Ways with Visual Languages
Making the Case for Critical Media Literacy

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Although print media continues to dominate literacy efforts in K-12 classrooms, our lives are increasingly influenced by visual images—from corporate logos to building-sized billboards to Internet Web sites. Learning how to "read" the multiple layers of image-based communication, media languages, and Internet technologies is becoming a necessary adjunct to traditional print literacy. The explosion of media literacies has outpaced our pedagogy, our curricula and methods of instruction, and the definitions of what it means to be literate in a multimedia society. In the multimedia world of the Internet and digital television, visual and digital languages have multiplied the ways in which "texts," both written and electronic, have become part of the out-of-class curriculum.

In the sense used here, "text" goes beyond a verbal or written artifact to refer to any communication or expression produced by artists, writers, or those in the media industries. I believe that the meanings of such texts evolve as readers or viewers interact with the texts and construct meaning from them. It is in this sense that I use the term "read" as a form of textual analysis. To examine the generation of meaning in texts is a complex and involving process. Such examination needs to go beyond the aesthetics, modes, and forms present in the visual work, artifact, or text and locate them in their social and political contexts as well. A discussion of media texts that ignores these aspects is incomplete. This critical perspective acknowledges the "intermedial" nature (the interconnectedness of multiple forms of mass media and Internet technologies) of the world students live in today. In this world, technology and media have become part of the texts of everyday life.

The intermedial world, this "cyberculture" (Kellner 1995), poses many challenges to U.S. students. Whether they like it or not, they live in an age when live online chats, Webcasts, digital images, and movies compete in the classroom with textbooks in an education climate excessively charged with the rhetoric of accountability, national and state standards, and high-stakes testing. In this multimedia world, students learn to manipulate texts in ways that were not possible before—texts are copied, pasted, excerpted, morphed, revised, annotated—to offer a web of meanings and new opportunities for constructive engagement with them (Fetterman 1998). For these students, media-based production aids now include Web-based writing and publishing tools; multimedia and hypertext tools for creating and annotating reports, newspapers, and nonlinear documents; graphics and animation programs for rendering layered visual representations and even movies; camcorders, video editors, and animators that enable students to create their own dramatic and documentary videos. Each of these new literacies has its own formal features or "language," its own potential audiences, and its own strengths and limitations as a medium of student expression. In this article, I explore the dimensions of the languages and the technological challenges that they pose at a time of intense school reform. In this discussion, I propose a rationale for supporting a growing but formidable national movement that advocates the integration of critical media literacy across the curriculum.

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School Reform, Media Languages, and Internet Technologies

As students and teachers enter yet another period of budget cuts, the war on terrorism, and mandates based on the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001, they are left to wonder: What does it mean when our students’ lives and culture are no longer shaped by nature but by electronic media environments of our own creation? How does a teacher teach reading or language arts, science, or social studies to students who are constantly exposed to multimedia and technological advances in a world of critical intelligences and electronic communities?

For many years, governments across North America and in many countries of Europe and elsewhere have created reforms such as No Child Left Behind to improve outcomes of schooling. The pressure to make changes in schools is fueled by national and international test comparisons and driven by the belief that economic competitiveness will be determined by people’s skills and knowledge. A quick scan will reveal common underlying themes in education reform among English-speaking industrialized countries, adjusted for each area’s particular culture, history, politics, demographics, and geographical area. Some of the themes include:

- greater specification of curriculum standards and outcomes, with more focus on reading, writing, mathematics, science, and technology;
- greater opportunity for parents and students to choose the school that the student attends;
- more pressure on teachers through measures that control their work, limit their pay, and test their competence;
- altered finance structures to reward schools that are able to improve academic results, attract more students, or both; and
- within these policy frames, greater decentralization of managerial responsibility to individual schools.

(Moll 2003)

In the United States, for example, reforms in Chicago, Kentucky, North Carolina, Texas, and California have been the subject of much discussion, but every state has had some kind of major reform program, and some states have had several different reform programs over the last ten years. As suggested by Levin and Wiens, these reforms have produced a great deal of upheaval and much controversy: “Many speeches have been made, much improvement has been promised, lots of money has been spent, and many educators have felt disheartened. The results in terms of increased student achievement have been generally disappointing” (2003, 659). In reviewing five large-scale change efforts, Leithwood, Jantzi, and Mascall concluded: “The consensus is that reforms have not worked because they have not focused on the things that we know can affect student performance in schools” (2003).

