

# Multimodal Literacy

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading in today's technology-rich world has become an increasingly complex maze of symbols, systems, and patterns. Current research in the field of literacy proposes an updated, more robust definition of reading that extends beyond traditional printed text to include reading-to-learn as a multimodal activity incorporating emerging technologies into daily literacy instruction. Heath & Street (2008) define multimodal literacy as the ability to navigate the "combined representations of written, oral, visual, and gestural systems of communication." However, the implication on educators is such that additional modifications to pedagogy must take into account the ever-changing nature of media. Generational terms such as *digital natives* (those born after the year 1980s) (Prensky, 2006) and *millennials* (those reaching young adulthood sometime around the year 2000) hardly encapsulate the huge difference between growing up with an offline home/micro-computer in your home to the vast array of knowledge available by spending your childhood with a smart phone in your hand. Digital natives process information in a vastly different way than previous generations, however, "native-ness" with technology and the ability to use it to learn in efficient ways are not always synonymous. Facility with social media and multitasking does not equal deep understanding or a natural instinct on how to program or create media for and about learning. Curriculum and schooling has begun to change to accommodate this world of hypertext, distance, and simulated learning, but many scholars find that change has not come fast enough to keep up with the pace required by the exponential growth of technology. For example, in the field of literacy

education and the teaching of reading, the effects of technology on the classroom environment, and most-specifically how the truncated and fast-paced world of online, shallow reading has affected the reading and learning stamina of children saturated in media (Carr, 2010). These critical factors are what will dictate the knowledge capacities and learning modalities of today's children and future generations.

## BACKGROUND

Since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional notion of literacy has been redefined. Just as the invention of the printing press moved society into the typographic culture, now we are in what Provenzo (1986) termed the "post-typographic culture," where the definition of a literate person now includes affinity with the computer, media, and visual literacies. In the post-typographic world, microcomputers revolutionized commerce and news media, but education is still late to the game. There are pockets of classroom use, but by comparison to how, for example, marketing, was transformed by social media and online metrics, education has largely seen isolated use of technology. However, within the last decade, tablet and portable device-driven learning has begun to see a more comprehensive change, and print books are taking a "back seat" to multimedia in the school life of students. Print-based texts contain elements of written language, images, and design elements such as typography and graphic design, but media-rich texts involve moving images, sound effects, and increasingly robust digitally-rendered elements that must be "read" by students (Sarafini, 2014).

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Many students are immersed in media-centered environments that are different from classrooms of the past. This new technology comes with several acquired understandings for young readers, as they must learn to maneuver their way through both print text and a series of icons, images, and symbols. Literacy instruction, therefore, the “becoming literate” has moved from an ability to navigate and decode a printed text for the purposes of gaining new knowledge to the ability to access, manipulate, and apply information from a variety of print and non-print courses (Gee, 2007). These new literacies require a pedagogical revolution that incorporates processing a variety of modalities simultaneously in the classroom. Engagement with robust new literacies helps prepare students to not just be receptacles of information, but to think critically, observe and evaluate like scientists and historians (Abilock, 2001). To foster inquiry and project-based learning, schools are developing links between content area teachers and the central texts (both print and digital) through *disciplinary literacy*, that is the confluence of content knowledge, personal experiences, and the ability to read, write, listen and speak academically (Wineburg & Resiman, 2015).

Engaging students in open-ended, authentic, problem-based tasks using technology has become the key to this kind of transformative learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Technology has been, for many disciplinary literacy scholars, a blessing in that a myriad of open access resources are now available to learners. However, this blessing has also created a curse. Most of the text available online are less dense and more truncated than ever before. Imagine the difference of reading the New York Times cover to cover versus getting the news in pop-up updates from your CNN app. The fast-paced world of online reading is the demand of the day. Although we may long for the times when deep reading was valued, the machine of automation has driven society forward and the field of literacy education is no different. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, we cannot drive the information super-highway by looking in the

rear-view mirror (1964). However, literacy educators today fight a constant battle to combat the foundational pangs of “shallow-reading,” including poor reading stamina, shorter attention spans, and the inability of students to show motivation to read anything that appears time consuming or lacking in value (Carr, 2010).

## Digital Natives?

In the literature, *digital natives* and *millennials* are often used interchangeably, although there has been some considerable debate about whether or not the distinction still holds relevance. Both terms have come to refer to the same social group: those born after 1980 that have become working adults around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The modern educational system is currently populated by both *digital natives* and *digital immigrants* (those who have learned to use the technology as adults). In fact, many of today’s teachers are also by definition *digital natives*, although many argue that the level of native-ness varies greatly between those born in the 1980s and those born today. Having a computer with dial-up Internet in your home as a child is quite different than having a smart phone in your hand at all times. Classroom teachers must navigate the distance between their own technological knowledge and skill and the technological fluency of their students, and that savvy with technology has been pared down to a fundamental difference between how digital natives and digital immigrants think.

McLuhan commented that “we shape our tools and thereafter, our tools shape us” and part of that shaping includes reshaping how students acquire, retain, and exchange information. Take communication, for instance. To a digital immigrant, long-distance telephone communication was something that was once expensive and limited, almost a novelty used only by those who could afford it. Letter writing and post-cards were the medium of choice when communicating with those distant cousins. But, to a digital native, real-time connections across the world via text messaging

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