

**A Journal on the Course Readings**

**Digital Literacy: Theory, Practice and Research**

**EDUC5304G – Professor Janette Hughes**

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### Week 1: The Current Digital Literacies Landscape

It seems that digital literacies include not only the use of technology, but also the socio-cultural aspect associated with the use of technology such as the way we “make meaning,” the way we “relate to others,” our identity formation, and the thought process (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 1). In the digital age that we live in, the dynamics of the relationships that we build and the communication processes seem to affect the way we view our world, and the way we connect with the world around us. For me as an individual, having a World Wide Web internet connection seems to create a number of affordances and constraints.

For example, having a laptop computer at home that’s connected to the internet, I would have access to any information that I would have a question about. I can download recipes for cooking, or “how to” videos for fixing a drywall, or the wooden floor, and if I have questions about health effects or the nutritional value of certain foods, all the information can be readily accessed on the internet. I can find consumer reports and ratings on any products or services that I would need by checking it on the internet. I read blogs to find out about some of the experiences that people had with particular products and services. I do online shopping, online banking and take online courses. Much of the teaching resources can be downloaded as a Powerpoint slide presentation, which can be modified for my needs. As mentioned by Jones and Hafner (2012), I was using the internet as a “cultural tool” to help me “do things” (p. 5). Without consciously thinking about it, but just using it as need arose, internet has become an indispensable tool in my daily activities.

How did all these activities on the internet change me? Physically, I spend less time on the road travelling to and from different vendors looking for the right product, and talking to various sales associates. I have quick access to information that I need on the internet, and there’s less of a need to travel to a specific place, or talk to a specialized person about products and information. Consequently, there’s less face-to-face interaction, resulting in the change in “relationships” that I have with certain people. The conversations that I would have would be on the phone with online representatives, or on the “live” chat to find out more about the products that I’m interested in. Some of the websites have pop-ups of an online service chat person asking if I need any help – similar to walking into a retail outlet and being asked the same question by a “real” sales representative.

Due to the purchase of a second lap-top computer last year, I spent about 30 minutes chatting online with a sales representative about various add-ons and other product descriptions, and placed an order online. It was convenient, time-saving, and easy/hassle free. I did not have to line-up to receive a service by a real person at a computer counter somewhere. The online order was shipped to me, and I was able to follow online where the shipment was at a given time, and when I would receive the order. Experiences like this online order described above changed the way I “think” about shopping. In the comforts of my home, I can place orders online instead of putting on my winter jacket and boots and driving to a store. For a product that I may need immediately, I would need to make an effort and leave the comforts of my home. However, because of some of the benefits of online shopping, I may plan ahead of time to account for the shipping time of the order, which would affect my buying habits. As David Bawden elaborated in chapter one of Lankshear and Knobel’s, *Digital Literacies*, “the ultimate purpose of digital literacy is to help each person learn what is necessary for their particular situation” and use the technology to fill that requirement (p. 30).

Internet has also made finding teaching resources much easier than ever before. Providing students with authentic examples is a simple process of downloading a Youtube video, or other online materials. Even a Powerpoint lesson can be downloaded from the internet, which can be easily modified to customize for my classes. The implications for teaching and learning are changing. With so much access to information available for all on the internet, encouraging a more self-directed approach of learning would enable an entirely different learning experience for the future generation of students. A curriculum that's designed to be more flexible to account for the interests of the students and to help each individual to learn at their own pace in the direction that they wish to move towards would be possible in the digital age. This would mean that the "relationships" of teachers and students would change, and the way teachers/students "think" about their teaching/learning would change, which would lead to a different way of perceiving "being" a teacher, or a student, affecting their "social identities" (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 9).

### Week 2: Multiliteracies, New Literacy Studies, Multimodal Literacies

I found New London Group's (1996) article, *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures*, very interesting. The urgency expressed in recognizing the changing nature of global "multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" nearly two decades ago seems very relevant today (p. 67). A broad recognition of "pedagogy of multiliteracies" to include socio-cultural context would be a challenging objective of our digital age, which needs to be addressed at a practical level (p. 66). David Buckingham also mentions "developing a much broader *critical understanding*, which addresses the textual characteristics of media alongside their social, economic and cultural implications" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 83).

Thanks to the New London Group, Lankshear, Knobel, and many other scholars, we are provided with an opportunity to better understand and critically reflect on the continuously changing digital culture and its implications to our learning and teaching. The social implications of these changes and our adaptation/ or use of the technology seems to have far reaching consequences for the future. For example, the various multimodal literacies that Jones and Hafner mention in *Understanding Digital Literacies* help us to reflect on the power of new literacy practices such as digital storytelling, video blogging and the use of other visual resources. Moving beyond defining multiliteracies, and digital literacies, and towards pedagogical practice, there seems to be a gap that needs to be bridged in the education sector.

