

## Literacy in the New Information Landscape

Editor's note: This article is drawn from David Warlick's presentation at the Thomson Gale/Linworth Educational Forum, at the Texas Library Association conference, April 12, 2007 in San Antonio, Texas.

Several years ago, just after Christmas, my son informed me that he needed an analog digital converter. I did not know what an analog digital converter was, so my sixteen-year-old offspring explained to me that with this device, he would be able to play his video game systems through his laptop. On the outset, this sounded rather cool. But I reminded my son that he had a 37-inch TV downstairs where he usually played his video games. Why would he want to play

days and wishing that he had listened to me. That night, I walked by my son, lying on the sofa, playing his video game through his laptop computer—the 37-inch TV in front of him, switched off and blank. I shook my head as I walked by.

The next morning, as I was having breakfast, my son walked into the room, laid his laptop on the table and said, "I want to show you something, Dad."

added some music, and produced a QuickTime® video file that he played for me at breakfast. The practice is called *Machinima* (<http://www.machinima.com/>), and it is one of many ways that our children and students are teaching us about the new shape of information.

The very nature of information has changed in the past decade. It has become increasingly digital, networked, and overwhelming. Information also flows free of the containers that we previously managed as the gatekeepers. The print version of the Encyclopedia Britannica holds approximately 65,000 articles. The Wikipedia, on the other hand, now holds more than four and a half million articles, counting all of the various languages it serves (Berinstein).

Each of these new qualities of information impacts directly on our notions of what it means to be literate, the basic skills required to use information to accomplish goals.

- When information comes from a network, it is not always obvious where it came from, who wrote it, or why. This expands what it is to be a successful and responsible reader today. It means that part of reading is asking questions about what you are reading.
- When information is increasingly digital, especially as all information (text, audio, images, video, and animation) is now made with numbers, arithmetic takes on a much larger array of skills. For the same reasons why we must continue to teach students how to process numbers (add subtract, count, measure, calculate), we must also

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through his 15-inch laptop display? He replied that he really needed to be able to do this and that he could buy one for about fifty dollars.

Undeterred, I took him shopping, and it turned out that the cheapest analog digital converter we could find was \$270. Even though that was just about all of the money he had saved up, he still insisted he needed this device. So I let him buy it, expecting him to become bored in three

He explained that, the night before, he had been playing in the video game environment Halo II. But he was not playing the game and he was not being a player. He was a cameraman and a director. His friends were also playing in the game environment with him, but they were not being players. They were actors and acrobats. My son was using the game on his computer, through his video editing software, iMovie®, and capturing the action that he was directing his friends to perform and saving it on his hard drive as video clips. They were using the game as a movie set.

When they had captured enough video, he dismissed his friends and retreated to his bedroom, where he edited the clips,



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teach them how to use contemporary technology to process text, images, sound, and video, adding value to the information.

- As we become increasingly overwhelmed by information, we must work hard to decide which information we are going to use, and which information we are going to ignore. In other words, information must now compete for our attention in much the same way that products on a store shelf competed for attention in the industrial age. So merely being able to write a coherent paragraph is no longer enough to be a communicator. Students must learn to also communicate with images, with sound, with video. Students must learn to express their ideas compellingly.
- The containers that we once guarded—the libraries, book shelves, reference books, and file drawers—can no longer hold the information that most of us actually use. We can no longer be the gatekeepers. We must, instead, teach children how to be their own gatekeepers, and this is an ethical imperative.

These dramatic changes in information do not mean that we must change our definition of literacy, but they do point to an expanded notion of what those skills are. It means that students must know how to use appropriate tools to find information, decode it, evaluate the information to determine its value, organize the information to add meaning, process, analyze, synthesize, manipulate, mix and remix the information, and then express their findings in compelling ways using appropriate modes of communication.

Our children understand what this means as they play in their information landscapes. Information, to them, is a raw material. The video game, their music, the images and other content that they find online and collect with their digital cameras, all owe much of their value to what can be done with them. Mixing captured video game footage, with music, still images, and vocal overlays is just one of many ways that they are remixing content, taking information raw materials and assembling them into something that is personally pleasing.

They have taught themselves how to play the information. Their classrooms and libraries must become places where they learn to work the information. They must learn not only the technique, but also the responsibilities that information workers own—that information is powerful, yet fragile, that it can be worked hard but must also be handled delicately, that the basic information skills have become not only much more complex, but also a lot more exciting. ■

### Work Cited

Berinstein, Paula. “Wikipedia and Britannica: The Kid’s All Right.” Information Today, Inc. 14.3 Mar. 2006 30 Mar. 2007 (<http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/mar06/berinstein.shtml>).

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