It's a digital life! Digital literacies, multiliteracies and multimodality

Robyn Henderson | University of Southern Queensland

Today's young people are growing up in a world full of digital technologies and, for many, the use of multiple technologies is part of everyday life. This paper reflects on essential considerations for teachers of students in the middle years of schooling around the literacy learning of technology savvy, and sometimes not so savvy, young people.

Digital technologies in young people's lives

Digitally speaking, it would be hard to argue that the world is not a different place from what it was one decade ago, or even from what it was a couple of years ago. Increasingly, digital technologies are permeating daily activities and having a huge impact on the conduct of many literacy practices that are part and parcel of our lives. Computers, automatic tellers, mobile phones and iPods are just a few of the technologies with which most of us are probably familiar. Young people, on the other hand, would seem to have a different view of the world. To them, these are not so much 'new' technologies, but are instead the everyday technologies they have grown up with.

Most young people in Australia have first hand experience of a range of digital technologies. We know that teenagers are the highest users of sms messaging (Nielsen Online, 2006) and many are more "internet and technology savvy" than their parents (Nielsen Online, 2005, p.1). Approximately 92 per cent of youth have had online experiences (Nielsen Online, 2007) and almost 65 per cent of 5 to 14 year olds have accessed the internet for leisure activities, with a further 27.5 per cent having used computers but not the internet (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

It is also evident that many young people in our society have taken up 'computer games' (using the term broadly to encompass games played on computers, games consoles and other hand-held devices including mobile phones) as one of their leisure activities. In fact, a recent newspaper report highlighted the popularity of games consoles and huge sales in the pre-Christmas period at the end of last year ("Games consoles wrap up boom festive season," 2008). The article quoted data from the market research company GfK Australia, showing that 175,000 Sony PlayStation systems were sold in the five weeks preceding Christmas and that

Nintendo was unable to meet consumer demands for its DS and Wii consoles during that time (see also GfK Australia, 2008). The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that almost 70 per cent of 5 to 14 year olds play electronic or computer games (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). While the data indicate that there are differences between males and females and between age groups (5-8, 9-11 and 12-14 year olds) in relation to computer game usage, the overall data show that 20.7 per cent of 5 to 14 year olds spent between 10 and 19 hours playing computer games during a two-week period. In the case of the 12 to 14 year old age group, 15.8 per cent were engaged with games for at least 20 hours during the two weeks (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

At a wedding I attended recently, many young people – from pre-school age through the middle years – entertained themselves with a variety of portable games consoles. As the pictures illustrate, the young people were focused, engaged and oblivious to the wedding activities that were going on around them. Whilst it is obvious that not all youth have the same interests, resources or levels of access, it would appear to be quite difficult for literacy educators to ignore the extent to which digital practices like these are becoming the 'norm' for today's young people. Indeed, it is no longer possible to assume that 'reading' – in the traditional sense of engaging with print-based materials – is a popular past-time or that traditional 'cultural activities' are necessarily part of young people's lives. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) data about the leisure activities of 5 to 14 year olds, 97.4 per cent watched television, DVDs or video, 92.4 per cent were involved in computer activities, while only 74 per cent said that they read books for pleasure.

Making connections with students' home digital literacies
I would argue, however, that such data tell only part of the story. In today's world, most activities around digital technologies involve engaging with literacies of one type or another, if not with multiple literacies. For example, it is impossible to watch television without being bombarded by programs and advertisements that present multimodal meanings through pictures, colours, sounds and moving images, as well as oral and print words. We also know that it is impossible to play computer games successfully without making sense of multitudinous symbols, multiple sources of information, instructions and so on. Similarly, it's very difficult to understand the meanings of text messages sent via mobile phones without some understanding of how to 'read' and interpret the condensed linguistic versions of messages (e.g. see "Has txt kild the ritn wd?," 2007, October 2) and the emoticons or pictographs that

are often included. As a quick tour of the *NetLingo* website –
http://www.netlingo.com/ (see Jansen, 2008) – can demonstrate, knowing that
'2moro' means 'tomorrow, that '2B4UQT' stands for 'too busy for you cutey', or that
@(**)@ represents a koala requires specific forms of semiotic knowledges and
understandings.

The immersion of young people in new technologies and in a world "saturated with
the multimodal media and texts of consumer culture – film, computer games,
interactive toys, SMS, email, the internet, television, DVDs" – and digital, electronic
and hybrid texts (Carrington, 2006, p. 47; see also Prensky, 2001; The New London
Group, 1996) has to be taken seriously. To ignore the literacies that students in the
middle years of schooling are using on a daily or weekly basis in their out-of-school
lives would be negligent on the part of literacy teachers.