Many educational environments in the elementary and higher education do not have technology infrastructure to fully support the changing needs of our learners. The teachers in these environments also need to be trained appropriately to support the current technology in the classrooms as they become more readily available. What was once considered emerging technologies a couple of decades ago is now the norm with students at both the elementary and the post-secondary levels of education. Our digital generation, born during the last twenty years, would need curriculum and teaching strategies that are more relevant to who they are in today's digital culture.

By broadly conceptualizing literacy and its practice for the new generation, we would be in a better position to support our learners (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). This ideology provides an opportunity for me to be creative as a student using the available technology to create and produce work that would express my views and understanding in a different way than I had done previously. It would be a new learning experience. As a teacher, it opens my mind to be more receptive and flexible to the creative needs of the new generation of students. In the formalized educational world, the process for this change to occur, whether gradually or rapidly, would be interesting to observe. I look forward to the possible changes, challenges, and the processes in the educational environment.

### Week 3: Popular Culture – That’s Literacy?

The readings for this week did not establish definition on popular culture; however, the presentation team, Greg and Kati, covered this point well in both the blog and in the class discussion sessions. Although we seem to have an understanding of what “pop” culture is, when we are asked to define it, it seems illusive. There seems to be multiple definitions and understandings of what pop culture is. In chapters 6 and 7 of *Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies and Practices*, Martin and Soby (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008) describe digital literacy and digital competence, and how they relate to our society and the individuals within it. For example, Martin states that “within the context of a digitally infused society as, at one level functional, at another socially engaged, and at a third as transformative,” which leads to individual empowerment (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 156). How does this statement relate to pop culture? It seems that in Martin’s statement as quoted above, pop culture would fit in with both the first and the second statements, “functional” and “socially engaged.” Does the third factor, “transformative”, also apply to those who engage in pop culture? How does one measure transformation in an individual or at a group level? Can transformation occur to a large mass of people as a result of pop culture?

Martin also categorizes the various “literacies of the digital” to illuminate the history associated with some of the current use of the terms: computer, IT or ICT literacy, technological literacy, information literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, and communication literacy (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 156). Martin separates the term, digital literacy from the plural term, digital literacies. Martin focuses on Gilster’s definition of digital literacy as critical thinking and critical evaluation, rather than technical skills on the web (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). He emphasizes the individualized relevance in the use of the technical skills. It seems that Gilster’s definition of digital literacy has many similarities at an international level by various organizations, groups and scholars as mentioned in Martin’s article, *Digital Literacy and the Digital Society*. For example, in Canada, The Canadian SchoolNet National Advisory Board (SNAB) focus on the “acquisition of enhanced skills in problem solving, critical thinking, communication and collaboration” as well as the technical skills such as “the ability to retrieve, manage, share and create information and knowledge” (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 165). In addition, Soby’s definition of digital literacy as “digital bildung” integrates “holistic approach that enables reflection on the effects that ICT has on different aspects of human development: communicative competence, critical thinking skills, and enculturation processes, among others” (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 166). These definitions and concepts in the readings help us to build better framework for further discussion and shared understanding.

At a practical level, using graphic novels to foster literacy skills with the youths, especially those who are marginalized, seems to elevate digital literacy to a socio-cultural level as evidenced in Hughes, King, Perkins and Fuke's (2011) article, *Adolescents & "Autographics": Reading and Writing Coming-of-Age Graphic Novels*, in the *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*. The article reveals one of the underlying gaps in education in the engagement of the adolescents. It helps us to question the status quo – who decides what should be considered literature and appropriate for the adolescents in the classroom? What are some of the other ways to engage youths to learn? What are some of the ways we can respond to the needs of our students and include student-centered real life issues in our practice?

As Buckingham mentions in his article, *What Do Young People Need to Know About Digital Media?* in Lankshear and Knobel (2008)'s *Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies and Practices*, we “need to provide students with a means of understanding” the media as “cultural forms” (p. 74). Also, Cope and Kalantzis state that “new communications media require new forms of cultural and communicative competence” (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 75). There seems to be a dispute among scholars about visual media as a process of cultural learning, which may be considered different from learning from a written language (Buckingham, as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). I found that the critical statement made by Fabos about bias in all information to be “unavoidable” quite apt and relevant (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 78). As she mentioned, information is “inevitably couched in ideology” (p. 78). She further cites that “rather than seeking to determine the ‘true facts’, students need to understand ‘how political, economic, and social context shapes all texts, how all texts can be adapted for different social purposes, and how no text is neutral or necessarily of ‘higher quality’ than another” (Fabos, as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 78).

