New Literacies

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Traditionally, we define literacy as reading, writing, listening and speaking through an interaction between reader and text. An important goal of traditional literacy is comprehension through the use of text and illustrations. Varying degrees of importance are placed on social and cultural relevance with regards to literacy instruction. In the early childhood classroom, literacy could include the use of basal readers, anthologies, reading strategies, comprehension skills and sharing ideas. This has been the practice in most classrooms, with a 21st century shift slowly approaching.

New literacy highlights the importance of learning by using electronic media inside and outside the classroom. Literacy now encompasses multiple formats of information as well as the ability to understand, analyze and create visual literacy, media literacy and computer literacy. Students must be taught to be information literate. Students must be able to quickly retrieve information while critically evaluating its credibility. The sole emphasis on written text, such as basal readers, should be shifting to include electronic text, other technologies and mass media. (Semali, 2001) Students are required to navigate the Internet, evaluate information that is found, synthesize the information and share this information with others (Miners & Pascopella, 2007). In my own classroom, I would like to use new literacies in order to promote student independence and collaboration, effective researching skills, communication through blogs and discussion boards and to incorporate a variety of assessments methods in my instruction. Children can work together to support each other in their online learning and to share their own online skillset by helping others. New literacy allows children to work more at their own pace. Students are given the opportunity to demonstrate understanding of topics and processes through a variety of methods. The breadth of Web 2.0 tools and other computer programs allows students to do so efficiently. A child’s world outside the classroom becomes a vast, developing learning environment. As teachers, I believe we need to take the time within the classrooms to teach learners how to utilize the new literacies being presented to them on a daily basis at home, in a store, in the community.

This school year has been quite a learning experience for me in terms of my technological knowhow. Teachers were fortunate enough to have Promethean Boards, ActivSlates and Elmo document cameras installed in their classrooms, equipped with the latest software, including Windows 7. It was a daunting task to learn to use these tools appropriately, and to also learn ways to effectively teach young children how to gain valuable information from this technology. This past year I was able to incorporate interactive Flip Charts with visuals, audio, video clips and programs like Google Earth into my weekly lesson planning. I occasionally used a Flip Cam to document field trip experiences. With my comfort level rising, I would like to utilize more Web 2.0 activities as well as instruction of online literacy strategies in my teaching. For example, I would like to use a Flip Cam to record a child’s oral reading fluency for assessment and discussion with the student. I would like to create ways in which students may communicate with each other as well as the teacher in the form of blogs or other Web 2.0 programs. Most importantly, I would like to teach strategies for online literacy which help students think critically about the material they read on the Internet, watch on television or hear from other mass media.

Web 2.0 includes “online applications” that are created by and shared with individuals (Youngmath, 2008). Individuals are able to create and receive information with minimal knowledge in computer programming or formatting. Information is easily input into online resources such as Google Docs, blogs, videos, Wikis and discussion boards. We shape electronic media by adding, developing and deleting digital information. Web 2.0 includes “people sharing, trading, and collaborating” (Wesch, 2007).

Web 2.0 encompasses important tools for sharing information in an inexpensive, quick manner to a massive audience on the Internet. There is a two-way sharing of information and ideas. Web 2.0 includes the tools that students may use in order to access the new literacies of the 21st Century. Using these tools, students can create authentic and original work that could be shared with peers, teachers and even parents. In turn, the intended audience can access and respond to this information. The 21st Century teacher can now access Web 2.0 in his/her classroom in order to broaden students’ understanding of topics and to get students directly involved in electronic print. Rather than a focus on the traditional concept of literacy with written text in books, students can expand their knowledge and develop a sense of online community by using tools that Web 2.0 has to offer. The ability of students to access new literacies online is largely dependent upon school resources and the input and training of the teacher. (Youngmath, 2008).

