MEDIA AND LITERACY

Third Edition

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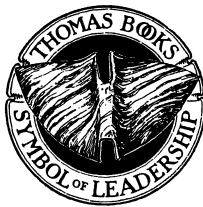
Learning in the Information Age–
Issues, Ideas, and Teaching Strategies

By

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and

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PREFACE

As mass communications, teaching, learning, and literacy take on new meaning, we must be sure that all students have access to media in their most powerful forms. The multiple technologically-intensive literacies involved in mastering new media are central to helping students function in today's home and school environments. Examples include media literacy, visual literacy, digital literacy, networking literacy, information literacy, and more. They all affect academic achievement and they all influence citizenship. When it comes to academic instruction, there are many ways that new literacies can be powerful allies of learning. Much depends on what classroom teachers do to incorporate the study and production of multiple media into the basic subjects they teach.

National standards have become important educational references. One way or another, they all refer to media and literacy. Subject matter standards suggest what schools must do to reach educational goals. Performance standards focus on the nature of proficiency at various levels. A central concern is aligning the standards with the curriculum and assessment. The opportunity to learn standards have a lot to do with considering what all students need in order to have a fair shot at high achievement. Although they are all part of educational reform, the emphasis here is on basic subject matter standards and understanding the multiple media literacies required in a digital world.

There is a growing acceptance of subject matter standards when it comes to figuring out what students should know and be able to do in core subjects. Many disciplines have undertaken such projects in the last decade or so. Updates and related ideas are published frequently. Professional associations have been involved in a way that reflects what is known about content and pedagogy. Information and communication technology are viewed as tools and content across the stan-

dards. This book builds on these projects and suggests a mix of media possibilities. Along the way, it explores ways that multiple literacies connect to the language arts, science, mathematics, the arts, and technology.

At one time, literacy was squeezed into an established framework of reading and writing. The meaning of literacy has changed as new circumstances and new approaches to teaching have opened up a much wider range of possibilities. In some circles, the word "literacy" has become almost synonymous with the word "competency." We don't push the definition that far, but we do agree with writers who refer to technological and scientific literacy without any reference to reading and writing. But no matter how words and their definitions evolve, there is general agreement that the core subjects and their technological associates will all play a major role in tomorrow's elevated concept of literacy.

At the very time North American systems of scientific research and education are in crisis, other regions are redoubling their efforts. The erosion of American leadership in science and technology is related to the declining investment in education. The only solution is recapitalization of our educational base and doubling the investment in science and technology. Of course, it's not just preparing students to be technical engineers. (Many of these jobs are being outsourced anyway.) An even more important goal is a broad-based literacy that encourages children to think for themselves in a way that supplies us with essential sparks of originality. This is important because people in advanced countries will have to find better ways to innovate and create superior products for which they can charge extra.

In an era of rapid change and innovation, being really good at learning how to learn is an enormous asset. In today's world, those who are imaginative and excited about learning new skills will do at least as well as those who focus on factual competency and general knowledge. A healthy irreverence for the established way of doing things often goes hand-in-hand with the ability to think and learn deeply and widely. This applies as much to teachers as it does to students. Everything possible should be done to make tomorrow's schools attractive, pleasant places where imagination, ingenuity, and creativity are valued. Technology can help.

Getting millions of teachers who can break new educational ground requires raising the level of what teaching is all about. More than a

third of the teachers working today are expected to retire in the next decade. Too many younger ones will quit. At the same time, a surge is expected in the number of schoolchildren. Recruiting a sufficient cadre of well-educated new teachers will require better pay, more prestige, and much better working conditions. Only then will we get enough teachers who can demonstrate that it is possible to be thoughtful, confident, action oriented, and fully literate.

What will it mean to be literate in the twenty-first century? *Media and Literacy* will attempt to answer part of that question. The book is written in a style that we hope teachers and others interested in education will find accessible. Many practical content and media-related activities have been included. All of the suggestions here are based on the belief that children can build knowledge (including media knowledge) in ways that connect to their own experiences. This constructivist approach to learning implies that knowledge cannot be gained simply by absorption through the senses. We view active thinking, hands-on inquiry, and collaborative doing as ways to capitalize on how children learn best.

Children need access to the most powerful technologies available so that they can examine reality from many angles and in different lights. As students use media to engage in social, physical, and mental activities, it will become possible for them to visualize new connections and choices. Teachers will continue to guide their students to think critically about the information presented to them through a mix of distant sources and media. Understanding both sides of the coin matters. When you get connected to the Internet, for example, you have to understand that it can be an empowering medium when used responsibly. When used irresponsibly, it can be a colossal waste of time. Whiz-bang high-tech skills can help. But sound fundamentals like knowledge skills, critical thinking, individual judgment, and personal values are most important when it comes to media and literacy.

