

Changing Literacies

“If you can read this, thank a teacher.”

Have you ever seen one of these old bumper stickers? I’d like there to be a lot of different ones. What about, “If you can understand the symbols in a video thank a teacher.” Or “If you can identify the theme in a piece of music thank a teacher.” While my versions may not be as catchy as the old standard one, they make a point: being literate is about so much more than being able to read a piece of text.

A society that reads is a society that learns. Since the explosion of alphabetic literacy across Europe, we in the Western world have always valued the skill of reading. In other places such as China and the Muslim world, this change came much earlier. Having a population that can read, allows (and often may be the root cause of) fundamental changes to occur in society. People who can comprehend and produce their own information on a large scale are much less likely to be led astray and deprived of their rights. Most information in the past was created and presented as alphabetic text, so this coding system was of course the defining mode that people learned to use.

But what happens now? The ability to decode, comprehend, and produce information that is in alphabetic form is absolutely vital and is increasing in importance. Written texts are flourishing and the skill level needed to read them is increasing. But written texts are only one of many choices that people have when they are either obtaining or producing information.

This has been true for a number of years. For example, people have always had the opportunity to paint to create a message, and for the past 100 - 150 years, a limited number of people have also had the tools and knowledge to create a photograph or make a video. But now many people have access to these tools, and to the knowledge to use many different forms of representation. As one of the grade seven students in my class told me last year, “You don’t have to be a rich old guy from New York,” to get your message out there any more.

Being literate is so much more than being able to understand a written text on a piece of paper.

ACCESS

The teacher and the school, as the fount of knowledge and source of all information, was the keeper of many texts. We gave students textbooks and told them to read. People could buy newspapers and a few had books in their homes, but overall, in past times, the ability to access texts was limited. Fast

forward to our society and the ability we now have to drown ourselves in cheap, disposable information from books, television, the internet, radio, magazines, video, etc. In our time, one of the major skills of being literate is the ability to access texts in many different forms from many different sources. Importantly, it is not about searching for texts, it's about finding them. Accessing information, having the ability to search for, and actually find information is a vital skill and not one that we have often considered with learners. In the past we gave them the information we wanted them to work with because there was little of it out there. Now our role has changed. Now, we need to help them find information that is meaningful to them. Throwing in another old adage: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

When it comes to accessing information, this is the absolute truth. Students need the skills to find their way around a library, to use search engines, online databases, email and VOIP. They need to be able to find information that is in print, or online, that may be paintings or photographs. They need to be able to access mp3 files, archived audio and video interviews, and information that is in the form of animation, and mathematically represented data such as charts and graphs. They need the ability to find everything out there they can possibly use.

EVALUATE

Once they've found all of this information, the next vital literacy skill is evaluation. Is this any good? Is it useful, helpful and meaningful for what I need it for? Is it true? Again, this is not a skill that we bothered with much when we gave students textbooks as their main source of information in classrooms. The information was perceived to be true simply because it came from the teacher. But when much of what we have students work with comes from outside of the school, we absolutely need to teach learners to evaluate information for bias, truth, usefulness, and depth. Funneling information, beginning with a massive amount of resources and then evaluating it to find what is actually good for your personal purposes is like giving students a life preserver to save them from drowning in a flood.

COMPREHEND

While listed as a separate literacy skill, the act of comprehension occurs throughout all of the pieces here. But the fact is, once students have accessed texts in many different forms, and once they have separated out what is actually of use to them, they need to dig deeply to begin making some sense of what they have found. Reading, re - reading, writing summaries, taking notes,

watching video clips, listening to interviews, are all important to comprehension, but how many of them do we regularly teach in classrooms? We probably all have three different methods of taking notes, finding main ideas and topic sentences of paragraphs that we can pull out our sleeves at a moments notice and use with the students in our classroom, but how many classrooms also teach students to comprehend and collect information from a piece of video whether it is a documentary or a fictional work? In how many schools are students taught to take notes from a podcast?

If information is coming at students in these forms, they need at least the same number of tools in their mental toolbox to comprehend it. Understanding the form the text is in, how they would best collect the information they need from that text, and what to do when something goes wrong are all vital.

MULTI – MODAL PRODUCTION

So now what? I've located enough information to immerse myself for weeks, managed to separate out what I need, finding what I feel are the most unbiased and the most truthful pieces, and I've spent time with my sources, getting a good "feel" for the topic I am working with. What do I do next? Now you put yourself out there.

Teachers droned on and on. Students read books, Students wrote essays, turned them in for teachers to read and got them back some time later covered in red pen and possibly, received a mark for their effort. It does not need to be this way. Certainly there are times when we want to restrict student choice and require them to write an essay (or make a movie or a podcast for that matter), but many times, there is absolutely no reason why students cannot be given a great deal of choice and freedom to conceive of, design, and create a representation of their understanding.

Having a student create a comic book, a series of fictional interviews, a painting, a website, an animation, etc. will motivate them, push them into using much higher level thinking skills, and also increase their level of skill and comfort with different forms of representation. For example, one of the biggest benefits I've found that having students create animations and videos gives back to them is that it removes some of the "Wow factor" when they watch professionally made, big budget productions, allowing them to see through all of the sales pitch, and actually focus on the message they are receiving.

Students are often more comfortable with print in school because they have always had to use it in school. But at home, they take pictures, draw, and make short videos; we should be capitalizing on these skills and using them for academic purposes.

NETWORKED GLOBAL INTERACTION

Few things pain me more these days than seeing the inbox beside my desk filled with papers and knowing that I am the only one who will ever see then thoughts placed there. I do not want to be the major audience for the students in my classroom. I am certainly one of them, but I want to be one among many. There is no question that students can have an audience for their work. Without ever being asked, many of my students will regularly publish drafts of essays and stories, sample videos, and half completed podcasts online and call for global feedback. And they get it. Feedback comes in from other classes we work with, from the general public who find their posts, from parents, and from other students in our own classroom. And also from me. But I am only voice among many.

I don't know a single recording artist who wants an audience of one person. The same is true for painters, web designers, photographers, and anyone else who produces a creative work. We do not produce in a vacuum. We complete something hoping to gain an audience, hoping to get our ideas out there for others to look at, to gain a voice, and to enter global conversations. Why do we often restrict students to us as their audience?

By publishing student work online, we allow them to gain a voice, to have an audience, to be confident producers of information in their own right among their peers, and before the globe. Most importantly, it allows students to enter the ongoing stream of global conversation, information production and creation. They have the opportunity for feedback, critique, and continuing thought. I've seen students on a number of occasions continue to revise, re - write, and re - edit something they have already handed in and received a mark for after getting feedback on it from somewhere around the world. Are these not the opportunities we want for our students and their learning?

Complex. Multi - faceted. Recursive. Multi - layered. These are all descriptions of literacy in our globally connected world. Reading and writing alphabetic text are cornerstone skills that are increasing in importance and depth. These skills are going nowhere soon. But the skills and the abilities of our students is changing. The tasks they are called upon to complete are becoming more complex and we must ensure that we offer them all of the opportunities that it is possible for them to have.

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