

# Literacy and the New Technologies

What does it mean to be a literate person in society today? What is the future of literacy as new technologies emerge?

At one time, a literate person was one who was able to sign a document. Today, the definition includes a variety of functions in different literacy contexts, both print and digital. Changes in a society and its educational institutions have factored into what forms of literacy are considered more important. This book discusses the considerations and practices for teaching digital literacy.

The Internet was designed for sharing information, both between individuals and among groups of people, through e-mail or attaching files. Many actions previously performed primarily orally could now be quickly and easily transmitted through text. Writing short text messages could replace chatting on the phone. Writing an e-mail could replace leaving a message on an answering machine. The Web has provided a variety of tools and literacy spaces for writing. Writers create new forms of literacy that can easily be shared with a seemingly boundless audience.

## REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Has technology impacted how you teach students to write? In what ways?

## Digital Literacy and the Classroom

Students, who are sometimes referred to with the controversial term *digital natives* and who may or may not possess greater amounts of *digital wisdom* (Prensky, 2009) than their teachers, may expect some forms of digital literacy to be part of their learning experiences.

Digital literacies take various forms in educational settings. They can be used both to support traditional literacies and to introduce new forms in the classroom. Students can discuss their ideas throughout the writing process through synchronous (the reader and writer interact at the same time, e.g., chatrooms) and asynchronous (a difference in time between writing and reading the text, e.g., e-mail, blogs) forms of literacy. Another important aspect of the growth of digital literacy has been the greater value given to *multimodal* forms of literacy, which allow students to remix various media. The resulting product can resemble traditional forms of academic writing as well as push the boundaries of these genres (Prior, 2005). These literacies have disrupted the traditional dichotomies between literacies inside and outside the classroom as well as between home and school, thus providing new forms of texts, new types of authorship, and new challenges to the nature and importance of older forms.

Previous research on changing or hiding identities and on privacy can still help teachers understand how new forms of digital literacy may help students adapt to alternative forms of authorship. These new forms include blogging, where the amount and type of writing can vary; microblogging (e.g., Twitter), where the posts are always very short; and posting to social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), public discussion sites, and photo-posting sites (e.g., Flickr), where users comment on photos.

### REFLECTIVE BREAK

- How do you compare your own level of “digital wisdom” to that of your students?
- How has this comparison affected how you use technology in your classroom?

Teachers often struggle with understanding why students write much more freely on blogs when doing classroom assignments. Newer technologies, such as Facebook, require new understanding on how different literacies can provide new spaces for creating new types of identities and new authorial voices through the use of text, images, video, and music. Digital literacies can also be used to address traditional classroom concerns, such as how to have students address broader audiences or think about plagiarism in different ways. Digital stories, for example, can be shared within the classroom or even posted to YouTube for the world to see. New problems, such as information overload, are often caused by the technologies themselves and may be addressed using sites such as Scoopit or Diigo, which allow teachers to curate only the appropriate information they want students to use.

## Technology Is Not Neutral: Adapting a Technology to the Classroom

One temptation teachers face when they discover a new technology is to consider the technology first (“How can I use Facebook in my classroom?”) rather than first evaluating which technology will best fit the nature of literacy. Graff (1987) asks teachers to continually reconstruct the contexts for reading and writing: “how, when, where, why, and to whom the literacy was transmitted” (p. 4).

Teachers can become overwhelmed by the number of tools and literacy spaces available to them, few of which (e.g., chat, e-lists, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, digital storytelling, personal learning environments, online portfolios) have been designed for teaching and therefore must be continually adapted and modified for use in the classroom. Teachers may fear using these technologies because of their potential for encouraging plagiarism and inappropriate intellectual property usage.

These frustrations can cause teachers (and students) to become unreceptive toward using technology. Teachers, as is probably true for everyone, may feel frustrated when the technology does not seem to work in the way it is expected to; however, this frustration can be an opportunity as well. A technology, like any tool, does not intrinsically determine what happens when it is used; rather, it is dependent on its design and implementation as well as the background of its users—

both teachers and students. Teachers, therefore, always have the opportunity to adapt the technology to their own goals.

Therefore, great care must be taken in choosing an appropriate technology because no technology is neutral. The term *nonneutrality* illustrates how technologies do not operate in a fixed, deterministic way but can be modified or implemented in different ways to change their uses or improve their effectiveness (Feenberg, 1999).

For example, a teacher of an advanced ESL writing course may try different technologies to foster more interactivity among students. The teacher may find that when the students start using blogs after having used listservs or discussion boards, they do not comment as often on the blog as they had on the listserv. To regain this interactivity, commenting can be required rather than optional. Also, students can also be encouraged to cite these blogs in their own papers, which creates a new and different kind of interaction. Bolter and Grusin (1999) use the term *remediation* to describe how the relationship between the user and the technology can be improved by integrating it with other technologies or with additional training.

Nonneutrality also means that the introduction of a technology, and any modifications to its design or implementation, will affect the writing process. Decisions such as allowing anonymity in comments or constraining the need to search for information can affect both the motivation for writing and the nature of the literacy itself. The choice of technology can affect the amount and types of writing students produce: for example, a listserv seems to encourage a different form of writing than a blog, the ease of publishing a text can affect its audience, the ease of cutting of pasting can determine whether students copy or not. Therefore, teachers should continually experiment to determine the best possible choices and implementations.

## REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What is your general attitude toward the use of technology in the language class? Has it had a positive or negative impact?
- How would you redesign a technology to make it more effective for teaching and learning?