Expanding the Concept of Literacy

Most people think of literacy as related to words. One who is literate is able to read and write words or text and can use language to conceptualize ideas, convey meaning, and receive and share information and knowledge. Notions of media or computer literacy tend to be raised in very limited contexts, if at all. Media literacy is most often defined as the ability to understand how television and film manipulate viewers, and computer literacy is frequently described as the skills to use a computer as a tool to perform various tasks, such as gaining access to the World Wide Web. Elizabeth Daley, dean of the University of Southern California’s (USC’s) School of Cinema–Television and executive director of the Annenberg Center for Communication there, urges that the definition of literacy be expanded to acknowledge the prevalence of the multimedia language of the screen in our everyday lives.

The Language of Multimedia
An expanded definition of literacy would recognize the fact that most people receive information, communicate with one another, and entertain themselves through methods that most often involve audio recordings, radio, film, television, and computers rather than print language. Technology is enabling these alternative means of communicating to penetrate our lives more directly and in more powerful ways. Today, to be able to interpret and express oneself in the language of the screen, of sound and image, is arguably as important as being able to read and write an essay.

One of the primary goals of the USC Annenberg Center’s Institute for Multimedia Literacy is to introduce a multimedia screen language into teaching, research, and publication. Although it is difficult to explain this vision to colleagues in academia, the following four principles that underlie the institute’s work should help to clarify the discussion:

1. The multimedia language of the screen has become our vernacular.

Imagine living and teaching in Padua around the year 1300. Inside the stone walls of that great univer-
sity your colleagues lecture in Latin but the people walking on the streets below, including your own students, speak Italian. Eventually, that vernacular has to be embraced within the Italian academy.

Print was instrumental in promoting mass literacy and as such has proven to be tremendously important. But to privilege a print language is often to ignore progress of the technologies created since the primary modes of print were developed. Today, the images and sounds that exist on computer, television, and film screens have become our vernacular, more often than not the source of our everyday shared experiences as human beings.

2. The language of multimedia is capable of constructing complex meanings independent of text.

Media creators and scholars believe that images and sounds, integrated in a time-based medium, can be as important as text in creating knowledge and communicating ideas and information. At its most fundamental level, their work does not endorse the premise widely held for the past two millennia that comprehension of and expression through the printed medium defines what it means to be literate and, by extension, educated.

By arguing for the importance of the language of the screen, media scholars do not intend to attack words or print. Rather, we wish to emphasize the value of a multimedia language—which has clear differences and, in some instances, advantages over print. Print carries its own technological bias. It supports linear argument but does not value aspects of experience that cannot be contained in books. Print is inadequate for nonverbal modes of thought and nonlinear construction.

Similar to text, multimedia enables us to develop concepts and abstractions, comparisons and metaphors, while at the same time engaging our emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. Think for a moment of the still images that have defined many of the important moments of our lifetime: a sailor kissing a girl in Times Square at the end of World War II, a young Vietnamese girl fleeing napalm, or a college student at Kent State kneeling over a body. These images demand no text to be understood, although text may extend their meaning. Multimedia and cinema, while sometimes enriched by language, embrace many other elements as equal—not only image but also sound, duration, color, and design.

One of the greatest challenges we faced in early courses offered through the Institute for Multimedia Literacy was to convince students and faculty that they did not need to describe with words what was on the screen. The images and sound sequences could stand alone.

3. The language of multimedia enables modes of thought, communication, teaching, research, and publication that are essentially different from text.

Multimedia encourages approaches different from those used to write text, as evidenced by its vocabulary. One creates and constructs media rather than writing it; one navigates and explores it rather than reading it. The process is active, interactive, and often social, allowing for many angles of view.

Perhaps the key characteristic of multimedia production is that it most often involves a collaborative effort. Collaboration is an implicit part of the creative process; indeed, faculty have commented on the surprisingly consistent ability among students to collaborate, each contributing his or her unique abilities and ideas to bear on the project at hand. Most interesting is the collaboration evident among faculty, which may well offer important avenues for cross-disciplinary research.

Another production technique distinguishing multimedia from text is that the final product is most successful when it emerges in large part during the process of creation. Multimedia forms allow room for discovery and even serendipity during their production or creation. One
of America’s great filmmakers, Walter Murch, who edited *The English Patient*, among other well-known films, refers to this process as the “collision of intelligences,” which produces something unforeseen by the creative team—a process that allows for and respects intuition. In many ways, this process constitutes a type of active research in which one studies what one is doing while doing it. It allows for rapid iteration and quick changes of direction.

Finally, media forms usually are meant for public distribution and presentation. This has led to a shift in the nature of authorship for our students, who no longer write only to please their professors. They want to be understood by their peers and others who will see and experience their projects. Indeed, they often return to our labs many months after the completion of a course to continue working on a project. Likewise, faculty in our workshops are intent on making their research projects accessible to those outside their discipline. Faculty from disciplines as diverse as quantum physics, art history, and philosophy have found common ground, insights, and points of access into the pedagogical and research issues in one another’s disciplines. Multimedia may well have the potential to provide a much needed new space in which cross-disciplinary conversation can occur between the humanities and the sciences.

4. To be truly literate in the 21st century, one must study multimedia as a language and learn to both read and write in its various forms.

Typical so-called media or visual literacy courses have severe limitations. They are often based on underlying assumptions that television, cinema, and related media are inferior forms of communication that misrepresent reality, that media at its worst manipulates us and at its best is superficial. The courses tend to limit the definition of literacy to a “read only” approach, when in fact full media literacy demands the ability to create as well as to interpret.

To read and write the language of multimedia and learn how it creates meaning within particular contexts, one needs some understanding of frame composition, color palette, editing techniques, and sound–image relations, as well as the ability to mobilize generic and narrative conventions and some knowledge of the context of signs and images, sound as a conveyer of meaning, and the effects of typography. Outside schools of film, instruction in these formal elements of multimedia and cinematic construction is not provided in the same way that it is in English or foreign languages. Even the most cursory knowledge of media is not included in the general education curriculum of most colleges or universities.

The Institute for Multimedia Literacy is committed to empowering faculty and students to choose the best language for the task at hand. In some cases this language may well be linear text, in other cases one or more kinds of multimedia may be most effective. To make that choice, one must have a command of the elements of multimedia and screen language and understand how to use it to create and disseminate knowledge.

**Conclusion**

Since the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century, the intellectual community has valued the rational over the affective, the abstract over the concrete, and the decontextualized over the contextualized. These values, combined with a deeply ingrained suspicion of practice and the creation of product, make it difficult to bring the vernacular of contemporary media into the academy.

The language of multimedia is, no doubt, more closely related to the affective and subjective language of art than to the rational linear language of science. To accept the language of multimedia as equal to text will require a major paradigm shift that challenges the domination of science and rationality, abstraction and theory. Yet this shift may be long overdue. In recent years I have become more convinced than ever that the rapidly developing language of multimedia—the language of the screen—can bring important new approaches to teaching, research, and publication.

Fortunately, I have colleagues who agree. Mark Kann, chair of the USC Political Science Department, has worked closely with the Institute for Multimedia Literacy for several years. His thoughts in this regard make a fitting conclusion:

It seems to me that at some point multimedia expression is going to be like writing: it’s some-
thing you don’t leave college without. Kids are very sophisticated in navigating on computers and surfing the Internet. I think pretty soon they’re going to have to be as sophisticated in expressing themselves using the media. And I wouldn’t be too surprised if at some point a multimedia program that is the equivalent of freshman writing starts appearing at universities. It will become a requirement for graduation.

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