

New Literacy Studies

By Melody Buckner

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University of Arizona

Introduction

When asks to define literacy it is important to understand the context. Literacy can have many definitions depending upon the environment. The most broadly assumed context is in a formal educational setting and the form of literacy would be reading a book. Yet as we look to the future, how will this formal educational setting change and more importantly, what will the new forms of literacy look like in the future? This is the question that the New Literacy Studies Theory tries to address.

Recently, I attended a conference on information technology for higher education. I heard an interesting comment from a publisher's representative that made me think about the progress or lack of progress in education. It was called the "Laura Ingalls Wilder Test". The question posed was if Laura were to walk into our world today what would she recognize? He cited all of the monumental changes in our world over the last 100 years, but then he paused and said, "However, if she walked into many of our classrooms today, she would say, 'Hey, this is a school room!'" Well, I don't totally agree that the classroom of today is just like the classroom portrayed in *Little House on the Prairie*, but education needs to evolve to keep in alignment with the world in which we are educating tomorrow's citizens.

This paper is going to discuss the New Literacy Studies Theory and ponder some of these questions:

- What is the New Literacy Studies and what issues does it address?
- How does the New Literacy Studies relate to other theories?
- What is needed to use the New Literacy Studies productively?
- How does the New Literacy Studies intersect with schooling, teaching and learning?

New Literacy Studies and the Issues

The "New Literacy Studies" is a label that has been given to research occurring over the past twenty year. Most of the research has been in the form of ethnography, looking at the movement of literacy from an individual focus towards a collective interactive and social practice (Gee, 1998). The idea is that literacy is not just a technical skill achieved by an individual, but also a social practice embedded with socially constructed epistemological

principles. Literacy is about knowledge and the way that people transfer the concepts of knowledge, identity and being. Literacy is deeply dependent upon the particular context from which it gathers meaning and practice (Street, 2003). So as new technologies and contexts, like the Internet arise, we need to look to the research on the New Literacy Studies to find ways to effectively exploit their potential.

One definition of new literacies covering a broad sweep of the subject states:

The new literacies of the Internet and other information and communication technologies include the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. These new literacies allow us to use the Internet and other information and communication technologies to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, and synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Camack, 2004).

Examples of new literacies that are emerging recently include, gaming software (Gee, 2003), video technology (O'Brien, 2001), social networking (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003), search engines (Jansen, Spink & Sarcevic, 2000), virtual worlds (Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, 2009) and Web 2.0 tools (Hichman, Sheridan-Thomas & Alvermann, 2008). So what are the implications for the development of language as technology plays a larger role in manipulating identity and the norms of conversation to fit into these new electronic spaces (Crystal, 2001)?

Where we once used pencil and paper to share information, we now use a multitude of information and communication technology to convey our thoughts and ideas. What is even more exciting is the spread of the communication. We don't just write our ideas down to be stuffed into a notebook, we publish them to the world for others to read and make comments. New literacy is about empowering everyone within the reach of technology to communicate, share ideas and receive feedback.

However, this is not without issues and discourse. There are many barriers to overcome. For example, who has access to the technology and in which language are the ideas conveyed. We have to be aware that this "ideological" view of literacy does not dominate and marginalize others (Gee, 1991; Benier and Street, 1994). We also need to

understand the effects of different literacies as we cross from one culture to another (Street, 2003).

New Literacy Studies and Other Theories

There are many theories that the New Literacy Studies stands on as it evolves. I believe that the New Literacy Studies is a moment that will be constantly changing because of the continuous nature of emerging technologies. Any analysis of the new literacies gathered from traditional research literature shows that we are at the forefront of a very new phenomenon. Not much research has been conducted in this area (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Camack, 2004).

Gee talks about some theories that have been incorporated in the New Literacy Studies in his paper on the “Social Turn”. He lists what he calls a “baker’s dozen”, I will highlight a few of these theories and his thoughts on these theories, in regard to the New Literacy Studies.

1) Situated cognition as it relates to Vygotsky argues that knowledge and intelligence is not only in the head, but distributed across social practices and various tools including technologies. He states that knowing is being able to participate mainly in practice and learning is the changing of patterns of participation.

2) Cultural models theory argues that people make sense of their experiences by applying images or storylines shared with a culture or social group and this explains why and how things happen as they do and what they mean. This guides people in their actions, judgment of self and others and shapes the way they talk, write and communicate.

3) The new science and technology studies argue that scientific knowledge originates in the scientists’ day-to-day social practices and is characterized by the tools and technologies that the scientists’ use. Therefore, scientists’ activities are more technological, social and cultural influenced than their write-ups in books and journals may appear.

