



New Literacies: Enrichment or Essential?

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In a classic comedic vignette, Don Novello (a.k.a. Father Guido Sarducci) describes a school he would like to open, called *The Five Minute University*. The basic premise is that he would teach you the things that you would remember after five years after graduation from college-and that this process would only take five minutes to accomplish. Obviously, college graduates remember more than five minutes worth of information-but in 2006, what kinds of skills are required to effectively function in a world of almost limitless information, digitally available at our fingertips? What skills are essential and what are simply enrichment? And, of that essential skill set, what technology literacies are critical and supportive of life-long learning?

As we all know, technology is characterized by continual change. New tools emerge daily-blogs, wikis and podcasting, to name a few. How do schools meet the challenges of using these new tools, in the context of the literacies that they potentially support? Or do schools simply keep on doing what they've always done? Does the use of these new tools represent enrichment, or should they be considered absolutely essential for success? Let's consider three examples:

1. Learning with the Web as an information resource: many reading this may say "We already do this." What kinds of activities do students do while online? How many of the activities would be considered classic inquiry, where students are posed an essential question, develop a search strategy, locate multiple information sources, evaluate information, and craft an original response to the essential question? How many activities promote inquiry, and at the same time information literacy skills? Information literacy, in my opinion, is the single most important skill set not taught in American schools. Our kids need to use the Web for learning in many ways, but we have to structure online learning so that it is true inquiry, supported by the requisite information literacy skills, so that students, when in need, have internalized a problem-solving approach to build answers to questions of importance. Enrichment or essential?

2. The use of blogs and wiki technology. Fifty-seven percent of students already claim to be "content creators" (Lenhart and Madden, 2005). Can we harness this aptitude and interest in our schools? What kinds of content do we currently ask students to create? What kinds of products are students currently asked to produce to represent that content? And are these products created with contemporary technology tools? Student interest in blogging is real (ask a group of kids how many have a Myspace.com account)-how can we tap this interest to help students write better, write more personally so that they are more expressive, and write within the context of the most authentic audience possible (potentially, the world!)? Extend that personal writing experience into the collaborative writing experience embodied by wiki technology, and now schools have the capability to teach writing with engaging tools that promote a lifetime of participation and contribution.

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3. Digital Storytelling: digital storytelling is the process of taking student writing, typically a narrative, preparing a script from that narrative, and then creating a video based on the script that combines still frame imagery, music, and the students voice to tell the story.

As you can probably tell from the description, digital storytelling can be a lengthy production process. Writing. Rewriting. Script production. Storyboarding. Locating visuals and music. Composing and rendering, and then finally sharing the completed project. It takes time. Is it worth it? How important is it for schools to teach students a process for finding their own voice and to produce a product of compelling value? How important is it for schools to find another way to get students to write and learn a process that helps them visualize their writing? How important is it for schools to have students tell their stories? What happens to student achievement when learning is personalized like it is in digital storytelling? Or is it enough to continue just doing PowerPoint presentations?

Enrichment or essential?

The Upshot:

In this document, I've posed many questions. They are important questions to answer, and hopefully they target some of the essence of what we do as educators. It's up to each school community to judge the use of these tools against their climate and culture to determine what is enrichment, and what is essential....

Resources:

21st Century Skills

<http://www.metiri.com/21/Metiri-NCREL21stSkills.pdf>

Teen Content Creators and Consumers

http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Content_Creation.pdf

7 Things You Should Know about Wikis

<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7004.pdf>

7 Things You Should Know about Blogs

<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7006.pdf>

Using the Internet to Promote Inquiry-based Learning

<http://www.biopoint.com/inquiry/ibr.html>

The entire inquiry process outlined:

<http://www.jakesonline.org/essential.htm>

Capturing Stories, Capturing Lives: An Introduction to Digital Storytelling

http://www.jakesonline.org/dstory_ice.pdf

*These links, and other resources from this presentation, can be accessed digitally at:
www.jakesonline.org/tfsandiego.htm*

*Lenhart, Amanda and Mary Madden. "Teen Content Creators and Consumers." 02 Nov. 2005. PEW Internet and American Life Project. 06 Feb. 2006 <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Content_Creation.pdf>.