These critical reflections help us to approach teaching with a more critical perspective. People in a teaching profession need to consider each of their own perspectives when approaching an issue, as well as the more systemic hegemonic ideals embedded in all aspects of our society. By being aware of the socio-cultural context, teachers would be better prepared to help our students gain critical awareness of the relevant inter-related issues in social context, helping them towards improving their literacy.

#### Week 4: Digital Literacy and Online Social Networking

Jones and Hafner's (2012) chapter on *Social Networking* describes an interesting overview of social networking sites' effects since its inception to the time of the book's publication. By contrasting the use of “online communities” in the early days of internet to current prolific use on Facebook, Twitter, and Google, among others, one can clearly visualize the rapid changes (p. 145). A society interlinked through many different levels of online relationships is an interesting reality for many people in our globalized world today.

My initial interest in Facebook was as a result of a colleague at work travelling overseas for two years, and she wanted to connect with people at work in Canada during her work experiences abroad. She posted many pictures of what she saw and experienced, along with comments during her adjustment period overseas. My colleagues at work also shared photos and stories with her to keep her updated on the changes back at home. I felt at the time, that Facebook was “cool”; it allowed

individuals to connect with others when they wanted, and how they wanted in real time communication. However, it soon became clear that there was too much personal, or private information being disclosed on Facebook. Many of us who were connected with this individual were concerned, and hoped that she was aware of what we saw and read. At a certain point in time, because I felt uncomfortable with some of the personal content on the Facebook, and because I felt that I was infringing on her personal space, I stopped logging onto Facebook all together. It was possible that she intended to share all with everyone, but based on the office/colleague relationship that we had, I felt that some of the content were not appropriate for me to view. This feeling was also shared by some of the colleagues in the office. At the time (2006/7), Facebook did not have many options for privacy settings as it does now. This week's readings on privacy and self-presentation on the web brought these old memories back again for me. As more people become aware of digital footprints that they leave on the internet, and possible consequences, they are becoming digitally aware, or digitally literate. Being conscious of consequences of having certain photos or personal writings/materials available in the public domain such as Facebook is an important aspect of online literacy that every user should be aware of before using such a medium for their self-expression.

I find that children and youth are very vulnerable to the effects of social media. They are at an age, where although they may have been told from teachers and parents regarding some of the possible dangers of using the internet, many of them are too young to really understand, or care about the implications of their actions 20 or 30 years later in their lifetime. I wonder about our workplace hiring practices in the future, when the employers may have access to some of the public profiles of the young people that they would hire, how much of this information would they use for their hiring practices? As the popularity and growth of social media continue, would those who are not engaged in it feel pressured or compelled to join the majority?

For example, I'm probably one of the few students enrolled in the M. Ed. program at UOIT who doesn't own a mobile phone. Up to this point in time, I felt that it was a luxury item that I did not need. However, both of my teenaged children have their choice of mobile phones, as it seems a necessity for the new generation for their social connections, texting and gaming. It's becoming much the same at the workplace as well. The younger generation cannot imagine anyone not having a mobile phone. I'm feeling social pressure from all sides to get the mobile phone. I wonder if it would feel like this for those who are holding off on social media in the near future. I'm made to feel like a dinosaur at times just because I do not have a mobile phone although I am fairly competent with the use of technology. Who benefits from this social pressure? Corporations that charge me monthly bills! In our never ending need to consume, the phones get outdated rather quickly, and newer versions of the must-have new technology seem to call for attention every year or sooner.

I have to admit that there were a few times when I felt that a cell phone would have been useful. I'm teetering on the verge of caving in to get a mobile phone. This is partly because the new technology in the market intrigues me, and partly because I want to belong. Perhaps not in the sense of "relating," but more in the sense of "being" (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 9). It would seem that practicality is not a big deciding point in my consideration, which is probably the reason that I've been putting off purchasing a mobile phone. It would be an expensive toy that would most likely become an indispensable part of me before it becomes obsolete, and then, I would be pressured to get a newer model. I've heard some of my colleagues at work comment that when they forget to bring their mobile phone to work with them, they "feel naked" without their phone, that they feel

something vital is missing. This need to be available to connect with others 24/7 seems rather neurotic at times to a person like me who enjoys quiet personal times and introspective moments. Does this mean that not purchasing a mobile phone may be considered as part of my identity of “being” different? (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 8)

How does not having a mobile phone affect my professional work? I have a business phone at work that I use during the day to communicate as needed, so having my own mobile phone at work is not required. In my part-time teaching sessions, I use the computer and digital projectors in the classroom for online presentations, or for showing videos from the internet. There are phones in each classroom that connects to security and other college facilities if/when I need them. What would I do differently if I had a mobile phone in the classroom? At the moment, I would consider putting it on silent mode, or turn it off before I begin the class. It’s possible that there may be times that I may take a picture of something relevant to what I teach and upload it from the mobile phone to the computer to show it to the class. However, this function can also be done with a digital camera although a mobile phone may be more easily accessible. It’s possible that when I have the use of the mobile phone, that I may find other creative means of using it at work, but at the moment, I’m thinking that the mobile phone companies are very glad that there aren’t many people like me who resist purchasing a mobile phone.

