations that confound conventional understandings of academic structures and interactions. Moreover, the emergent configurations play out in a variety of ways because many local factors help determine the shape and direction of any particular instructional project. So the educational scene is as