



Chapter 1

Seeing Beyond the Screen: A Multidimensional Framework for Understanding Digital–Age Literacies


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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines a multidimensional framework for theorizing digital-age literacies—one which considers the content, procedural, and contextual dimensions of literacy practices enacted through and around digital technologies. The authors then provide an overview of three empirical studies that illustrate the application of this framework to understand the integration of digital technologies and literacy pedagogies. The authors offer their experiences as classroom teachers, teacher-educators, learning scientists, and literacy specialists working to understand and support the literacy and language practices of learners in the 21st century. The goal of the chapter is to illustrate the value of shifting conversations about digital technologies away from notions of moral panic and techno-idealism, and instead toward a renewed focus on technology-mediated social practices that shape what it means to be and become literate in contemporary society.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Increased access to digital communication technologies in the 21st century is changing what it means to take an active role in a modern literate society (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013). However, widely-adopted models of formal literacy instruction can feel disconnected from the ways that people experience literacy in their everyday lives, especially as they engage with digital media for making and sharing meaning (Avila & Pandya, 2012; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Serafini & Gee, 2017).

This is also a social period when falsified narratives and visual trickery abound in digitized spaces, when “screen time” is problematized by the same institutions that once hailed the advent of mobile media technologies, and when myriad educational technologies built on the tenets of behaviorism are marketed as innovative solutions to the “problems” of education (Mehta & Guzmán, 2018; Watters, 2014). At the same time, popular news outlets continue to report on the perennial “literacy crisis” in the United States (Taylor, 2017), the “under-preparation” of elementary school teachers to teach reading (Hanford, 2018), and the pitfalls of standardized education (Sheninger, 2012).

On the other hand, there is a growing recognition that people of all ages have always engaged in a diverse range of literacy practices well beyond those sanctioned by established institutions (Heath & Street, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2013). For an increasing number of young people, these multiple literacies are practiced and developed across virtual and physical spaces (Garcia, 2017; Mills, 2010). Recognizing this reality, many researchers, educators, and other stakeholders in literacy education have begun to highlight literacy pedagogies that are more responsive to these multifaceted literacy experiences (Gee, 2004; Moje, 2004; The New London Group, 1996; Walsh, 2010). The seminal work of the New London Group (1996) argued for a pedagogy of multiliteracies that recognizes the dynamic nature of literacy practices in a rapidly changing, globally connected, and technologically mediated society. These literacy contexts involve multiple modes of representing, communicating, interpreting, and acting on meaning across a variety of media, across both digital and face-to-face environments (Jewitt, 2008; Kress, 2001; Serafini, 2012).

As students continue to shift their engagement in multimodal literacy experiences to digital and online contexts, the need for understanding the literacy demands, practices, and experiences of students in these spaces becomes even more salient (Gee & Hayes, 2011; Lemke, 1998). While not the only indicator, the proliferation of standards and policy documents emphasizing such notions as “21st-century skills,” “digital literacy,” “information literacy,” and “research and media skills” from across a variety of stakeholders—educational, political, and even commercial—signal this growing interest (Common Core Initiative, 2012; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; OECD, 2013).

How should literacy educators and researchers, make sense of these complexities? How can stakeholders better understand the evolution of diverse literacy practices across virtual and physical social spaces? How can the affordances of digital media technologies best be harnessed to create more equitable, meaningful, and engaging literacy-learning experiences? In the remainder of this chapter, the authors grapple with these questions, drawing on a variety of empirical research about young people’s literacy practices across various contexts: within and beyond classrooms, across virtual and physical spaces, and across academic disciplines and subject areas.

Representing backgrounds cutting across the Global North and South (de Sousa Santos, 2015), the authors bring experiences as classroom teachers, teacher-educators, learning scientists, and literacy specialists working to understand and support the literacy and language practices of learners in the 21st

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