Digital Literacies

Digital Literacies Go to School: Potholes and Possibilities

David O'Brien
Cassandra Scharber

As coeditors, we wrote this inaugural department column to offer a working, evolving definition of *digital literacies*. We attempted to mediate the compelling theoretical work in this area with the realties of schools, standards, and dominant policies that sometimes impede progress with technologies that support teaching and learning. The authors that follow in this volume year are recognized scholars interested in how digital literacies practices shape, and are shaped by, youth inside and outside of school and how these practices can be supported by educators. We can touch only the surface of this rapidly changing topic within this volume year, but we hope this department helps readers of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* (*JAAL*) think about digital literacies further, peruse resources (we selected some current ones from the wealth available), and work to incorporate instructional frameworks and practices into classrooms, schools, and districts.

What Are Digital Literacies?

A search on the term *digital literacies* yields a range of results including *digital media*, *new technologies*, *new literacies*, or *New Literacy Studies* (popularly abbreviated to NLS); or things that digitally literate people produce (blogs, wikis, podcasts); or activities that digitally literate people can engage in such as digital storytelling, social networking, and webpage creation. State and national education standards in the United States define *digital literacies* with phrases such as *using computers*, *critically reading webpages*, and *understanding how to view digital images*.

In this department, we do not want to privilege a particular perspective, but given the wide range of digital literacies descriptors, we want to offer a definition that will enable us to focus discussions through this volume of *JAAL*. We acknowledge that literacy itself is a rapidly changing construct and the so-called new literacies are continually morphing (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). Text is an example of such a rapidly morphing element.

From linguistics traditions, *text* has referred to written ideas; thus, *text* is synonymous with *print*. We take the position that digital literacies include the composition and reading of *multimodal* texts. In multimodal composing and reading, ideas and concepts are represented with print texts, visual texts (photographs, videos, animations), audio texts (music, audio narration, sound effects), and even dramatic or other artistic performances (drama, dance, spoken word). From a digital framework within NLS, a text is a multimodal intentional representation with purposes and boundaries understood within a given sociocultural domain. We define *digital literacies* as socially situated practices supported by skills,

strategies, and stances that enable the representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools. Digitally literate people not only represent an idea by selecting modes and tools but also plan how to spatially and temporally juxtapose multimodal texts to best represent ideas. Digital literacies enable the bridging and complementing of traditional print literacies with other media.

Potholes and Possibilities

From an NLS perspective, schools, for the most part, promote "old" print-based literacies in instruction, curriculum content, and assessment. Once the school day is over, youth gravitate to and use "new" digital literacies. At the risk of endorsing a false binary, we can say that young people are engaging in different literacy practices inside and outside of school. Digital literacies potholes concern reactions to the perceived polarization at two extremes: either (1) attempting to engage youth in school by mapping the most appealing aspects of digital literacies onto the curriculum or (2) positioning digital practices as not only ineffective but even detrimental to schooling. The possibilities of digital literacies relate to bridging the new with the old in ways that will gradually transform how youth express ideas and learn in schools using new emerging digital tools.

Policies, Standards, and Accountability

The most formidable pothole is the gap between the digital literacies practices youth engage in outside of school and the ways literacy is framed in official standards and assessments. Although more students are reading and writing multimodal digital texts, schools, school districts, and state- and federally sponsored assessments are almost exclusively print based. Digital literacies and the modes in which the practices are enacted are framed as add-ons to existing standards rather than as a fundamental shift in literacy pedagogy and assessment. It is important to note that this shift does not seek to eliminate old literacies; rather, it proposes to braid together new digital literacies and old or already established literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Policies that stipulate these transformations will affect teacher preparation, professional devel-

opment, and classroom teaching, moving education forward into the 21st century.

Institutionalized Structures of Schooling

A major pothole in digital literacies is that the institutionalized structures of schools are often incompatible with the purposes and enactments of digital literacies. Many digital literacies practices defy the traditional scheduling or organizational routines of schools. Some tech enthusiasts might be tempted to import into school the most enjoyable aspects of young people's social worlds and pleasures gained from creating and using digital literacies. This desire should be tempered with the understanding that the use of digital technologies in schools should be driven by educational purposes rather than social ones. That said, compelling possibilities for using digital literacies tools and practices to engage, motivate, and enhance students' learning abound.