In the school reform debate, scholars wonder whether the recent No Child Left Behind law, which emphasizes accountability, evidence-based classroom practices, and testing, can make a difference in student performance in schools. It is perhaps too early to tell: as the old adage has it, education reform is a long-term project that can only be judged retrospectively. However, education policy based on research would focus on (a) changing classroom practice, (b) supporting validated curriculum and teaching models with extensive staff development, (c) accepting the importance of local context, (d) building strong relationships with families and communities, and (e) building school capacity to improve. In the 1980s and 1990s, few reforms were organized around those purposes. Instead, many of them gave primary attention to questions of governance or market mechanisms or finance or testing.

Surprisingly, these reform goals have little to say about the role mass media and Internet technologies play in shaping individual or national identity. Although adolescents spend hours each day engaged with the media and the powerful culture industries of our time, the authors of No Child Left Behind make little attempt to build a bridge between child culture and school culture, what happens in the classroom and what happens outside, or schools and community. Furthermore, the new literacies force educators of young adolescents to go beyond the traditional reforms and curricula content of thirty to forty years ago, when new media languages and Internet technologies were virtually unknown. For many schools, what is missing is a research-based method for teaching students to read, question, and understand the visual languages of media, as well as examples of ways to produce meaning that enhance lives and reject the oppressive nature of texts that privilege some student voices and deny others. A reconceptualized vision of new literacies education would include an explicit effort to enable students to understand how visual media work to produce meanings. This effort would strive to develop literate people who are able to read, write, listen, talk, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of media, including print, television, music, video, film, radio, hypertext, the arts, and Internet technologies.

I am not advocating a simplistic solution to a very complex reform agenda. I am not suggesting that a vision of media literacy education should be perceived as a panacea for adolescent angst and alienation or school failure. The complexities of school culture, dysfunctional families, and community facilities’ serving or ignoring teens are beyond the scope of media literacy education and school reform.
Evidence-Based Research and the Need for Critical Media Literacy Education

There are clear indications that young people are spending more and more time in the virtual world. Despite the claims that Internet use is replacing television watching, a 1999 survey found that American children between the ages of two and seventeen who had computers, video games, and a television spent an average of four hours and forty-eight minutes a day in front of some type of screen, compared to three hours and forty minutes for children who had only televisions (Subrahmanym et al. 2000). Clearly, access to more screens increases, rather than decreases, the total time spent in front of screens.

Another emerging picture of computer use shows that the average amount of time spent online is increasing every year. In 1999, American children between the ages of two and seventeen were spending approximately one hour and thirty-seven minutes a day using a computer or playing video games—an increase of twenty-four minutes over 1998. In 2001, Canadian nine- to fourteen-year-olds who had access to the Internet at home spent 4.9 hours per week online, up from 3.8 hours per week in 2000 and 2.4 hours per week in 1999—a 100 percent increase in only two years. As some scholars have warned, the potential problems indicated by these numbers should not be minimized. "Research indicates that between 5 percent (and) 8 percent [of] Internet users have difficulties associated with Internet addiction." In an alarmist tone, psychologist Richard Davis calls for parental attention to this problem by warning that excessive use of Internet technologies will have harmful effects on children if it goes unchecked (Davis n.d.). It is curious to note that after five years of investigation into the use of computers by young children, Alison Armstrong and Charles Casey, authors of The Child and the Machine: Why Computers May Put Our Children's Education at Risk, concluded that "the overwhelming majority of elementary schools have not benefited from using computers. . . . Young children need to develop intellectual curiosity, learn social skills, and explore the sensuous richness of daily life" (1998, 201).

Given the evidence that the Internet can be harmful to young children, some experts have suggested that parents should be more restrictive about computer and television use, e-mail accounts, and unsupervised Web browsing. For example, child psychologist Jane Healy, author of Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds—For Better and Worse, says, "We need to ask more questions about the impact of educational technology on children—questions about what computers are doing to children's brains, social health, and physical health." Healy takes "a firm stance against computer use by children before the age of seven, when they develop the capacity to think symbolically instead of only concretely" (2000, 21).