Since the seminal work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983), considerable research has
focused on the importance of identifying students' literate strengths and capabilities
developed at home (e.g. Freebody, Ludwig, & Gunn, 1995; Henderson, 2005;
Thomson, 2002) and on finding pedagogical approaches that help students make
connections between home and school literacies (Kalantzis, Cope, & the Learning by
Design Project Group, 2005; Kamler & Comber, 2005; The New London Group,
1996).

It would not only be naïve to think that only school learning 'counted' (Wight, 2008,
February 15), but it would seem unreasonable to discount research that has
identified the importance of building on the literacy knowledges that students already
have. Nevertheless, despite such evidence, media attention has been given to the
arguments against digital recreational practices and to the potential for another
'literacy crisis' for students who engage in such practices (e.g. Poulter, 2008; "Violent
games make users more aggressive," 2006; Wolf, 2007). As a quick internet search
revealed, there are numerous websites that identify the supposed disadvantages of
engaging with digital technologies: the potential for aggressive or violent behaviours,
tiredness, poorly developed social skills, a negative impact on learning, and even
damage to the human brain (e.g. see Hickmott, 2006; Rufus, 2004; Schmitt, 2001).

Not surprisingly, the media has also picked up on examples of the positives of digital
technology use (e.g. Clapperton, 2007, October 18). Unfortunately, though, these
generally relate to extreme cases that are likely to create media hype, such as a

report about the increased dexterity of surgeons who play computer games ("Nurse, hand me the latest video game," 2007). My purpose in this paper, however, is not to focus on the merits or otherwise of the use of digital technologies, but to reflect on what we know about digital technology use and on the considerations that teachers need to make as they prepare and plan for successful literacy learning.

Thinking about school literacy learning

Recognition that the use of digital technologies incorporates a whole range of literacy practices (Clapperton, 2007, October 18; Gee, 2003; Merchant, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2007) prompts us to consider the importance of knowing the particular literacies that are being used and the literacy knowledges that students are developing as they use these technologies. Yet research in this area is not extensive. As Steinkuehler (2007) has pointed out, "one might indeed feel cause for alarm" (p.297) knowing that more than eight out of ten children in the US have a games console at home (a figure based on research from 2005). Whilst we do not have full data for Australian children, recent sales of games consoles (as discussed above), the statistics cited above (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) and some small study research data (Henderson, 2007) suggest that computer usage and computer games in their various forms are certainly part of many students' home lives.

However, measures of school achievements in literacy learning often rely on the reading of print texts, thus privileging particular literacy practices over others. Indeed, traditional pen and paper tests privilege the reading of print texts over engagement with the full range of texts and multiliteracies available in today's world. Yet we know that many middle years students are particularly familiar with digital or screen texts and many have greater expertise with some of those texts than do their teachers. From a sociocultural perspective, expertise in reading (and literacy more generally) involves learning broad repertoires of practices which enable children to decode, make meaning, produce texts and demonstrate critical understandings across all texts they will encounter (see Freebody & Luke, 2003), at school, outside of school and in the future. From this perspective, children's experiences of 'reading' are important, regardless of the mode. Whether children grow up 'reading' literature, junk mail, the World Wide Web, mobile telephones, or even computer games, they are using literacies as part of daily sociocultural practices and are laying the foundations on which to build future knowledge and expertise.

The recognition of 'new' literacy practices also requires an acknowledgement that new codes and conventions are in operation. For example, whilst reading from left to right and from the top to the bottom of the page is appropriate for the reading of traditional print materials, digital texts often require different conventions. Reading can entail moving 'through' and 'across' texts via hyperlinks or making meaning from a range of multimodalities, including visual images, sound bytes and linguistic components. In other words, different conventions are required to do this reading successfully. They should not be regarded as necessarily less important or of less value than those required for the reading of traditional print-based texts.

Because we know that students' engagement with digital texts and digital literacies is often extensive, we need to be much more cognisant of the expertise in literacies that middle school students are bringing into classrooms. We also need to recognise that some students may have diverse experiences of digital literacies, while other students may not. However, by aiming to work productively with the knowledges and expertise that students have, teachers can open up new ways of dealing with diversity and of moving beyond deficit constructions of students and their out-of-school lives. This is an important step if we are serious about making a difference to literacy learning in middle school contexts.

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