

Keepin' It Real

*Integrating new literacies with effective
classroom practice*

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Foreword: David Booth



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Introduction

Reflection is an amazing thing: We can truly understand the direction we need to go in only by looking at the direction from which we have come. This is not a new concept. In fact, Christopher Columbus navigated the Atlantic by a process called *dead reckoning*. Using the stars and early navigational tools, he used his knowledge of where he had been, combined with the direction and distance he had traveled, to determine where he was, and indeed where he was to go. Although his destination was unknown, and technically he didn't end up at the destination he'd initially planned, he had a good idea of the direction he needed to go to get closer to his goal. Teaching is a reflective process. We are facing the future every day and, like Christopher Columbus sailing across the Atlantic, we may know where we've come from, but we certainly don't know our final destination or what the future will hold. As educators, we gain a glimpse of the future as we prepare our students to enter it. Our youngsters are the ones who will define the worlds to come, and our role is to equip them as well as possible for the unknown future.

As I continue to reflect on my teaching, I'm constantly asking myself to justify my practice. Why do I do the things I do? What is the intention behind the tasks I ask my students to complete? Am I ensuring that they are participating in authentic learning situations? How can I maximize their engagement, their risk-taking, their motivation? How can I develop students who are self-directed, goal-setting, autonomous learners who will face the future head-on? Who will question, criticize, analyze, and evaluate the world in which they live?

The world is changing so rapidly, so too must my teaching practice. Would you be comfortable being treated by a doctor who refused to heed technological advances in his field? The field of medicine, like the world of literacy, is one that is making dramatic advances on a daily basis. It is the way we bring these new innovations to life in our classrooms that will enhance the learning of our students. The children of this generation live in a digital world, embracing everything digital. The way they interact with their digital world determines new forms of literacy. The world is filled with "new literacies." What does that mean for the "old literacies"? Do we disregard everything old and replace it with the new? But how is it possible for the new literacies to exist in a world without the old? How can we separate the old from the new? The "old" literacies—reading, writing, speaking, listening—are inextricably woven into the "new" literacies—digital literacy, social literacy, media literacy, critical literacy.

It is impossible to understand and interact using new forms of literacy unless we are proficient in the foundations of communication. In order to proficiently use technological advances, one must be skilled at reading and writing. In order to utilize social networking tools, one must understand the basics of communication—speaking and listening. The world may be changing, the tools we use

to interact with it evolving, but the basic skills we need to actively engage in it remain constant.

The relationship between the new literacies and the old is one of mutual benefit. Students need to have strong reading and writing skills in order to develop these other literacies. The foundations of literacy are not changing. In fact, more than ever, it is important that students can read, understand, and evaluate the information they read. It is equally important that students develop strong writing skills so they will be able to actively engage with others through the written word. Students need to listen to others, articulate their own thoughts, and understand the different ways in which we communicate with each other. The new literacies are completely grounded in the foundations of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

As educators, we are preparing our students for the future. We are equipping them with skills that will be essential as they graduate and enter the workforce. However, these skills are evolving. No longer will it be sufficient for students to read and write, but they will need to read, write, analyze, create, discover, learn and relearn on a daily basis. They will need to examine the world in which they live, connect with others, and apply knowledge in new and innovative ways. According to Daniel Pink (2005),

The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind—computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.

As the world evolves, we must prepare our students to embrace these new changes. We need to teach them to be flexible, adaptable adults. They need to think critically, analyze deeply, and create effectively.

This book is intended to help educators navigate through the new literacies and find meaningful connections through all learning experiences. As 21st-century learners, our students no longer see learning as separate subject areas, but rather perceive it as a web of interconnected ideas and concepts. The new literacies are not separate from all other forms of learning, but instead are new approaches for interacting with the subject matter. Students cannot be digitally literate in isolation, but need to be digitally literate about the things they are learning. Similarly, they cannot be media literate, critically literate, or socially literate without having meaningful material with which to interact. Using the new literacies, students are able to gain a deeper understanding of information, can critically analyze the things they encounter, and are aptly equipped to respond in unique and creative ways.

Throughout this book, you will meet dynamic educators who are embracing the new literacies to the fullest. In the Evolution in Action boxes and through real quotes from students, you will see how 21st-century students are thriving through the integration of digital tools in their daily learning. Keep It Real activities show in a classroom setting the importance of using technology as a tool, rather than a subject. As a catalyst for thought, Digital Task Cards clearly illustrate the ways in which teachers can bring digital tools into their curriculum.

These cards connect directly to subject matter learned in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies.