Psychologist and educator Howard Gardner, well known for his theories on multiple intelligences, when asked at what age children should be introduced to computers, responded, "Children would not suffer the slightest disadvantage if they didn't see one till age nine or ten" (in Healy 1998, 166). The Alliance for Childhood, in Fool's Gold: A Critical Look at Computers in Childhood, recommends "an immediate moratorium on the further introduction of computers in early childhood and elementary education, except for special cases of students with disabilities" (Cordes and Miller 2000, 166). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) recommends that children be restricted to one to two hours a day of media time (including television, computers, video games, etc.) and that television sets be removed from children's bedrooms.

The arguments outlined above reveal a split in approach among the protectionist, interventionist, and cultural studies perspectives. A protectionist approach aims to shield children from the media through abstentions, such as TV Turnoff Week, or through regulation (the rating system) or censorship. An interventionist approach focuses on the negative issues pertaining to the media (e.g., violence, sex-role stereotyping, or manipulation in advertising). This approach interprets media literacy as a strategy to help protect young people from harmful effects, with the idea that individuals who participate in a media literacy program are less likely to be affected by media programs with harmful content. A cultural studies approach advocates for the empowerment of audiences through awareness training and critical pedagogy. The usefulness of critical pedagogy as a media literacy strategy lies in its ability to generate skepticism and frameworks of unpacking assumptions through its inquiry methods. Once we are skeptical, we can begin to investigate our unquestioned assumptions about the media, voicing uncertainty about the veracity of renderings of events, ideas, or popular stories by the media. Such critical analysis undermines the intellectual certitude that allows some educators to dismiss certain classroom practices as culturally deficient and to accept others as academically sound.

Need for Critical Media Literacy

Before I begin to outline the rationale for critical media literacy, I will define media literacy. (For a detailed discussion of the history of media literacy in the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia, see Heins and Cho 2002 and Semali 2000). As indicated previously, the definition of media literacy is evolving. Today there many organizations and Web sites in the United States that promote media literacy. They offer a
variety of purposes and perspectives (prevention, education, critique of media products, activism, curriculum development, and many others) that run the gamut from discussions of what media does to children to educational programs that help students enjoy media texts or learn from them. Organizations such as the National Telemedia Council and the Alliance for a Media Literate America welcome the multiplicity of perspectives. With those perspectives also come different definitions of media literacy.

Furthermore, scholars note that few studies have explicitly defined and measured the results of participation in media-literacy curricula, but there is a generalized notion about what those outcomes are. The following definitions are noteworthy: First, media literacy often incorporates the goal of fostering "discerning sensivenes" or critical analysis in its participants (Brown 1998). Second, media literacy involves "asking questions about what you watch, see and read" (Hobbs 1998), thus encouraging the outcome of ongoing critical inquiry. Third, among the most commonly stated goals of media literacy is the development of "critical viewers" (Singer and Singer 1998). Fourth, Elizabeth Thoman, director of the Center for Media Literacy, defined critical viewing as "learning to analyze and question what is on the screen, how it is constructed and what may have been left out" (Thoman 1999).

Fifth, another crucial component of media literacy, as discussed by Silverblatt, "is awareness of the multitude of messages received daily from the media and the effects they can have on attitudes and behavior" (Silverblatt 1995). Thus, media literacy can help foster critical thinking and discussion of media-related issues, including how media messages are created, marketed, and distributed, as well as their potential influence (or how they are received).

One elaborate definition of media literacy that has been widely scrutinized was developed by the New Mexico Media Literacy Project (<www.nmmlp.org>), established in the early 1990s by the Downs Media Education Corporation. In contrast with many other organizations, the New Mexico Media Literacy Project believes in independence from media corporations, "so they do not take money from the global media giants who are restricting information, redefining freedom, limiting our democracy and presenting so many negative educational choices to our children and citizens" (Heins and Cho 2002, 24).

The definition posted on the New Mexico Media Literacy Project Web site reads as follows:

"Media literacy”—the ability to critically consume and create media—is an essential skill in today’s world. Media literate individuals are better able to decipher the complex messages they receive from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards and signs, packaging and marketing materials, video games, and the Internet. Media literacy skills can help one understand not only the surface content of media messages but the deeper and often more important meanings beneath the surface. Media literacy education seeks to give media consumers greater freedom by teaching them to analyze, access, evaluate and produce media.

