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## What Should We Teach? Rethinking Literacy

*“Adolescents need to learn how to integrate knowledge from multiple sources, including music, video, online databases, and other media. They need to think critically about information that can be found nearly instantaneously through out the world. They need to participate in the kinds of collaboration that new communication and information technologies enable, but increasingly demand. Considerations of globalization lead us toward the importance of understanding the perspective of others, developing a historical grounding, and seeing the interconnectedness of economic and ecological systems.”*

—Bertram C. Bruce (2002)

A definition of twenty-first century literacy offered by the New Media Consortium (2005) is “the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms” (p. 8). We would modify this definition in two ways. First, textual literacy remains a central skill in the twenty-first century. Before students can engage with the new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write. Youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new. Second, new media literacies should be considered a social skill.

New media literacies include the traditional literacy that evolved with print culture as well as the newer forms of literacy within mass and digital media. Much writing about twenty-first century literacies seems to assume that communicating through visual, digital, or audiovisual media will displace reading and writing. We fundamentally disagree. Before students can engage with the new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write. Just as the emergence of written language changed oral traditions and the emergence of printed texts changed our relationship to written language, the emergence of new digital modes of expression changes our relationship to printed texts. In some ways, as researchers such as Black (2005) and Henry Jenkins (2006a) have argued, the new digital cultures provide support systems to help youth improve their core competencies as readers and writers. They may provide opportunities, for example, through blogs or live journals, for young people to receive feedback on their writing and to gain experience in communicating with a larger public, experiences that might once have been restricted to student journalists. Even traditional literacies must change to reflect the media change taking place. Youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new.

Beyond core literacy, students need research skills. Among other things, they need to know how to access books and articles through a library; to take notes on and integrate secondary sources; to assess the reliability of data; to read maps and charts; to make sense of scientific visualizations; to grasp what kinds of information are being conveyed by various systems of representation; to distinguish between fact and fiction, fact and opinion; to construct arguments and

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marshal evidence. If anything, these traditional skills assume even greater importance as students venture beyond collections that have been screened by librarians and into the more open space of the web. Some of these skills have traditionally been taught by librarians who, in the modern era, are reconceptualizing their role less as curators of bounded collection and more as information facilitators who can help users find what they need, online or off, and can cultivate good strategies for searching material.

Students also need to develop technical skills. They need to know how to log on, to search, to use various programs, to focus a camera, to edit footage, to do some basic programming and so forth. Yet, to reduce the new media literacies to technical skills would be a mistake on the order of confusing penmanship with composition. Because the technologies are undergoing such rapid change, it is probably impossible to codify which technologies or techniques students must know.

As media literacy advocates have claimed during the past several decades, students also must acquire a basic understanding of the ways media representations structure our perceptions of the world; the economic and cultural contexts within which mass media is produced and circulated; the motives and goals that shape the media they consume; and alternative practices that operate outside the commercial mainstream. Such groups have long called for schools to foster a critical understanding of media as one of the most powerful social, economic, political, and cultural institutions of our era. What we are calling here the new media literacies should be taken as an expansion of, rather than a substitution for, the mass media literacies.

### **What New Skills Matter? New Social Skills and Cultural Competencies**

All of these skills are necessary, even essential, but they are not sufficient, which brings us to our second point about the notion of twenty-first century literacy: the new media literacies should be seen as social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply an individualized skill to be used for personal expression. The social dimensions of literacy are acknowledged in the New Media Consortium's (2005) report only in terms of the distribution of media content. We must push further by talking about how meaning emerges collectively and collaboratively in the new media environment and how creativity operates differently in an open-source culture based on sampling, appropriation, transformation, and repurposing.

The social production of meaning is more than individual interpretation multiplied; it represents a qualitative difference in the ways we make sense of cultural experience, and in that sense, it represents a profound change in how we understand literacy. In such a world, youth need skills for working within social networks, for pooling knowledge within a collective intelligence, for negotiating across cultural differences that shape the governing assumptions in different communities, and for reconciling conflicting bits of data to form a coherent picture of the world around them.

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We must integrate these new knowledge cultures into our schools, not only through group work but also through long-distance collaborations across different learning communities. Students should discover what it is like to contribute their own expertise to a process that involves many intelligences, a process they encounter readily in their participation in fan discussion lists or blogging. Indeed, this disparate collaboration may be the most radical element of new literacies: they enable collaboration and knowledge-sharing with large-scale communities that may never personally interact. Schools are currently still training autonomous problem-solvers, whereas as students enter the workplace, they are increasingly being asked to work in teams, drawing on different sets of expertise, and collaborating to solve problems.

Changes in the media environment are altering our understanding of literacy and requiring new habits of mind, new ways of processing culture and interacting with the world around us. We are just beginning to identify and assess these emerging sets of social skills and cultural competencies. We have only a broad sense of which competencies are most likely to matter as

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young people move from the realms of play and education and into the adult world of work and society. What follows, then, is a provisional list of eleven core skills needed to participate within the new media landscape. These skills have been identified both by reviewing the existing body of scholarship on new media literacies and by surveying the forms of informal learning taking place in the participatory culture. As suggested above, mastering these skills remains a key step in preparing young people “to participate fully in public, community, [Creative] and economic life” (New London Group, 2000, p. 9). In short, these are skills some youth are learning through participatory culture, but they are also skills that all youth need to learn if they are going to be equal participants in the world of tomorrow. We identify a range of activities that might be deployed in schools or afterschool programs, across a range of disciplines and subject matter, to foster these social skills and cultural competencies. These activities are by no means an exhaustive list but rather are simply illustrations of the kind of work already being done in each area. One goal of this report is to challenge those who have responsibility for teaching our young people to think more systematically and creatively about the many different ways they might build these skills into their day-to-day activities in ways that are appropriate to the content they are teaching.