Why Does Information Literacy Matter in the 21st Century?

In the 21st century, winning hearts and minds is a huge challenge given the proliferation of fake news, Internet hoaxes and trolls that make modern information sources less reliable, less credible and less trustworthy.

Educating people about how to navigate the dynamics of the information world is essential and involves far more than our basic print literacy skills. Gone are the days when being “literate” simply meant being able to read and write. With the development of the digital world, multimodal literacy skills are needed to comprehend the messages embedded in clever visual texts that include movement and sound. Think about the power of the video advertisement compared to the print poster.

The expansion of the mass media from local newspapers and TV and radio networks into global broadcasting corporations has led us to consider questions about who is controlling the media and whose values and ideologies are promoted. Being able to ask and answer these questions means that you are media literate. If you understand how texts influence audiences for a purpose, and if you question the social impact they may have and whether it is ethical, you are considered to be critically literate.

Information literacy is all this and more. Given the overwhelming amount of information we confront every day, we need to be able to define and identify the information we need and then locate and access it. We need to recognise its purpose and appreciate that most information is created to gain profit or power. This means questioning and evaluating the information that is presented to us for accuracy, authenticity and credibility. When we find a website answering our Google search, more often than not we will soon

My Life as a Multimodal Text Native

How do I experience multimodality throughout a working day? How might my multimodal text experience give people an idea of my personal identity? Follow me to see how I navigate through a plethora of multimodal texts on a typical day.

My morning routines are made up of checking updates in anything from BBC World News to latest additions to Vevo, a music video channel. Other YouTube channels that occasionally grace my iPad screen in the morning include a music contest channel and the TED-ed channel, where you find short, inspiring animated educational videos. It’s a little early for the updated online edition of the Guardian newspaper because it is still the day before in the UK, so the digital SCMP would make a decent substitute. Being an avid weather watcher, I feel obliged to check the weather map and regional weather information. A heady mix of information, visuals and music helps set up my day nicely.

A few emojis to friends and loved ones on different messengers later, it’s time to hit the road. On the way to work, I may answer a few work emails and they are probably one of those few moments during the day when I am at my most monomodal. If I am not preoccupied with checking work emails, I look out of the window and let my eyes wander around the streets, looking for interesting banners, billboards or signs.

During office hours, if it is a paper-work-heavy day, there will be more of those unholy monomodal moments when the closest that I come to exploiting multimodality is manipulating the font size and colours of emails, and the layout of Word documents or Google Docs.

The lunch hour comes and all those mouth-watering images on the menus don’t do anything to me because I am able to see through the tricks behind commercial photography. The food images only mean something to me when I have absolutely no idea what a dish is. Hawker rice, anyone?

More paperwork to follow. Relief comes when I start to scrutinise the content of workshop presentation slides,
discover, upon careful examination, that it is selling us something, thanks to the algorithm used by Google to determine our search habits and preferences.

As we need to know how to find reliable and trustworthy sources, we also need to be able to extract and organise the information we need, and such processing requires IT skills. These skills also allow us to create our own information for our own purposes and therefore participate in society through the cyber-world by contributing our own content. Understanding the role in society of information providers such as the Internet, libraries, museums and broadcasting networks is also important for monitoring and ensuring the credibility and authority of the information they provide.

To do this, we must be able to recognise the values and stereotypes implicit in the information they offer and to identify misrepresentations and lack of representation. Texts powerfully shape societal values and norms and it is important for social cohesion to be inclusive and to allow all voices to be heard. This leads us back to the overarching criteria for information literacy, and that is the ability and willingness to provide and communicate information ethically and responsibly. Information literacy is more than technical skills and critical thinking. It is also an attitude that involves ethical judgments and a determination to make the world a better place where violent extremism has no voice.

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including their design. It’s always a challenge to convey a message using more visuals than words and everyone here is learning. These days, some Presentation software or apps allow users to create a voiceover for a web-based or self-running slide show. I haven’t had a chance to trial this function yet, but when we start offering professional development opportunities online, this will be the way to go.

Reading the ENET Scheme evaluation report, with all the mind-boggling graphs and pie charts, and checking teaser posters for the 20th Anniversary of the Enhanced NET Scheme in Secondary Schools and the subliminal message they are trying to convey both add some fun and variety to the intellectual pursuits that the NET Section offers.

Evening time is when sound, still images, moving images and texts come and stay alive – sharing news links, photos and video clips, complete with my thoughts, on social media, watching a film on the big screen or a DVD on a TV or a small screen, reading online news, Huffington Post, Al Jazeera, the Guardian, etc. I enjoy watching those an-issue-in-60-seconds kinds of videos posted on these news sites: these videos are good examples of how an issue can be nailed through the interplay of succinct texts, captivating images and carefully selected sound and soundbites.

Then it is time to crash, relax and submerge in my vivid, multimodal, technicolour dreams.

My life, just like anyone’s life, is tied up with all sort of screens: big screens, laptop screens, tablet screens and cell phone screens. Through these screens, I access and communicate meaning. How I access and communicate meaning, however, is not always demonstrated by simply reading a text or writing a sentence or paragraph. So how much do you know about your students’ multimodal text habits? Have you missed out on opportunities to learn more about your students’ life and identity? How can we, as educators, best integrate text focused and multimodal literacies in our learning and teaching environments? Now the ball is in your court, the ball that helps shape the future!

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