Chapter XX
Videoconferencing a New Literacy

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of broadband telecommunications and affordable equipment, videoconferencing has emerged to replace expensive and elaborate distance learning systems that had been developed in the early 1980's. Yet, as we enter the close of the first decade of the 21st century, videoconferencing has not fulfilled its potential. The following chapter describes and poses solutions to the issues of access, equity, student achievement, pedagogical strategies, and the integration of emerging communication and media technologies that, if deployed, can transform videoconferencing to become a high performance tool for teaching and learning. In addition, as we embrace the millennial generation with unique characteristics that distinguish it from generations that have gone before, we must acknowledge the global, diverse, and politically-charged world. As a result, there is also an urgency to deploy videoconferencing with its fullest capacities; this urgency is an embedded theme in the writings that follow.

INTRODUCTION

As we look to the future of videoconferencing, it is useful to imagine a scene from the early 1900's in which a model a Ford is chugging its ways down main street USA and passes by two blacksmiths' shops on either side of the street. The workers in both shops are drawn outside by the new sounds. In the first shop, the workers have a conversation about how much noise this new technology "thing" makes, and how it will never make it in the world they live in; they retreat back into the shop to make very good horseshoes. The workers in the second shop, while also alarmed by the noise, determine that the world may be changing and that perhaps the best course of business is to add mufflers to their set of products. Fast-forward a few years, and we sadly see that the shop that was only producing very fine horseshoes has been replaced by a fast food restaurant, while the horseshoe/muffler shop has grown and started to franchise.

"As digital media become the dominant means of communication, they will usher in a new paradigm, transforming how we think, behave, relate, and create" (Miller, 2005, p. 31). The visual media of film, video, and television have long made the promise to schools that they will transform the educational system and bring wonder and excitement to classes. The claim was based on the inherent nature of the media. Seels, Fullerton, Berry, and Horn (2004) further state:

These media characteristics of film and television are primarily realism or fidelity, mass access, referability and, in some cases, immediacy. Producers for both of these technologies wanted to make persons, places, objects, or events more realistic to the viewer or listener. The intent was to ensure that the realistic representation of the thing or event was as accurate as possible (i.e., fidelity). The ability to transmit sounds or images to general audiences, or even to present such information to large groups in theaters, greatly expanded access to realistic presentations. In the case of television, the characteristic of immediacy allowed the audience to experience the representation of the thing or event almost simultaneously with its occurrence. The notion of "being there" was a further addition to the concept of realism. (p. 252)

The problem is that historically these media have failed to prove that they can indeed transform the educational landscape. The reason that these media failed to meet their promises was that they were built on a definition of schooling derived from a model of literacy that is 400 years old.

The very nature of literacy is changing. New media surrounds the millennium generation, and their everyday discourses are built on encoding and decoding of information using audio and video technologies. It is more and more common to see students with audio and video players, laptops, and cell phones. These devices have become an extension of their lives in the way that books and magazines are an extension of previous generations. Durrant and Green (2000) commented:

Indeed, we are now able to recognize and acknowledge that, for schooling and education, print is simply one of a range of available technocultural resources. Accordingly, account needs to be taken of a profound media shift in literacy, schooling and society—a broad-based shift from print to digital electronics as the organising context for literate-textual practice and for learning and teaching. Although this does not mean the eclipse of print technologies and cultures, it does mean that we need to employ a rather different, more flexible, and comprehensive view of literacy than teachers are used to in both their work and their lives. Print takes a new place within a reconceptualised understanding of literacy, schooling, and technological practice, one which is likely to be beneficial in moving us and our children into a new millennium. (p. 89)

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