# New Literacies in our Global Society: Teaching Literacies Beyond Text

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## Introduction

In our globalized world, students now have access to a variety of viewpoints in a variety of formats from around the globe. This creates new challenges for students in the evaluation and understanding of information. As a result, it is becoming increasingly more important for our students to understand where their information is coming from and be able to read and interpret the format of this information. This entails having literacies that go beyond text and includes cultural, social, critical, and media literacies.

A comprehension of new literacies is important in our society because of the changing role our students have in the information society. Social networking and the ability for anyone to create content online has prompted the shift of the student from exclusively an information consumer to an information creator. In order to adjust to their new role in our information society, students must have a sense of awareness and knowledge as information consumers in order to identify, access, and evaluate information; as information creators, they must have the ability to incorporate, use and understand this information so that they appropriate and share information ethically, legally, and to their advantage.

Traditional views of literacy overlook literacies that are non-text based, but these non-textual literacies are important. Although we may live in a society which has, in the past, been largely text based, we are now operating in a global society. Consequently, definitions of "literacy" must be evaluated to reflect the changing nature of information. Having an understanding of multicultural contexts of perspective, assumption, bias, purpose, history, ethics, politics, and geography assist in moving beyond more traditional literacies and creating a deeper understanding of issues that may be used to better understand, examine, and challenge existing systems and assumptions.

## Changing Definitions of Information Literacy

Grassian and Kaplowitz provide an overview of the rise of 'information literacy' as the defining element of library instruction in *Information Literacy Instruction: Theory and Practice*. "The modern [information literacy] movement of the 1980s and 1990s acknowledged and built up [on the rich history of [Bibliographic Instruction] begun in the late 1960s" (2009, p. 3). James Marcum (2002) points to Patricia Breivik as one of the preeminent designers of information literacy in academe in the late 1980s. Breivik's work is built partially on the idea that "the active involvement and support of academic libraries will be a key to achieving higher education reform goals" (Breivik & Gee, 1989, p. 2-3). Goals such as updating curricula, covering gaps, addressing changing societies, improving teaching, increasing the quality of the student, and decreasing the vocational aspects of curriculum. Breivik and Lee's exploration of a "new concept of literacy" (1989, p. 22) was later expanded and refined into ACRL's Standards for Information Literacy, and librarians have been poking holes in information literacy instruction almost as long as the concept has been defined, stating that "[Information Literacy] is hopelessly tainted by its heritage and present environment in education, libraries, bibliography, books, and other printed texts" (Buschman, 2009, p. 109) and that the very phrase "information literacy" is problematic in its lack of

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clarity and definition (Snavely & Cooper, 1997, p. 10).

We will continue to poke holes in how information literacy is defined. Currently, information literacy is constrained by the way libraries control information and how librarians come to rely on information resources—students come to the library to get materials for research papers, but may not be coming to the library for group projects that require collaboration and creativity. As students and instructors participate in collaborative activities in order to engage in discourse or understand a particular topic, the need for information literacy modeled on bibliographic instruction proves inadequate in providing any valuable service to academe. Amanda Robillard at Northwestern University notes that "If a person is to become truly literate, she must not only be able to find and use information but also to synthesize, analyze, and engage with the information such that her own concepts and theories are formed" (2008, p. 383). Meanwhile, a generation of individuals are watching something on television while "texting their friends with a mobile phone, and working on a paper for school, chatting and facebooking on their laptop" (Nijboer & Hammelburg, 2010, p. 37). The need to incorporate cultural, social, critical, and media literacies, then, is invaluable to reaffirming the role of the librarian in assuring that competencies are acquired by students and tools are understood, both in their general use (e.g., how do we track tags?) and as a method of being an engaged and informed citizen.

## Literacies Beyond Text

Western definitions of literacy are based on the ability of one to read, write, and think critically about text. Widespread literacy, however, was not possible until a simple and flexible alphabet was established and spread throughout a culture. In the Western World, we seem to forget that the value we place on text is not universal, and that the predecessor to Western "literacy" was oral communication (Buschman, 2009). Information in the form of text can be recorded and form a written record of past events, but the predecessor, oral communication, was different because at the time it required face-to-face interaction and could not be recorded unless universal symbols were used to illustrate the story. Knowledge transferred through conversation had no static record; ideas or concepts that ceased to be relevant or necessary either evolved or disappeared from the oral record. Prior to the use of text, humans relied on oral communication and pictures to convey ideas and meaning. Later this form of communication was supplemented or (in some cases) replaced with text in order to preserve communication. Fast forward to the present day and we find that information is transferred in many more ways, but still includes these basic elements of speech, picture, and text—all of which may be present during the communication of one idea.

Users identify tools based on need, so literacy skills are developed somewhat organically. Depending on the format of the desired information (text, audio, or visual), users will develop knowledge of various tools. In light of this, instructors should be focused on exposure to all appropriate resources, as opposed to merely the ones provided by the library.

## Defining New Literacies

Information comes in a variety of forms from a diverse pool of resources. Information literacy instruction based solely on textual information is a disservice to students, as they create and consume information from a variety of non-textual sources. Inclusion of these resources into information literacy instruction requires a rethinking of how we evaluate resources and the information provided based on context and distribution. The context in which information is created is not always obvious and is frequently obscured by the method of distribution. Integration of what is now being referred to as "new" literacies into the curriculum aims to address current gaps in information literacy instruction that stem from emerging technologies. These new literacies include cultural, social, critical, and media literacies.

*Cultural*: How different cultures produce, distribute, and consume information.

*Social*: How information is shared between a networks of individuals.

*Critical:* Challenging embedded meanings and assumptions in information sources.

*Media*: Understanding the implications associated with the producer and distributor of information.

