Technology in the Classroom: The New Literacy

By: Jordan Catapano

All seminal moments in the advancement of civilization are centered around communication. Mankind’s acquisition of speech, the invention of the alphabet and writing, the printing press, the Internet – each step along the staircase of communication has empowered individuals to spread their ideas further and faster.

Yet not all individuals could access these powers: Throughout history, with each step, there have been those left on the outside. Reading and writing was often in the hands of the priests, the scholars, and the wealthy; those who could read could access more ideas. Illiteracy, though, was a shackle condemning countless individuals to their narrow scope of experience and community.

Today, a similar divide exists: There are those who can access the Internet (often via technology in the classroom) and freely roam through its riches. And there are those who have limited or no access. Just as access to books made civilizations smarter, the gap between those who can access information and those who can’t enlarges with the disparity in Internet accessibility. Literacy and access have always been the purview of the elite and powerful. And it still is: Literacy is a sign of those who have power, privilege, wealth, and hope.

But now something is changing. What it means to be “literate” has expanded, yet the stakes are the same. Being able to “read” no longer strictly applies to textbooks and stories. A broad new divide is arising between those who can navigate the new landscape of literacy and those who cannot. The entire nature of how we read is changing as digital media becomes more central to how we absorb information. And if the nature of our information and technology in the classroom is changing, then the nature of our literacy must change too.

Technology in the Classroom: What the New Literacy Looks Like

New ways of sharing information call for new ways of processing it. Understanding the new rules of literacy opens up the doors of opportunity for students to more completely leverage their digital environment. While traditional reading skills still occupy the centerpiece of literacy, being able to apply those traditional skills within new contexts and adding new skills is what is quintessential for the new literacy.

First, there is a new “tech” language that has steadily infiltrated our parlance, and possessing a familiarity with tech-related terms is the beginning of the new literacy. For example, Internet terms like “http,” “url,” “blog” “IP address,” and “ISP (Internet Service Provider)” are entry-level terms that relate to how we access and utilize internet resources. Other terms – like “tweet” or “hashtag” – relate to how we interact with others on our “Web 2.0” avenues. Simply knowing the basic relevancies of these terms is crucial to the next phase of digital literacy.

New literacy in the digital environment also comes with a heightened understanding of one’s audience and style. Students should be able to identify the information that is meant for their current needs. Because topics and content are so fluid online, digital literacy involves identifying these trends and perceiving one’s own contextualization within a broader audience. And students, as producers of their own original content, should be able to more aptly identify their intended audience and the style needed to communicate out their own ideas.

But the new literacy goes further. Some argue that in addition to understanding the basic terms and audiences, a familiarity with coding language is necessary. Instead of focusing on Spanish, French, or Chinese, it may be more essential for students to acquire literacy with Java, PHP, JavaScript, SQL, and the like. After all, some argue, who will have the power in the future: The ones who can use websites, or the ones who can make them?

The New Skills of the New Literacy

But knowing additional content and terminology is not enough in the new world of literacy. A whole litany of verbs accompanies this ideal. Traditional literacy says students need to read, comprehend, monitor, identify, develop, annotate, and so on. These skills are still essential, but new literacy also introduces the need to collaborate, curate, evaluate, synthesize, create, produce, inquire, interact, initiate, and innovate. The landscape of information has shifted:

1. Ubiquitous Information: With prolific mobile technology and an infinitude of websites, students first need to learn that they do not have “gatekeepers” to knowledge. Traditionally, students relied on teachers to lead them to the pastures of information. Today, however, students can look up literally any information they desire whenever they choose. The first lesson in new literacy is understanding that information is ubiquitous.

2. Where to Find What: The second lesson, though, is students knowing where to find what they need. With an overinundation of information resources, students need to know which sources to go to for finding which information. In former days, these were called “library” skills – but now the library is everywhere and has millions of resources. Just as students needed to learn how to navigate the fiction, nonfiction, reference, and periodical sections of their libraries, now they need to understand where and how information is organized online.
3. How to Curate and Evaluate: Along with having millions of sources to choose from, new literacy demands a higher degree of sophistication in curation and evaluation skills. Students must be able to filter their content so that they can be exposed to only those sources that are useful and relevant. And they must be able to quickly determine the origination, credibility, and value of any given resource. Hardcover resources in libraries tend to be approached less skeptically because they have been published by a company and represent many individuals’ work. Online, however, there is no guarantee of value or credibility: Students must be more skeptical of where they receive their information. They must know when something is valuable, or when to tune it out.

4. What Your Network Knows: New literacy, it could be argued, also calls for the establishing of personalized digital networks. Nowadays, if a person doesn’t use the Internet, they are looked at as something as an insular dinosaur. In the near future, the same will be said about people who don’t actively interact with a network. Having access to a multitude of others means that literacy is not just about what you know, but what your network knows.

Getting Our Students (and teachers) to Embrace the New Literacy

Students today may already be ahead of the curve when it comes to some aspects of the new literacy. They do, after all, write more than any generation has before them. Many previous generations only really wrote when they were in school; once they graduated, unless they had a job that required certain kinds of writing, they stopped. Today’s generation, however, communicates prolifically through writing: In addition to their schoolwork, loads of social interactions – from texting to tweeting to blogging to posting – are written. While teachers may decry the sorry state of the sentence in the hands of tech-prone teens, the truth is that students begin navigating the world of digital literacy at a young age, and the more they produce and interact via these written media, the more they understand what types of language are necessary for which audiences in which places.

Also, most of what students write is for a real, live audience … except for what they compose in school. When they communicate digitally, it’s usually oriented toward an actual individual for set of individuals. When they compose something for class, the only person who often reads it is the teacher and then the works is graded and discarded – it’s like playing “house” where everything is a pretend imitation of reality. When it comes to the new literacy, teachers need to figure out how to turn their classes from places where “practice” and “imitation” occur to places where real, authentic communication is studied and leveraged. The new literacy requires a mature understanding of audience, purpose, and message as students both read and write for real audiences.

It’s essential for teachers to first develop a new literacy themselves. Although teachers are well-educated and highly literate, they are not natives to the new digital landscape enveloping our culture. Teachers must understand the new nature of communication information so that they can help guide the pathway for students to follow. More seriously, they must become newly literate for the sake of ensuring that their traditional lessons do not become outmoded and irrelevant. At best, teachers can instruct students about new literacy, digital communication, networking, and so on; at worst, schools might become obstacles to students fully understanding new literacy.

Students, in large part, are inundated with this new literacy, but without the guidance and examples of professionals, they tend to learn only what they need to for survival. But we don’t want literacy survivors – we want thrivers. As an enhanced literacy becomes a centerpiece of discussion in our 21st century classrooms, students will be more highly cognizant of how to leverage these technology tools to make themselves more powerful individuals. They will better be able to curate, cultivate, synthesize, evaluate, create, and collaborate through this enhanced literacy than they would have on their own.

Ultimately, we want to make sure that our students inherent the power of literacy, and the wealth, privilege, and empowerment that literacy endows. In the changing landscape of digital information, being able to expertly access and create content will define the true literacy divide.

What do you think about the new literacy? How literate are you, and how do we pass this on to our students?

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