4) The postmodernist work, which is centered upon the notion of “discourse”. Discourse being the ways of communicating and acting toward people and things so that certain perspectives come to be viewed as “normal”, while others come to be seen as “deviant”.

This is just a sample of some of the theories from different disciplines that have influenced the evolution of the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1998).

Using New Literacy Studies Productively

As new literacies swirl around us, how do we capture them and bring them into focus in order to use them to their fullest potential? There are certain skills, strategies and dispositions that students need to learn to effectively utilize these new literacies. Students will increasingly encounter new literacies every time they read, write or communicate through the Internet (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Camack, 2004). Let us use the example of a student writing a paper or creating a presentation for an online class. The student will use the following new literacies to achieve this goal: 1) an Internet browser and a search engine to find information, 2) critical thinking skills to evaluate the accuracy of the information found on the Internet, 3) a word processor or presentation tool to create the document, 4) knowledge on how to access email or a course management system to submit the assignment, 5) the ability to use a discussion board or online classroom to present or interface with other students about the paper or presentation.

This is only one dimension that the New Literacy Studies addresses. There is another view that is even more important to consider, this being the concept of multiliteracies. The New London Group (2000) defines multiliteracies as a set of open-ended, flexible literacies required to operate in different contexts and within different communities of practice. So how are students going to productively use these multiliteracies and create meaning? When looking at the Internet, there is the use of multiple media forms, so according to Lemke, students will need to understand how literacies and cultural traditions combine different semiotic modalities to realize that the total experience is more than the parts mean separately (Lemke, 1998). Students will also need to be proficient contributors to the Internet community adding to this growing body of knowledge. Finally, students will find that they encounter information from various social contexts. When students start to share information on a global scale there are new challenges that arise, such as how to interpret and respond to others from multiple social and cultural contexts (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Camack, 2004).

One major theme that is very important with New Literacy Studies is to teach students to be critical thinkers and enable them with the ability to analysis the information they will encounter as they are exposed to these various new literacies.

The Intersection of New Literacy Studies in Education

When considering the formal educational setting it is important to expose students to the most essential information and communication technologies mainly centering on the Internet and available from online, networked environment. Living in the middle of the information age it is imperative to prepare students in new literacies, because these skills are essential to accessing information and acquiring knowledge (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Camack, 2004).

Public school policy and national standards need to be in alignment with the challenges of global competitiveness and information economies (Leu, O'Byrne, McVerry & Everett-Cacopardo, in press). Currently there are no standards for the following skills: 1) the ability to use a search engine and read the results, 2) the ability to evaluate critical information to determine reliability, 3) the ability to compose effective email messages, 4) the ability to use critical software like word processors or presentation tools, and 5) online reading comprehension skills. Our educational system has yet to tap into, utilize and instruct the new literacies that are already dominating our lives online. These new literacies include, social networking, semiotics of visual images and the use of new forms of media from Web 2.0 tools.

Another area to consider is how the use of the Internet is presented to students. It should be defined as literacy, instead of just a technology tool. The Internet should not be taught as a separate subject, but integrated into all subject areas. Every teacher should be responsible for showing students how to effectively utilize the Internet within their subject area. When the Internet is framed as literacy, then researchers from various disciplines can come together to collaboratively build on the New Literacy Studies Theory (Leu, O'Byrne, McVerry & Everett-Cacopardo, in press).

However, there are concerns and issues that need to be dealt with when using these new literacies in the schools. Students from the poorest school districts are at an unfair advantage when it comes to technology and Internet access. How will our educational

system and public policy bridge this gap and bring about equality to all students when distributing and teaching new literacies?

Conclusion

I have often heard it said in many different venues, “Our world is changing so fast that we need to prepare students for jobs that don’t even exist yet. So how do we go about accomplishing this seemingly impossible task? We can start by training teachers how to effectively incorporate new literacies into the content. Students don’t need separate classes for these new literacies; they need seamless integration of today’s literacies into their current learning environments. We need to inspire today’s students to think about how they can take the technologies of today and evolve them into new innovations for tomorrow.

Today I listened to a panel of UA students talking about the integration of technology in the classroom and their perspective of online learning. These are students what I would call “Digital Natives”, those born after 1980, yet they were not seeing the vision of new literacies incorporated into the learning environment. They use all of these new literacies for communication and entertainment, but they are not getting the transition of these ideas for education. I see this as a challenge to inspire students, faculty, administrators and policy makers to look toward the day when new literacies will be seamlessly integrated into our classrooms. I want Laura Ingalls Wilder to walk into a classroom and have no idea what goes on in this room, yet be motivated to discover that learning takes place in this environment!

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