The Digital Divide

There is one popular pothole that has received lots of media attention. The term *digital divide* refers to "inequities of access to technology based on factors of income, education, race, and ethnicity" (National Telecommunications and Information Administration & U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). To rectify this issue, policymakers have funded programs that put students in urban and rural schools that serve high percentages of minority and low-socioeconomic students "next to" technology. To date, however, it has been far easier to install computers than to make them relevant to students' needs or to help teachers and students use them in empowering ways (Cuban, 2001).

Some researchers have suggested that efforts to improve people's circumstances with technology have gone unfulfilled because the digital divide has been defined as a technical issue rather than as a reflection of broader social issues (i.e., Warschauer, 2002). In addition, the divide in schools is more about the quality of technology integration (i.e., Solomon, Allen, & Resta, 2003), which has major implications for teacher preparation and professional development. The ways in which technology continues to be taken up or not taken up in classrooms is cause for concern.

Finally, the divide has also been used, unfortunately, as an argument against instituting school curricula that require tech tools, because such learning and assignments are believed to further advantage students with access to the tools at home. As educators, we need to entertain the possibility that more technology infrastructure and technology-enhanced curricula in schools can engage all learners and level the playing field for privileged and less-privileged youth.

Conclusion

Although the caveat about simply importing digital literacies practice into school is directed at tech fanatics who might be overly enthusiastic, education as an institution is populated by persons who work to preserve practices of the past, few of which depend on or explore the advantages of digital literacies. The perspective we and future authors will take in this department is one of bridging and mediating the best of practices of the institution with the most promising changes enabled by digital literacies.

Digital literacies are here to stay—they are at the core of new literacies. It behooves each of us to seriously consider how best to weave together old, new, and future literacies so that young people leave school literate in the ways of school *and* in the ways of the world. We invite all of you to read the upcoming digital literacies columns and engage in ongoing conversations on our blog (blog.reading.org/jaal)—both media will no doubt provide additional insights and raise further questions.

References

Coiro, J., Knobel, M., Lankshear, C., & Leu, D.J. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of research on new literacies*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Cuban, L. (2001). *Oversold and underused: Computers in the classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2006). *New literacies: Everyday practices and classroom learning* (2nd ed.). New York: Maidenhead.

National Telecommunications and Information Administration & U.S. Department of Commerce. (2000, October). *Falling through the net: Toward digital inclusion*. Washington, DC: Authors. Retrieved March 31, 2008, from www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn00/falling.htm

Solomon, G., Allen, N., & Resta, P. (2003). *Toward digital equity: Bridging the divide in education*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Warschauer, M. (2002, July). Reconceptualizing the digital divide. *First Monday,* 7(7). Retrieved March 31, 2008, from www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_7/warschauer/index.html.

Resources

Beach, R. (2006). *Teachingmedialiteracy.com: A resource guide to links and activities*. New York: Teachers College Press. teachingmedialiteracy.com

Beach, R., Anson, C., Breuch, L.A., & Swiss, T. (2008). *Engaging students in digital writing*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.digitalwriting.pbwiki.com

Burn, A., & Durran, J. (2007). *Media literacy in schools: Practice, production and progression*. London: Paul Chapman.

Edutopia: www.edutopia.org

ePals Book Clubs: www.epals.com/projects/book_club

Kist, W. (2005). *New literacies in action: Teaching and learning in multiple media*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Monroe, B. (2004). *Crossing the digital divide: Race, writing, and technology in the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Travel notes from new literacy studies: Instances of practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Technology and Reading Resources: www.literacymatters.org/tech/read.htm

VoiceThread: www.voicethread.com

The department editors welcome reader comments. David O'Brien and Cassandra Scharber teach at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Minneapolis, USA; e-mail dobrien@umn.edu and scha0809@umn.edu.