By using digital literacy in the classroom, the teacher is assuming responsibility for properly training students in using the technology. A part of this responsibility includes monitoring and/or maintaining tools, programs and sites that will be used by the students. Due to the nature of the environment that our children are growing up in, the use of technology in the classroom seems inevitable. Their futures in the workforce may also depend upon their experiences in digital literacy, among other factors. Therefore, it is important to take the time now to address important issues in using online literacy in classrooms. Primary concerns of bringing this into the classroom include availability and cost of hardware (i.e. computers). An adequate number of computers and other technologies may not be readily available to teachers for use in their classrooms. These computers come at a high cost to the schools, which may not fit into the administration and/or county budget. Funding concerns can and should be addressed at the county or even state level. I believe it is crucial that ALL students be granted equal opportunities with digital learning within their schools. There is already such a disparity between the availability of Internet access in homes across the United States. Now is the time to take a look at budgets in order to allocate funds to school systems appropriately. Another issue that should be addressed is staff training. Schools should establish professional development opportunities for all staff regarding the variety of digital tools available as well as ways to use them in the classroom. It is important that some staff members are properly trained on the maintenance (or who to contact for maintenance) of the technology in the school in the event that something malfunctions. However, the ability of websites and other resources to crash or become unavailable will always be a concern.

Additional issues of digital literacy in the classroom could be addressed, given that important training and maintaining of technological tools is already in place. Most of these issues require teacher monitoring and coaching before, during and after students utilize this technology. For example, teachers should be sure to implement an appropriate balance between the use of digital literacy and literacy in traditional terms. It is important that students are continuously exposed to both aspects because of the volatile nature of technology and the undeniable need for comprehension of written text in everyday life. Teachers must also monitor the depth at which students are exploring specific information, depending on the task at hand. It is important to recognize whether students are focusing more on using the digital literacy tool or on learning the content-specific information. Teachers should remind students to continuously reflect on their learning without being caught up in the fast-paced learning environment that is the Internet. Students can easily become isolated by sitting in front of a computer screen. Teachers should encourage students to collaborate with peers by assigning group projects, allowing students to assist each other with learning the skills needed to navigate and learn online, as well as share new learning with peers. (Conan, 2004)

Unfortunately, there are some concerns of digital literacy that are not easily addressed at the school level, nor is there an easy solution. For example, it has been reported that students are experiencing a declined “sensitivity in [their] senses” due to an over-exposure to technology at a young age (Conan, 2004). Others believe that technology immersion should not exist in the primary classroom because young children are not prepared to utilize the Internet independently. They may be overwhelmed by the complicated nature of digital literacy that they are unable to practice learning processes or the use of digital tools just yet. These issues will take time and extensive research to iron out. In the meantime, children should be given the opportunity to participate in digital literacy in ALL classrooms, as this is the direction our nation is evolving in at this time. (Conan, 2004)

With the knowledge that 21st Century learners are highly engaged through the use of technology, a WebQuest is an excellent tool for effective classroom instruction. A WebQuest is able to address the “kinds of thinking that the 21st century requires” in new literacies while allowing students to engage with Internet resources (Dodge, 2007). Students are able to become more fluent in using Web 2.0 tools because a WebQuest directs them to exactly where they need to look. This alleviates the stress of locating relevant, reliable and trustworthy sources of information. Everything the student needs to complete the project is appropriately linked. Many of these resources should include Web 2.0 tools such as a Wiki or video clip. The method for the final presentation of the completed task could be through a blog, discussion board or other Web 2.0 resource. By utilizing these tools in the controlled environment of a WebQuest, students will sharpen new literacy skills of teamwork, evaluating information, exploring multi-faceted global issues and communicating effectively, among other skills.

In the 21st Century, learning skills include collaboration, communication, technology, independence, creativity and critical thinking, among other skills. A WebQuest can develop many of these skills in young learners. For example, students must work in partners or teams to collaborate on a topic in order to complete the project. The information developed by the student during the WebQuest must be organized in such a way that it can be communicated to a “global audience of web learners” (Ankenbauer, 2010). Students are using online tools in order to complete the task. In addition, students must become self-sufficient in allowing enough time to complete the steps in the project. Depending upon the student’s skill level in digital literacy, different media sources could be used in the project. Students are forced to think critically in order to solve a global issue or reflect on a real world problem. (Ankenbauer, 2010)

After considering the growth and development of technology in our society, it is critical that our schools must be evolving in this direction as well. Students should be inspired to seek, evaluate, synthesize and communicate information from digital sources. The open network available to students in the outside community and future workforce can be incorporated in the new digital classroom with teacher training and student instruction in new literacy strategies, Web 2.0 tools and other media comprehension skills.

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