## Integration of New Literacies in Instruction

An understanding of research databases and other online resources has been the common approach for information literacy instruction, but as noted previously, this is rarely the principle source of most information. Instead, students need to understand how various technologies can disseminate information, the implications of using these tools (e.g., Terms of Service), as well as the implications technologies have on privacy, copyright, and other legal/ethical issues related to various technologies. Traditional methods of instruction, based primarily on teaching tools in class, are not enough. This is why we have moved towards more active methods of teaching: so that students are not only able to retain what they learn in class, but also assign meaning to the skills learned.

### Constructivist Method

The constructivist method of teaching is based on the premise that users build knowledge and skills based on past experiences and interactions and that this past knowledge has an influence on how the learner constructs meaning and gains new knowledge (Allen, 2008). Additionally, this method of teaching has been found particularly successful when complemented with active learning. Active learning requires students to participate in the learning process, which includes much more than mimicking the actions of an instructor during an in-class demonstration of a database search.

Active learning requires students to actively engage in the learning process thus allowing students to assign their

own meaning and values to the skills taught in class by "getting their hands dirty". Active learning takes many forms and may include the integration of social networking, multimedia and visual tools. To obtain optimal success (skills learned in class are stored in a user's long-term memory) the processes must be applicable to the user's everyday experiences (Allen, 2009). The constructivist approach is aimed at focusing on what students are doing as opposed to the instructor (Burhardt & MacDonald, 2010). Doing so will keep your students engaged in and accountable for material in class.

In our own information literacy course we try to implement in-class activities into many of our class sessions. An example of this is our course session devoted to the information cycle. In class, students are provided with a set of documents pertaining to the attacks on September 11, 2001. Among these documents there is a web article from the day of the attacks, the front page of the *New York Times* from the day after, the covers of *Newsweek* from the week of and the week after the attacks, a journal article from a year after the attacks, a book compiled of magazine articles about the attack from a year after the attacks, the 9/11 Commission Report (published three years after the attacks), two monographs (published 8 and 10 years after the attacks), and a recent web article from a topic related to the original topic (more recently we've used the death of Osama bin Laden). Date and citation information is removed from these items, and students are asked to work in pairs or small groups to put the items into the correct order of publication. Copies of all the articles have been magnetized and once students think they have correctly constructed the timeline of articles, individuals are called up to the board to place one document on the timeline which has been drawn on the board. When all items have been placed on the timeline, the instructor will check if all students are in agreement with the placement. The instructor then goes through each document and reveals the real date of publication to see how accurate the students were in placing them on the timeline.

A few important things to point out to students:

- The *Newsweek* issue, which has an image of George Bush on the cover, is dated September 17th, 2001, but was on newsstands during the attack. Students frequently expect that something dated *after* an event should mention the event, but this date is actually the date the issue was supposed to have been pulled from the shelves.

- The web article on the killing of Osama Bin Laden, reminding them that topics evolve over time, setting the cycle in motion all over again.

After the activity, we "unpack" the topic of the class. Discussing the task they have just completed is much more interesting and relevant to students because they now have some prior knowledge of the information cycle based on their in-class experience.

**Tools in the Classroom**

Some web 2.0 technologies have become very popular in information literacy instruction. Wikis and blogs help reinforce standards in information literacy instruction based on textual information, but through other technologies, non-textual information can be organized in these environments and shared. Tools that incorporate non-textual elements are particularly useful in the shift from textual information to the incorporation of audio and video into instruction. Podcasts and YouTube, for instance, can be incorporated into activities to allow students to assess information from audio and video sources, though these activities are generally more labor intensive than many classes can allow. More promising are technologies that allow students to quickly take on the role of information creator as a way to incorporate information resources into easy-to-complete projects. There is a wide variety of free visualization software that can be incorporated into lesson plans for a variety of purposes.

- Bubbl.us: Bubbl.us allows users to brainstorm and mind-map using an easy-to-use interface to help organize the links between key concepts. Our course has integrated bubbl.us into a larger research project as a way to visualize how information is linked together, and visualize the development of their research topic.

- Timeline and Tiki-Toki: Timeline (http://timeline.verite.co/) and Tiki-Toki (http://www.tiki-toki.com/) allow users to build interactive timelines and display them in a web browser. Timeline can quickly incorporate information from a variety of resources, including Twitter, YouTube, Google Maps, Flickr, and a variety of other web 2.0 items into the timeline. One potential use in our class is the incorporation of our information timeline exercise into something the students can synthesize for their particular research topic.

- Many Eyes: Many Eyes (http://www-958.ibm.com/software/data/cognos/manyeyes/), a product from IBM Research and the IBM Cognos software group, allows users to create over 20 different visualizations in their browser, ranging from pie charts and bar graphs to word trees and tag clouds.

## Conclusion

Opportunities to integrate the teaching of new literacies into existing instruction programs include the use of the constructivist method, which actively engages students in the process of assigning their own meaning and values to the skills taught in class. Additionally, the introduction to and use of audio and visual tools assists students in making connections beyond what is written and literal so that students are able to select an appropriate means of action based on their evaluation of content.

Information literacy instruction must change in

response to the evolving information landscape. Students face new challenges in the evaluation and understanding of information as the result of an increase in access to a variety of viewpoints, formats, and sources of information. This has created a need to expose students to non-textual literacies, which include cultural, social, critical, and media. Literacies have become tools (Marcum, 2002, p. 18) in the Information Age, so a 'literate' individual reaches for an appropriate tool based on need—the only limiting factor is exposure to the appropriate resource. As a result of the increasing amount of collaboration and production being conducted on college campuses, information literacy instruction needs to be less concerned with databases and catalogs and more concerned with ensuring that individuals can think critically about the production process and reflect on the impact a particular tool has in relation to their work

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