

Literacy Practices and Digital Literacies: A Commentary on Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, and Whitin

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Abstract

The integration of digital tools and multimodal representations in the English classroom has the greatest potential when we define literacy as multiple socially constructed practices. If digital literacies are defined as autonomous tools and isolated symbolic systems, reduced to a set of skills and forms for students to reproduce, then school literacy practices will become further distanced from nonschool literacy practices. Instead, English teachers should engage school literacies in which digital and nondigital tools help students inquire into how multimodal symbols are used to construct and negotiate community identities, relationships, activities, and values. Digital literacies may be especially supportive of such critical inquiry practices.

In the Conference on English Education position paper, "[Beliefs About Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers: Beginning the Conversation](#)," Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, and Whiten (2005) have provided a solid foundation about the many technological and pedagogical issues facing English teachers in this current time of communication transformation. They introduce some key characteristics of digital tools and multimodal representations, the effect of digital tools on reading and writing definitions and processes, the issues teachers face in integrating digital tools into the classroom, and some impacts of digital tools on social, economic, and political issues. Throughout the paper, my response returns again and again to a sense that the discussion focuses inward in an analytical way, dividing up technology into isolated and autonomous parts and would benefit from a more explicit overall stance toward literacy and learning in the English language arts classroom.

Over the past few decades, the overall stance toward literacy and learning that I believe has the greatest potential for grounding our work as English teachers and our integration of digital tools and multimodal representations is the conception of literacy as multiple socially constructed practices. Driven by anthropological fieldwork, Heath (1983), Scribner and Cole (1981), Erickson (1984), and Street (1984, 1995) pushed us away from definitions of literacy as transcendent skills that can be taught in isolation, practiced, then transferred into other social contexts. Instead, acts of literacy are always embedded in social practices of communication, in which members of a community seek to construct particular identities, relationships, or valued activities and objects. School classrooms have their own particular social practices in which literate acts are constructed by participants to achieve the valued ends of school. Beyond school, we engage in a host of other social practices in which we use symbolic acts, some of which include print or images or voice and now, increasingly, digital venues of interaction to construct and negotiate the social worlds we value.

A related theme that follows directly from the idea that we participate through our literacy practices in the construction of social worlds we value is the degree to which that social world embodies democratic ideas. The purposes of the participants, their valued identities and relationships, and their knowledge about the world have as great a role in the nature of the symbolic practices as the affordances of the symbolic tools used in the interactions to constitute those practices. I worry that emphasis and research focused only on the characteristics of digital tools, or multimodal representational systems, will lead to classroom lessons on how to use the tools to produce prescribed forms for the purpose of assessment. Such a focus would ignore the nature of democratic or critical identities, relationships, and knowledges constructed within the literacy practices.

If we ground the ideas about digital literacies presented in the position paper within a perspective of literacies as social practices, continually evolving and overlapping in the multiple discourse communities we either hold or seek membership, then at least one belief in each of the four major foci of the paper requires revision. My commentary will elaborate ideas about those four particular beliefs to explore the possibility of thinking of digital literacies as events embedded in larger social literacy practices.

Focus 1: Newer Technologies v. Newer Literacies

The introduction to this focus defines newer technologies as particular digital tools, but the definition of what is meant by new literacies seems to suggest the same narrow focus on technology because the new literacies “require direct instruction on the use of hardware, peripherals, software, and interfaces” (p. 9). I believe we must more clearly define new literacies as evolving social practices that coalesce new digital tools along with the old symbolic tools to achieve key motivating purposes for engagement in the literacy practices. Without a focus on the purposes for engagement with any symbolic system, our classroom adoption and integration of digital tools is likely to fall within the traditional skill transmission purposes of the English classroom. In fact, the first belief statement in Focus 1 is a call by Postman (1996) to explicate our “ultimate objectives of language and literacy education.” I believe that we need some of this explication in this position paper if we hope to understand how digital literacies work within literacy practices.

I contend that at least one of our ultimate objectives as English language arts teachers should be an inquiry practice into how we use symbols to construct our identities, our relationships to others, and our relationship to knowledge. Then, based on that thinking, we can ask why those particular positions and practices are valued and why we participate in them. Given this objective, we have a clear purpose for examining with students how various multimodal symbols and the digital and nondigital tools we use to produce

and share symbols achieve particular identities and relationships within school and nonschool literacy practices.

We must be careful not to reduce evolving literacy practices to either new or old literacies, as that leads us away from a clear focus on our participation in various literacy practices that use old and new tools and symbols. Print literacy has been an especially adept technology for both negotiating symbolic meaning about experience and for providing a pathway to join and maintain membership in a community. Within school, even nonprint symbols are interpreted through the spoken or written word in the highly valued practices of scholarship. And now with digital tools interconnected words, images, and sounds appear at rapid and simultaneous rates. However, school practices often control both the mode and the rate at which we experience texts, thus construct a dominant discourse that is vastly different from literacy practices in nonschool spaces.

Digital literacies are further separating school and nonschool literacy practices yet at the same time offer the potential to interconnect our primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 1992), especially when we use our learned secondary discourses as metadiscourses to critique the nature, ideology, and power of our acquired primary discourse or the dominant discourses that speak through us. A purpose of critique may also be facilitated by the capabilities of digital tools to display multimodal symbols in simultaneous time and space or in rapid succession, supporting the construction of explicit intertextuality and intersubjectivity central to democratic literacy practices.