As educators, we are all tasked with finding innovative ways to deliver our curriculum in a way that will engage, challenge, and motivate all learners. The new literacies allow us to use a broader range of tools, strategies, and approaches that will broaden students understanding, deepen their thinking, and expand their application of the material they learn.

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Literacies Old and New

“If we teach today as we did yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow.”
—John Dewey

Starting with What We Know

Literacy, by definition, is the ability to read, write, and communicate effectively with others. Any form of literacy assumes some level of proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These literacies must be considered foundational for all subsequent literacies. In order to interact with others through a wide range of communication tools, we first must be able to read, write, listen, and speak. Without a solid foundation in these core literacies, one would meet with little success in newer literacies, whatever they might be.

Effective readers need to be able to read a variety of text forms for a variety of purposes. They select texts and locate information. Proficient readers use a wide range of strategies to decode and comprehend text. They read fiction and non-fiction, and are intuitively knowledgeable about which is which. Readers engage with texts, they question the things they read, they make inferences and draw conclusions. They visualize images in their minds using all of their senses. An effective reader knows what's important and what's not. They're able to make predictions and think critically about the things they are reading. Readers are also aware of the different forms texts can take. They recognize instantly the different features of a poem or a letter, they read a newspaper differently from the way they read a recipe, and they automatically switch their minds from understanding the imaginary world of fiction to the reality of nonfiction.

Effective writers are able to write for a variety of purposes and for a variety of audiences. They recognize which text form is suitable for a given purpose. Proficient writers are able to capture their ideas in a way that they can be shared with others. They have an understanding of audience and write differently depending on who will be reading their work. As writers, they consider things like the form of writing, the content of the piece, the audience who will read it. They think about things like conventions, voice, and word choice. Writers may choose to write a list of items, compose a letter to a friend, and respond to an e-mail, all within a short period of time. They don't stop to think about the form the communication will take; they automatically know how to best capture their ideas and share them with others.

Listening and speaking are skills that are essential for communicating effectively with others. Students learn to listen and consider the ideas of others, and share their own thinking in articulate ways. They learn to analyze and question the words of others. They learn to read nonverbal cues like facial expressions,

tone of voice, and body language. Likewise, they learn how to effectively use these cues to express their own thoughts. Students learn to negotiate and take turns, they learn work cooperatively with others, and they learn to engage in conversations with their peers.

Evolution in Action

My good friend Arthur Birenbaum told me that teaching is the only profession where we have the same responsibilities on our first day as on our last. It's the way in which we carry out these responsibilities that define our career. If we're doing the same thing we did 20 years ago, then we have failed not only ourselves, but our students too. Teaching is evolution in action. We are constantly redefining the ways in which we do our jobs. We are reflecting on our practice and evaluating our effectiveness. It is this constant reflection that causes us to change, grow, and evolve.

Our students are living in a fast-paced world of electronics and technological devices. They are processing more information at a faster rate than imaginable. As teachers we need to adapt to the changing world in which we all live. It is not enough to teach our students to read, write, listen, and speak. They need to know how to read and write for authentic purposes. We need to teach them how to become digitally literate, socially literate, media literate, and critically literate. They need to connect with the world and question the information they encounter; they need to analyze, evaluate, and think for themselves. They need to interact with others in real, authentic, engaging ways.

How do we interact with the world? Although the form of communication is evolving, we depend heavily on our existing literacies to interpret and share information. We need to be able to read a variety of text forms and communicate using writing. We need to listen to others and to speak, clearly articulating our thoughts. The old literacies are foundational for success with the new, and the new literacies (when used effectively) serve to strengthen and support students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Digital literacy is the ability to use, locate, understand, evaluate, and organize information using digital tools. It enables users to connect to the world, communicate with others, collaborate with others, and create using a variety of media forms. It allows students to consolidate their learning and encourages them to critically analyze the information they encounter. Students who are digitally literate use technology as a tool to support their learning. They are engaged in authentic experiences that extend beyond their classrooms.

Media literacy is the ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret messages that are conveyed through different forms of communications. Literacy in this area promotes the critical analysis of messages. Students ask questions like these: Who created the message? For whom was the message intended? In what way is the message biased? Whose voice is being heard? Whose voice is being silenced? What strategies are being used to engage an audience? Media literacy encourages students to consider messages from different perspectives, to think critically about the content, form, and meaning. When students are literate in this area, they are able to understand, evaluate, and create a wide range of media messages.

