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# Introduction

*Literacy:* Ask 5 people to define this term and you're likely to hear 10 different answers. That's what happens, though, when a word develops a split personality. On one hand, literacy conjures images of the technical skills required to read and write, the denotation that the U.S. Army reinforced when it coined the term *functional literacy* during World War II. This line of thinking, as a number of literacy experts have noted, bred the ideas of "survival literacy" and "basic literacy" (de Castell & Maclennon, 1989, p. 7). However, the second strain of literacy, *critical literacy*, vexes the conversation far more today because of its many connotations, most of which stem from the idea of what it means to be educated. Whereas functional literacy lends itself to standardized tests that measure skills of one kind or another, it is clearly more difficult to determine when someone has acquired the critical literacy that describes "a liberally educated or learned person" (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993, p. 1604). It's little wonder, then, that five respondents would hedge their bets, offering definitions that address both specific, technical skills and the more nebulous qualities that would fully describe the literate individual.

Although functional literacy remains a prerequisite for other types of literacy, it is not the primary focus of this book. Of course, educators still need to teach students how to read and write while incorporating new technology into their classrooms, but they also need to teach them how to interpret and contextualize the words and information they encounter in electronic mail, discussion forums, Web sites, and more. Unfortunately, many how-to books dedicated to technology in the classroom neglect this type of literacy, stressing technical skills that fail to help students find meaning through a truly educated approach to online reading and writing. Perhaps this explains why such books feel obsolete before the ink dries on their pages. What educators need, therefore, is something more than a discussion of technical issues. To prepare themselves and their students for new types of literacy, they must be receptive to new definitions of the term itself. This requires more than technical knowledge; indeed, it demands that they ask open-ended questions about the human condition, searching for more satisfying definitions and a deeper understanding of these matters.

With this in mind, it may prove helpful to think of literacy in terms of taxonomy. The functional literacy required to read and write letters of an alphabet, and sound the words they form, serves as a stepping stone to more complex types of literacy. By embracing that notion, one invites

a more robust definition for literacy's most recent offspring, that troublesome fellow called *computer literacy*. This book encourages definitions that move, purposely stretching literacy to invigorate discussions of computers in education. I shall consider a variety of literacies, all of which come into play when one talks about "literacy in the Digital Age." Some of these terms are familiar; others are heuristics—which means I made them up! Although some may initially strike the reader as odd contrivances, all of these literacies apply to a networked classroom and the online environments in which students increasingly work.

Indeed, just as we must learn to read and write the alphabet to develop functional literacy, so too must we learn how to "read" visual images, discursive practices, personal ethics, community actions, cultural events, global developments, and humanity in general. What's more, while learning to read others online, we are also composing ourselves. This double entendre, which lends itself to the title of this book, suggests the need for composure as well as the desire for invention. We cannot achieve civil discourse online without composure, but neither can we satisfy our need for personal invention without giving full expression to a complex persona, the "saturated selves" that others must interpret through the pastiche of our words and images (Gergen, 1991).

Unfortunately, competence with one form of literacy does not guarantee fluency with another. As a matter of fact, one of the more important questions is whether some forms of literacy are mutually exclusive. Consequently, educators need a far more robust definition for computer literacy, one that takes them well beyond functional literacy. Most schools have passed the stage in which computers are confined to a "keyboarding" or "computer applications" course. Thus, they can no longer view computer literacy in purely technical terms, nor as the province of a particular academic discipline. One's keyboarding skills are hardly a measure of computer literacy at a time when people speak of Netiquette, hypertext narratives, and virtual architecture. For classroom teachers to succeed with the integration of networked technology in preexisting curricula, therefore, they must possess a theoretical foundation as well as technical skills. In fact, the former may prove more significant than the latter, since it will help classroom teachers determine which literacies they value and believe most significant for their students' development.

## ■ **CYBERWRITER AT WORK: THE DESIGN OF THIS BOOK**

Obviously, this is not intended as a how-to book, which will, hopefully, spare it the fate of those books gathering dust on the shelves of teachers' lounges and resource centers around the world. I hope that it serves as a philosophical guide while providing practical ideas for classroom practitioners. Toward that end, each chapter begins with a brief discussion of the abstract concerns regarding a particular type of literacy. From the question of definition, I move to discussions of why teachers should be aware of such literacy and the skills students need to acquire it. A series of "literacy challenges," learning activities that encourage critical reading and writing

online, will help classroom teachers synthesize theory and practice. In short, I look at ways to use networked technology and online learning environments to teach critical literacy skills. Here's a brief overview of what each chapter has to offer.

Chapter 1, "Media Literacy: Broadening the Definition of Computer Literacy," identifies several shortcomings with impoverished definitions of computer literacy and the pedagogical and curricular approaches they inspire. As a corrective, I propose approaching computer literacy through a more traditional filter: classical rhetoric. By applying rhetoric, the ancient art of persuasion, and the rhetorical triangle of ethos (author's credibility), logos (message's logic), and pathos (emotional appeal to audience), educators will discover important concepts that help students "get outside" themselves and think of "the other"—the writers and audiences they will encounter via electronic mail, newsgroups, chat rooms, Web-based discussion boards, Web sites, and more. Ultimately, this forces a movement away from functional literacy, which has defined computer literacy for much too long, toward a critical literacy that requires far more than technical skills.

Chapter 2, "Civil Literacy: The Cyberpilot's License," emphasizes the fundamental need for students to take responsibility for what they say, how they say it, and the effect it will have on others. This conviction has inspired an online tutorial that provides a forum in which readers may conduct research and continue this discussion. The respective sections of the Web site provide the basis for this chapter, along with relevant literacy challenges. "Know Your Vehicle" presents resources that introduce the history, terms, and technology of the Internet. The "Rights and Responsibilities" section tries to clear the air(waves) and stimulate meaningful discussions. "Who and What Rules the Airwaves" introduces several resources on acceptable-use policies, state and federal laws, and the great debate over freedom of speech on the Internet. In addition, readers may visit the "Reference Desk" to add a link or visit online resources that others have recommended. "Piloting Skills and Netiquette," an interactive primer on the use of electronic mail, search engines, discussion forums, and more, focuses on ethical concerns and definitions of acceptable use.

Chapter 3, "Discourse Literacy: Beyond the Chat Room," assumes familiarity with the concept of civil literacy and a desire to consider online discourse in greater detail. I begin with a distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, focusing on the former in this chapter. Whether teachers use software such as the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment, an Internet Relay Chat, or a Web-based message board, they will find ample opportunities to establish healthy discursive practices locally before turning to asynchronous discourse on a national or international level. However, they must be aware that many students have established unhealthy discursive habits during unsupervised, recreational forays into cyberspace. I examine transcripts from classroom sessions, exploring ways to use synchronous, online discussions for instructional purpose. Of particular interest are role-playing activities that enable students to take the position of writers they have studied. This use of pseudonyms presents a singular opportunity for students to adopt the voice and viewpoint of another, stepping outside of themselves as they