

The New 21st Century Literacy: Problems and Challenges for the Digital Age

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Literacy now has a new meaning in this digital age. The new literacy needed today is more broadly defined than the previous definition. Before, it simply meant understanding text—now it has a new meaning of being savvy enough to “...navigate the multi-dimensional and fast-paced digital environment” (Jones-Kavalier, Flannigan, 2006, p. 1). Moreover, with this new definition comes new challenges and problems to digital literacy such as resistance to change, implementation, complexity—problems which have to be addressed in order for the literate to stay proficient and the illiterate to acquire their skills.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Digital Immigrants, Digital Natives.

INTRODUCTION

There is a new literacy in the 21st Century, whose mastery is crucial in our technical age, which seems to be a formidable foe to those who have not been exposed to it at an early stage in their life. Whereas children nowadays are “digital natives” who are at ease with texting, web chatting, and the like, today’s adults and seniors may be found struggling to catch up. “Digital immigrants” now find themselves bewildered with today’s technology and have become illiterate and passed up by a younger generation who have the technical savvy to thrive. (Jones-Kavalier, Flannigan, 2006). These two terms were recently coined by Mark Perensky (2001) to describe this new phenomenon taking place in our information age, and they highlight the problems of the discrepancies between those with and without technical skill and know-how.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

This digital divide can be clearly seen in our classrooms with teachers and students in developed countries such as the United States and Korea. According to Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan (2006), "A common scenario today is a classroom filled with digitally literate students being led by linear-thinking, technologically stymied instructors" (p. 1). Students have been exposed to these technologies or similar ones early on during their formative years while their teachers have just been exposed to it only recently. As a result, the students are sometimes more capable with the technology. This can be seen in basic situations where students have a far greater learning curve with newly installed software in their classrooms compared to their teachers. Plus, while much funding goes toward the technology itself, very little goes toward the education on how to use it--teachers are given the tools, but not the knowledge. Teachers increasingly are learning the technology on their own time, to grasp the technical know-how without help from their school's administration (Jones-Kavalier, Flannigan, 2006). Haynes, an ESL instructor, adds, "We speak "digital" as a second language (DSL). We grew up in a drastically different text-based environment and even if we have tried to keep up with current technology, we speak this language with an accent" (Haynes, 2006, p. 1).

Though there may be difficulties with the implementation of the technology and the training of the instructors, the students typically have the confidence to use it effectively and prefer its use to more traditional methods of instruction (Jones-Kavalier, Flannigan, 2006, p. 2). The days of *only* using chalkboards and books in developed countries are approaching obscurity. Nowadays, there is the intermittent lesson with streaming video or audio-video interaction in our children's classrooms. Here the problem is how teachers should use this technology wisely to increase their students' competency, and to not be blinded by an extravagant new technology (also called a 'wow' factor). "Using the same skills used for centuries—analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—we must look at digital literacy as another realm within which to apply

elements of critical thinking” (Jones-Kavalier, Flannigan, 2006, p. 2). One example of this is found with Haynes’ composition class:

With 5th & 6th grade groups, I use the software Inspiration. With the latest version, my students can research information for a report or other writing assignment and organize it on a template in Inspiration directly on their laptops. They can spell check their work, use a thesaurus or dictionary, change the organizer into an outline and export that outline to their word processing program. These outlines become their frame for writing (Haynes, 2006, p. 2-3).

Endemic to technical marvels of technology such as audio-video interaction, there is the issue of complexity. There is the variety, and the constant altering into faster and more powerful forms. “Our world today is about connecting the digital dots. The challenge is in dealing with the complexity—the dots are multidimensional, of varying sizes and colors, continuously changing, and linked to other, as yet unimagined dots.” (Jones-Kavalier, Flannigan, 2006, p. 2). Clearly, the trend is towards more complex technology with multi-functions and uses requiring heightened aptitude. Being digitally literate will require constant diligence on the part of the learner.

CONCLUSION

It is crucial that these issues related to the new 21st century literacy be resolved. The technological resources in place today offer great potential for society in the sectors of education and business and especially to our schools for the beneficial role they provide in information, learning, and research. Clearly, however, the members of our technological society must be digitally literate in order to use these resources. For this to happen, the older generation must continue to maintain their technical skills learned later in life while the younger generation has already begun to obtain them. With continuing education, digital immigrants can improve and acquire the technological capabilities needed to function with, and help educate, the forthcoming generation of digital natives.

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