#### Week 5: Trajectories of “Remixing”

Ola Erstad’s article in chapter 8 of *Digital Literacies on Trajectories of Remixing: Digital Literacies, Media Production, and Schooling* provides examples of project-based activities at school for young students. The type of dialogue, creativity, and teamwork involved in the three media/technology enriched projects mentioned in Erstad’s (2008) article shows “possibilities and constraints” in digital literacies (p. 191).

The possibilities seem endless when we introduce digital media for the students. In Case 1 of Erstad’s article, creating a web page to showcase two “real” explorers by following their adventure provides students with an experiential learning opportunity on a relevant, real-life situation. This is a constructive learning opportunity that helps students to build project-based teamwork skills. It also helps them to be creative and responsible in a co-operative environment. The learning outcomes from such projects seem invaluable at many levels. However, only a limited number of students were chosen to work on the project, and there were many teachers involved to ensure that not only the students learn and do the work, but also to ensure that the school is well represented in the international project. As a result, the benefits are limited.

Some of the constraints can be found in Case 3 of the article, where limitations of a teacher’s skills set in digital literacy to assist or encourage students may be an issue. It’s interesting to note the way the teacher tries to subvert the students to redirect and also, tries to minimize the importance of their choice of a font to use in the production. However, the teacher admitted honestly that he/she did not know how to do what the students wanted to do. This would have been an opportunity for the teacher to refer someone, or make some form of attempt to help the students and perhaps, learn together. As some of us may have learned from our own project work experiences, we tend to take an inordinate amount of time to find all the right elements to make the final product look and feel

exactly the way we want it to be when we are engaged in a project, and when we feel that it's important to us.

Helping the students to produce the product that they would be satisfied with would have been an important function that the teacher could have served in the example mentioned above. The teacher in the above example also brings to mind many other teachers in schools today, who would not have the technical training required to support students in such a project-based work. It also helps us to observe part of human tendency to minimize and divert something when we do not know. Reflecting on such moments to support students better in their engagement and learning would benefit both the teacher and the students in their learning journey.

### Week 6: Digital Literacy and the Law

It's interesting that Lankshear and Knobel (2008) used some of Lessig's work and remixed it to make a point about the copyright issues that Lessig is passionately involved as described in chapter 12, *Digital Literacy and the Law: Remixing Elements of Lawrence Lessig's Ideal of "Free Culture."* The copyright issue is highly contentious, and it will make a huge impact on our growing digital society depending upon how it's negotiated. It seems that there's a growing awareness of the need to revisit the current copyright laws for digital media, thanks to people like Lessig; however, there seem to be multiple issues depending on which direction we approach the issue, such as economic, educational, political, artistic, social, cultural, and individual preferences among others. For this journal, I will comment on some of the educational issues.

From an educational perspective, Lessig's argument that the new media literacy involves more than content transfer, that new media is a new medium of communication and expression for the new generation, which would be equivalent to writing, would be a strong argument in support of flexibility and accessibility in the use of media resources. Having just recently become aware of some of these issues, I would agree with Lessig's arguments. The Creative Commons that he founded, which is flourishing in its use by millions of people, seems to provide users with immediate information on how a particular media is permitted to be used. It provides choices for anyone interested in uploading material on the internet. Ultimately, in the fine prints, Lessig's objective is to free up all of these resources for public use after a certain grace period has passed.

Lankshear and Knobel's (2008) remix of Lessig's work has consequences in teaching. As educators, we need to be cognizant of current copyright laws and ensure that this knowledge is passed on to our students. However, the current ambivalence and uncertainties about the direction of where the copyright laws are headed seems to indicate that a certain level of caution may need to be exercised. Perhaps, more educators actively advocating for the kind of law that would benefit the new generation in their free expression for their learning would help to promote the needed change. The following link <http://vimeo.com/53644517> provides Lessig's view as shown in an interview, regarding a possible conflict situation and a potential lawsuit, as well as the society's need to uphold free expression. It's important to be aware of the risks involved when embarking on the path one wishes to follow. In my adult teaching environment, providing opportunities for students to become aware of the current situation in copyright law would be both relevant and practical.



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