Focus 2: The Influence of Newer Technologies on Theories Informing Our Thinking About Text, Language, and Literacy

This focus describes some of the characteristics of digitally produced representations and the consequent impact on acts of communication. The particular belief statement, “Digital technologies require new literacy strategies,” reinforces a deterministic concept about technology and literacy. I caution against treating digital technologies as isolated entities or objects with inherent skills. The strategies we use within a literacy practice are certainly aided by the multimodal, juxtaposing, intertextual nature of representations produced with digital tools, but each new technology does not embody a new set of strategies.

The idea of strategy does fit well within the larger theme of literacy practices, as members of a discourse community use particular symbolic tools in particular ways to gain particular ends; thus, their literate acts are clearly strategic. In fact, I believe that the word strategy became popular in English education as a way to replace the term skills in order to connect our lessons on a language skill to some the pragmatic use in a social context. We should attempt to maintain a clear definition that particular strategies and the types of representations they use and the affordances of the associated digital tools and the skills constructed in the use of these tools and representations are consequences of participation in a discourse community, rather than precursor requirements. If we do not engage students in communicative social practices with new and old symbolic tools, we will slip farther into the school practices students perceive as irrelevant to their everyday media/technology rich lives. This point appears starkly whenever we introduce a technology in the classroom and find ourselves as teachers to be the least “skilled” in its potential functions.

Focus 3: Composing With Multimodal and Multimedia Technological Tools

The first belief statement asserts that “composing processes occur within multimodal and multimedia technologies.” Composing processes do not occur within any technology. As a symbol making activity, composing occurs within a social practice, or most likely, within multiple contesting social practices. Digital technologies may contribute extensively to the composing practices if rhetorical purpose and audience are dynamically served by textual form. When a correct or conventional form becomes the purpose for symbol production, then the literacy practice becomes a process of matching artifacts to predetermined exemplars without regard to the content. No degree of new multimodal digital literacies will shift this literacy practice. This is a particular rhetorical context in which most school composition exercises have been traditionally embedded even as they have integrated the word processor into the composition process. Literary interpretation likewise struggles to break free of an idealist pedagogy in which the teacher holds the correct meaning for a text and the students watch the dancing questions on the cave wall trying to produce symbols close enough to the ideal truth to be recognized as an higher ranking member of the competitive community. Or, as often is the case, students resist the purported values of this school practice and remain silent or subversive as they text message on their mobile phones.

What composition and literature give us are exceptional opportunities to explore identities, relationships, and communities and how our social worlds are constructed and negotiated through symbolic tools (Beach & Myers, 2001). Instant messaging, telephones, television, photography, radio, film, music videos, hypermedia authoring of Web sites and video, digital storytelling, and ubiquitous text messaging are all venues through which we socially construct meanings about the self, others, and the world. It is not a choice we have as teachers of English to decide whether these symbolic tools have value in our classrooms, because they are already integrated into the production of our own as well as students' consciousness. Our choice, instead, is to embrace different social practices in which meaning making can be constructive and collaborative with multimodal representations of experience.

Can we give up the particular practices of transmission of specific ideas and skills enacted by our traditional uses of print in textbooks, tests, and papers? If not, our adoption of technology in the classroom will be a struggle because the multimodal influx of representations characteristic of the digital environment eliminates the characteristic of a single authoritative text and teacher in our past literacy practices. The social practices in which we compose with digital tools provides for our membership in multiple simultaneous, overlapping, instantaneous, and rapidly changing communities, and in that regard, it may engage identities and relationships characteristic of a critical democracy.

Focus 4: Political, Economic, and Sociocultural Influences

The themes of social practice and critical democracy should not be partitioned off into this final focus of the position paper. The act of separating skill instruction from the ideological discourse practices in which symbols operate is a recurring problem. The larger societal issues surrounding the use and access to digital technologies must be framed as the acquisition of the dominant discourses required to gain the material benefits of a capitalist economy. The final belief statement in this focus is a key principle for English teachers to keep in mind as we negotiate the digital tools used in our future classroom literacy practices: “Communicating with technologies is an interactive process involving an awareness of the needs, agenda, backgrounds, and identities of both senders and receivers” (Swenson et al., 2005)

Our needs, agendas, backgrounds, and identities speaks directly to our ability as English teachers to focus our attention on the social practices and discourses of our multiple communities and, in particular, how symbols are contested and negotiated in our classrooms in increasingly complex ways as a consequence of digital literacies. We cannot allow ourselves to become trapped within the tools themselves, analyzing only on their forms of expression and production, making lesson plans that deal with correct process rather than purpose for communication. Our individual efforts depend on the ability of our larger community of English education to construct school as a place to explore and negotiate ideas and issues important to multiple communities using all means of representation and communication, instead of a place to practice new literacy tools in order to, as Dewey (1938) warned, prepare for a suppositious future.

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation that in the long run amounts to anything. (Dewey, 1938, p. 49)

So let us explore the literacy practices of the present in our English classrooms and with our students discover how digital and nondigital tools and multimodal representations function within our discourses. What do they do? What can they not do? How might they help us to better identify, represent, debate, and transform the democratic character of our literacy practices in and out of school?

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