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Chapter 1

MULTIPLE LITERACIES AND MEDIA ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

All of our inventions are but improved means to an unimproved end.
–Henry David Thoreau

The center of literacy education is shifting. Social and educational power now extends from being able to understand and manipulate the processes used to create messages in the modern world. Today, being literate implies having the ability to decode information from all types of media. The media literacy umbrella is in the process of being extended to cover technological literacy, visual literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, networking literacy, and more. As contemporary media converge, the features of multiple literacies increasingly overlap with each other and with basic subject matter. These new educational media possibilities hold great promise, but they should be viewed as a means rather than an end.

This book is an effort to contribute to the conversation about the nature of media and literacy in today's technology-intensive world. Understanding electronic media and connecting newer technologies to basic literacy development are central concerns. Everyone now has to go beyond the traditional basics of reading, writing, and calculating. Science, art, and technology are the new neighbors on the basic educational block. Across the core curriculum, today's students have to learn how to understand and create messages through varied experiences with many forms of print *and* nonprint media. Creating new avenues for electronic media and expanding related literacy instruction are major educational challenges in the twenty-first century. How

it will all work out is an open question. But one thing is for sure–tomorrow's schools will be even more closely associated with technology.

Literacy begins at home and continues in the classroom. From newspapers and books to television and the Internet, the way parents use media exerts a major influence on a child's education. The same can be said for the modeling influence of teachers. What do you remember about your best teachers? Was it being challenged to think about new things? For many of us, it's not so much what was taught but the fact that the teacher was excited about what they were teaching.

Curriculum, accountability, working conditions, and technology can all amplify whatever's found in the educational environment. Technology is an important thing; but it's far from being the only thing. If you can't solve a problem without technology, then you probably can't solve a problem with technology. Enthusiastically teaching students how to comprehend media in all its forms certainly matters. But the most important things are having good teachers and small enough classes so that those teachers can do their work. Clearly, if we want to grow more cutting edge talent in America, then we must make sure that the best teachers and the best students are nurtured and rewarded.

COMMUNICATING IN A NEW MEDIA CULTURE

Thinking, feeling, and following new ideas must all considered be when it comes to defining and extending literacy in the twenty-first century. Sometimes electronic media help; sometimes they do not. Either way, it is important for today's students to have access to literacy in its most powerful forms. Children have always spent years mastering elements of traditional literacy systems and learning how to use them fluently. Care must be taken to continue and improve that process. But now, it's time to add something to the mix: helping students reach out and creatively master new media.

Communicating effectively and creating meaning with a multitude of media are becoming essential parts of literacy instruction. Media and literacy cut across the basic subjects. When it comes to media literacy itself, there is more involved than merely teaching through

media. It also involves teaching *about* and *with* media. As part of an expanded definition of literacy, *media literacy* may be thought of as comprehending, analyzing, composing, and appreciating multiple print and nonprint symbol systems. From television to Internet web sites, when production is added to the lesson, it can serve as an integrating force in the classroom.

The ascendancy of television, video games, the computer, and the Internet is the most important media development of our time. As these and other interlocking technologies increasingly shape our future, it is important to explore the possibilities and the problems. The power of today's communications, information, and networking technologies requires special attention. But it would be foolish to provide too warm a welcome without more serious thought. Will developing electronic media provide a transforming vision and a new awareness? Possibly. But developments have been moving so fast that few have taken the time to consider where we're going or where we may end up.

Today's students live in a world where more and more information is communicated by viewing. The habits of the mind fostered through media interactions need to be highlighted because the future may well belong to those who can intelligently see it. Clearly, students in tomorrow's schools will have to interact with the full range of media possibilities. Each medium will present "texts" to be experienced, appreciated, analyzed, created, and shared. But user beware. Just look at a couple of examples. As things stand today, video games have a particularly bad reputation. And don't look for that to change anytime soon. Internet technology puts all kinds of real-world ugliness at the student's fingertips. On the positive side, the Web offers active, hands-on educational possibilities for students all over the world.

Although the Internet is coming on strong, television is still the dominant media of our times. With TV, becoming an intelligent consumer has never been more more difficult or more important. They are up to all kinds of new tricks. Advertising agencies and government agencies, for example, are preparing videos for local newscasts–and in the process blurring media ethics. Among the new questions to be asked when we watch the news: is it factual journalism, advertising, or just plain old-fashioned propaganda?

A little skeptical inquiry is key. Whether it's on television or on the