In sum, they define media literacy as one’s ability to access, experience, evaluate, and produce media products. However, I must add that in this context, media are seen to represent actual events, but those representations are subjective and incomplete. They are subjective because each individual interprets media messages or stories differently and consequently draws different meanings from the same message. They are incomplete because every iteration of questioning a text means penetrating the layers of the text. Basically, this means that we consciously engage in a systematic inquiry in which we do a number of things: identify the symbols and understand their meaning and functions; analyze the structure and understand its power; articulate the meaning as whatever it communicates to us within our social context; appreciate that we will not arrive at a definitive interpretation; and come to a deeper understanding that unpacks the contradictions and dilemmas furnished by the text. Such sustained questioning opens the gates for us to pursue meaning and understanding through further inquiry. Media literacy is necessary for media consumers to sift through the variety of presentations, including films, newspapers, Web sites, and video screens, to arrive at meaning. For instance, it helps consumers understand how journalists and news producers select which stories to publish, what aspects to emphasize, and what language to use.

In my writing elsewhere (Semali 2000), I have tried to answer the many questions teachers often ask: What is media literacy? Why do we need media literacy in schools? What resources are available to novice teachers to help them think about curriculum planning? Where can they start? In the current climate of high-stakes testing, mandatory state standards, and the No Child Left Behind legislation, how does a teacher begin to fathom adding media literacy to an already overcrowded curriculum? The rationale for critical media literacy education is based on the notion that if we are to prepare students for the emerging information age, we must help them comprehend and communicate through both traditional and emerging technologies. This means making them understand the following:

• The programs themselves (how they produce meaning, how various language forms are organized, and how they construct reality)
• The contexts in which the programs are transmitted
• The organizations or culture industries that produce them
• The technologies of production, distribution, and reception
• How the programs represent individuals and groups
• The different ways in which audiences respond to and use the mass media

Media literacy aims to move audiences from awareness to action, from passivity to engagement, from denial to acceptance of responsibility for what each of us can do as individuals, as parents, as citizens, as participants of our media-dominated society. In Teaching Media Literacy, Masterman (1985) argues that it is only a matter of time before schools realize that they must teach students to analyze media texts and visual images critically. For him, the gulf between education inside the classroom, which remains heavily print based, and outside of school continues to grow, and there is no likelihood of narrowing this gap any time soon.

Media literacy has for a long time been valued and advocated by nationwide organizations such as the National Reading Conference, International Reading Association, and NCATE. However, compared to other countries like Canada, Britain, and Australia, media literacy in the United States today remains the arena of a patchwork of nonprofit advocacy groups, nonprofit providers of curricular materials, and assorted state and local initiatives, a handful of which receive federal funding (Heins and Cho 2002). Yet the movement is growing: new ideas and energy abound; and along with a multitude of youth arts and journalism projects, media literacy is increasingly understood to be a vital part of educating youth. Several media literacy organizations are scattered throughout the nation. Several Web sites provide examples of curricular methods for integrating media literacy in schools; hundreds of articles, think pieces, and debates; and lists of resources, books, and teaching media lit kits. This national movement aims to:

• develop, distribute, and promote media literacy curricula that encourage critical thinking and free expression, examine the corporate media system, and inspire active participation in society;
• advocate independent media-making as a critical part of a democratic society and vibrant culture; and
• support local, state, and national media reform efforts.

As discussed elsewhere (Semali 2001), "visual literacy," "Internet literacy," and "media literacy" are often used interchangeably. The terms tend to have shifting meanings, and they confuse those of us saturated in conceptions of traditional print literacy. This situation leaves the classroom teacher with questions regarding the literate tradition and the nature of education, learning, and thinking. McLaren and Hammer (1995) clearly point out the new dynamics playing in contemporary classrooms and how literacy is taught and acquired:

In the current historical juncture of democratic decline in the United States, ideals and images have become detached from their anchorage in stable and agreed-upon meaning and associations and are now beginning to assume a reality of their own. The self-referential world of the media is one that splinters, obliterates, peripheralizes, partitions, and segments social space, time, knowledge, and subjectivity in order to unify, encompass, entrap, totalize and homogenize them through the meta-form of entertainment. What needs to be addressed is the way in which capitalism is able to secure this cultural and ideological totalization and homogenization through its ability to insinuate itself into social practices and private perceptions through various forms of media knowledges. (196)

These authors urge us to take a hard look at the situation brought upon us by multimedia technologies, raising the following critical questions: How are the subjectivities and identities of individuals and the production of media knowledges within popular culture mutually articulated? To what extent does the hyperreal correspond to practices of self and social constitution in contemporary society? Do we remain "sunk in the depressing hyperbole of the hyperreal," encysted in the monologic self-referentiality of the mode of information? Or do we establish a politics of refusal that is able to contest the tropes that govern Western colonialist narratives of supremacy and oppression?