Social literacy is the ability to connect and communicate with those around you. Students who are socially literate are able to adapt their behavior to suit

The new literacies:

- digital literacy
- media literacy
- social literacy
- critical literacy

a range of situations. They recognize the subtleties of body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. Students can use their understanding of social literacy to interact with others in positive ways. This is not a new concept. Social skills, etiquette, and manners have been valued and taught for many years. However, as social communications move into the digital realm, these skills are becoming more relevant as an aspect of literacy. Establishing norms for responsible citizenship, effective communication, and respectful interactions is an important consideration when students are working collaboratively. Most recently, these aspects of social skills are fitting under the umbrella of literacy. If the definition of literacy is to be able to read, write, and communicate effectively with others, then, in order to do so, we must use social literacy as a way of mediating these interactions. Students need to select their words carefully, think of the ways their message will be interpreted, and make important decisions about appropriate ways to respond when they may be in a difficult situation. Students who are socially literate are able to make responsible decisions when interacting with others, both face-to-face and online.

Critical literacy is the ability to analyze written information to evaluate the underlying messages. Readers who are critically literate are not only able to read and make sense of written text, but they are also able to engage in a discussion with others about its meaning. They are able to state their opinion and use information from a text to support their thinking. Critically literate individuals reflect on the information they encounter and consider the impact it has on their own lives. They question what they read and evaluate the accuracy. They consider the source of the information and the way it connects to their prior knowledge, opinions, and perceptions. Critical literacy is not a new concept. For many years we have been encouraging young readers to think, evaluate, and analyze the texts they read. However, critical literacy is becoming more of a focus for youngsters as we expand the parameters of the texts they encounter. Critical literacy is not a new literacy, solely arising out of the use of technology; however, the use of technology has increased the importance of teaching students to become critically literate.

Immediate Feedback = Immediate Change

There are few tools that bring about an immediate change in student behavior. However, when I introduced one of my students to a new digital recording tool, within minutes I saw instant results. This youngster had great difficulty articulating his words when he spoke, especially when he read. He would slur all of the words together, making it extremely difficult to monitor his reading. He also found it difficult to speak with varying volumes and intonation. One day, we made a huge breakthrough. Using a digital voice recorder, we recorded his reading. He read one sentence at a time, playing it back and listening to his own words. He was surprised by the fact that he, too, was unable to understand what he was saying. Together we recorded his reading sentence by sentence, listening to each phase individually and rerecording if it was unclear. Once he had recorded a few sentences, we listened to them together—to discover that he was, this time, reading with deliberate breaks between words. The digital recording tool represented his speech in a visual way, and he discovered that he could actually see the breaks between his words. Within minutes, he was speaking more articulately

and clearly, and he had even started introducing inflection into his reading. Later, when we gathered his peers together and replayed the digital recording, he was thrilled, for the first time in his life, to “read” a story to the class.

How then do the new literacies affect these foundational ones? Students who experience more authentic opportunities for sharing and applying their learning are more engaged. Digital tools allow for the extension of these foundational literacies. For example, writers could use a wiki to collaborate when writing a newspaper (see Digital Task Card: Class Newspaper on page 30), readers could use a blog as a forum for responding to their books (see Digital Task Card: Online Reading Response Journal on page 34), and students can use a chatroom as a way of having a conversation about the information they are learning (see Digital Task Card: Book Talk on page 16).

See Digital Task Card: Book Talk on page 16.

Keep It Real

A group of Grade 3 students used a chatroom to post book recommendations for each other. They shared information about the books they were reading or had recently completed. They were careful to include enough information to “hook” a potential reader, while not giving too much away. The chat format helped them keep their ideas short and succinct. Often students had read the same books, and the conversation continued on a deeper level. They shared their predictions, their connections, and their inferences. The chatroom was the perfect forum for their conversations.

When students have a broader audience for their writing, they write more. They recognize that their writing has direct impact on others. The quality of what they write matters, because they know it will influence the response they get. As students engage more with others through digital tools, they will encounter additional written forms. Through the exposure to a wider array of text forms, students will become more versatile writers. They will begin to determine the form that will best convey their message and explore new and innovative ways of expressing their ideas.

Through new literacies, students are constantly being challenged to stretch their reading abilities. They encounter different text forms, media presentations, and social communications. Students need to read, understand, and analyze a vast array of information. Text forms are changing and evolving, but the skills we use to interact with them remain the same. It is ever more important that we teach students to think while they read and not only decode the words on the page.

Finally, listening and speaking are the foundational skills for every social interaction. Students need to communicate effectively with others using the norms of social interactions. They need to use appropriate voice (when speaking or writing) and attend to the ideas of others. Digital tools allow students to connect and communicate with others well beyond their classrooms. They are able to listen, speak, and collaborate, regardless of physical boundaries.

In summary, reading, writing, listening, and speaking are foundational for the development of the newer literacies, and the new literacies, when used effectively, serve to strengthen, support, and bring purpose to reading, writing, and communicating.