Should New Media Literacy Skills Replace Traditional Skills?

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Introduction

The writing of this paper coincides nicely with a current project in which I am involved. I just finished facilitating week three of an eight week online graduate course for K-12 teachers who are trying to learn how to transform their classes into Classrooms for the Future (CFF). This CFF Program is a state funded program whereby high school faculty and schools receive grant money to purchase and implement new technologies into their classrooms in order to help students acquire 21st century skills (Pennsylvania Department of Education). Already many questions have started to arise such as, “Should we really change the way we teach to accommodate student tastes?”, “Are academics compromised when classes become about the tools and entertaining students rather than the content?”, and “We already know that student literacy skills are in decline. How will adding more technology into courses help this situation?” It is this last question in which I am most interested.

Articles abound on changing student characteristics and the impact of technology on their motivation and engagement in the classroom. Marc Prensky (2001) in an article entitled, *Do They Really Think Differently*, investigates the ways in which this new generation of students actually think and interact with information, technology, and each other in ways very different from what Baby Boomers are used to. In this article, Prensky gives an overview of the research findings about how student brain functionality has changed with greater technology use in regards to neuroplasticity and malleability of the brain. This paper will look at how literacy practices and skills may have changed due to the advent of the Internet and other technology tools and will discuss the effectiveness of new technology tools in relation to academic literacy development.
The Status Quo

In traditional forms of academic pursuits (in higher educational settings), students read textbooks and articles, participate in lectures and discussions, and are given written assignments that help them to integrate and synthesize information (Kist, 2004). The definition of “text” was very clear: it meant either a book or scholarly article in a respected academic journal. Sometimes videos were used, or interviews, but by and large, books were objects that could be held in your hands or articles that could be read in the library journal section, or printed from an electronic copy. These were the norm.

Writing entailed often a very linear process following the five-paragraph essay format of introduction including stated thesis, three or more supporting paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. This was modified depending on the content area and expected outcome (lab report versus essay exam or research paper, for example). Reading and writing exercises were meant to not only teach content, but also to help students develop their critical thinking skills. As students progressed through their courses, a more sophisticated thought process should become apparent in student writing samples. Lately, faculty in college settings have started to complain about the lack of students’ ability to write and their unwillingness (or inability) to read and break down more difficult academic texts. What could be causing the decline in traditional literacy skills? Is it a decline, or as some would say, a sea change in the way in which we approach reading and writing in academic settings? (Mitchell & Erickson, 2004) How are things different today, and what is the impact on traditional literacies as we know them?
New Possibilities

One of the first things to change with the advent of the Web was the interaction with hypertext, text that links to a new document with additional information about that topic. So as people read through a document on the Web, they may click on a hyperlink, and move to another article from which they click and move onto something else. Prensky (2001) lists this as one of the new tools that add to the changing nature of our brains. No longer do we read (and therefore write) in a linear fashion. Now our brains think more along the lines of webbed connections between ideas and people. Imagine how great an impact this one new functionality has had on our ability to interact with and process text, and therefore on the way in which we think and then write!

In the early days of the Web, users were mostly consumers. We went to the Web to find information, but with the arrival of the new generation of web tools, (Web 2.0) such as blogs and wikis, an entirely new range of functionality was achieved. No longer just consumers, users of the Web could now easily create content and collaborate with others. It is still unclear and much debated what the impact of this new ability will have in higher education in terms of intellectual property rights and just what constitutes “credentialed” knowledge (Nagy & Bigum, 2007).

In addition to other ways to move through text, are there actually new *types* of texts for us to “read”? Kist (2004) posits that “in addition to print-based media, we should be teaching kids new literacies – so they can “read” and “write” web pages, videos, MP3 files, and animated images, to name a few.” (pg. 30) Yet, when we consider faculty complaints in higher education settings, are we doing students more harm than good by not emphasizing the traditional literacy skills that are still valued in higher-educational settings as the standard for excellence? In the next section
of the paper, we will look at this and other pitfalls associated with an emphasis on the new literacies.

The Pitfalls

Henry Jenkins (2006), in an occasional paper for the The MacArthur Foundation’s initiative called, Building the Field of Digital Media and Learning, describes three pitfalls of the new media-rich classrooms that should be addressed by educators: (a) the participation gap, or who has access and who has not, (b) students’ ethical use of media, and (c) transparency, or students’ ability to take a critical stance towards media. Kealy (2004) in his article on media literacy echoes the same concerns about students’ lack of media literacy in an age when everyone is bombarded by visual stimuli. To what extent are students able to be critical consumers of the media? Jenkins (2006) also makes an important point when he positions the new media literacies as skills which build upon (my emphasis) traditional literacies of reading and writing, including research and critical analysis, rather than substituting for the traditional literacies. It is this point exactly that I believe needs to be emphasized in discussions about the changing landscape of students, teachers, and learning in relation to new media and literacy.

Anecdotally, what I hear from the K-12 teachers in the course I am facilitating mentioned at the beginning of this paper, is that students are savvy users of technology for social and entertainment purposes, but are very weak users when it comes to academic application of the same tools. Mitchell and Erickson (2004) in an article analyzing academic literacy and computer mediated instruction also emphasize how important it is to “consider the educational value of new forms of reading and writing in a university setting.” They also emphasize the importance of helping students understand how to use the tools for academic pursuits (2004).
Discussion

If we acknowledge that students are surrounded by all sorts of print and non-print media that need to be read critically for one to be an educated person in the world today, and if we also understand that expectations of faculty in higher educational settings is that students are prepared to excel in traditional literacy practices, then should the new media literacies be placed on a rung above or below traditional literacy skill-building in importance? Kealy and Jenkins make powerful points about the new skills that students will need to effectively live and work in the media-rich, collaborative, and global world in which we now live. If we view reading as a meaning-making endeavor, then it becomes equally important for students to be able to critically derive meaning from text and non-text items alike. As Kealy (2004) writes, “media literacy involves not only being able to decode a message but also having the ability to make judgments about the worth and validity of the message itself.” (pg. 288)

Lemke (2006) makes a very important additional point to consider in the discussion, namely that “All communication is multi-media communication.” (pg. 5) He provides a simple example to understand the concept. Take the act of writing. The physical act of writing may not seem very multi-media rich, but even here, the writer uses font and punctuation to convey more in the message than the words themselves. If this example is applied to any communication instance from text-based to multi-media rich, the task is the same – to make meaning. We want students to take a critical approach to their meaning-making and this skill is usually not acquired without training and support.

We know that all literacy skill-building takes time and preparation. Whether students are learning to read and write in a traditional sense or with the powerful new media tools, they will
need proper instruction and opportunities to practice with guided feedback. We will do our students a disservice if we forego either the new or traditional media skill-building in our classes. In the world in which we live, students (and teachers) need to understand how to be critically literate in a multitude of ways.
References