What is not being discussed is the pressing need within pedagogical sites for creating a media-literate citizenry that can disrupt, contest, and transform media apparatuses so that they no longer possess the power to infantilize the population and continue to create passive and paranoid social subjects (McLaren and Hammer 1995).

Such questions urge teachers and students to consider alternative definitions of literacy and to go beyond print literacy. A lack of critical pedagogy in schools creates passive citizens. The time has arrived to broaden the canons of traditional education and the curriculum to include the expanding technologies of television, film, video, and computers. Using critical pedagogy to integrate the new forms of visual and electronic "texts" represents a curriculum requiring new competencies and a new definition of what constitutes learning and how and when it takes place. Making these changes requires that teachers be trained in the emerging visual languages and Internet technologies.

In a classroom context, what might this critical approach entail? It means teaching new teachers and students the competencies of engaging in multiple readings of texts. Thus, media literacy becomes a process of analyzing, comparing, interpreting, and making sense of texts in a way that is different from the usual, routine, and preferred meaning. Typically, pre-
ferred meanings are found in texts that insist on the existing dominant interpretation or ideology, that explain why things are the way they are. When such texts are read or viewed in this particular way, their interpretation or meaning tends to coincide with mythical beliefs, clichés, and stereotypical or hidden bias. By applying critical media literacy strategies to read these texts, the reader or viewer is able to read against the grain, to evaluate the texts using multiple frameworks, and to make an informed decision to either question the proposed premise/explanation of the media text, partially accept it, or even reject it completely. Such critical reading, viewing, and listening skills individuals can acquire from the critical pedagogy of media literacy education.

Equally, student production in the newer media—hypertext, multimedia, the Web—must be encouraged and undertaken with an awareness of the unique strengths and limitations of these media. In a hypermedia document, what does the nonlinear nature of the text enable students to say or do differently with the material, and what purposes does this feature serve? How can students be helped to explore and understand this capability, as both authors and readers? These are particularly important questions to address because there are as of yet no clear standards or conventions guiding our use of nonlinear texts, nor the purposes to which we put them. These and related issues of “reality” authorship and ownership, which arise when students produce “new” works using media tools and incorporating content that becomes accessible and changeable with new technologies, are important for teachers and students to consider.

Conclusion

I conclude this discussion about media languages and the need for critical media literacy education with two observations. First, there is a steady shift in research toward examining the literacy practices of adolescents as embedded in their technology practices and social lives. In the past, the focus was on media effects, with special attention paid to television. With the emergence of multimedia, where computers, television, DVD, music files, and Internet technologies seem to converge to provide a limitless data source of information, entertainment, and instant communication, the study of one medium or one literacy does not make sense. As an educator, I have become aware of the degree to which technology figures in my students’ lives. They use computers not only to do their homework, but also to keep in touch with friends near and far, to construct a sense of who they are and are becoming, and to find out about their world. In the same sense, fellow educators have come to realize that technology is redefining literacy and literacy practices in ways not experienced before. They also realize that differences in technology use and perceptions of value between teachers and students can effectively block change in the integration and use of technology in literacy pedagogy. Although the development of new technologies may have helped to change literacy practices, as a community of educators and researchers we lack much of the information needed to develop grounded research and pedagogy.

Second, as teachers increasingly integrate the new media into their curricula, they need to establish a set of working criteria to evaluate commercial media products for use by their students and to assess the media productions of their own students in a developmentally appropriate fashion. Yet few teachers have been provided with much opportunity to develop a language, a set of useful concepts, with which to think critically about the form as well as the content of these new multimedia texts. Teachers can judge the quality of the content of a video or a CD-ROM or a Web site, but not the quality of structure. All of us learned in school how to analyze a range of written texts, from poems to research reports. Most teachers can explain why they consider a particular piece of writing polemical when an assertion is not followed by some kind of substantiation. But little attention is given to the visual languages and Internet technologies. This trend must be reversed.

Key words: media literacy, visual languages, multimedia, computers in education

REFERENCES


