Our everyday lives have changed dramatically as digital technologies alter how and with whom we spend our time and how we communicate in our workplaces, communities, homes, and schools. E-mail, Web searches, online conversations, blogs and e-diaries, digitally based media, online exchanges (of finances, photographs, music, and video), and Web homepages influence our daily interaction. As a consequence, our notions of literacy and the range of literacy practices in our classrooms are constantly expanding and transforming with these new technologies.

Advocates of “new literacies” and “multiliteracies” call for pedagogies that account for and help children become competent users of the burgeoning varieties of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies (e.g., New London Group, 1996). While schools may not yet be as well equipped as some homes, a growing number of schools are beginning to support the integration of these digital-based literacies in student learning and engagements. Emerging technologies afford new linked, online, and multimedia-based ways to interact and explore the world. However, these new literacies also represent digital and online extensions of rich multimedia engagements students have had for generations. For example, curriculum models that allow for collaboratively based multimedia engagement, such as the Reggio Emilia, and other integrated curriculum initiatives have offered nondigital variations of these same possibilities (see Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Consider the following three vignettes of classroom literacy involving new technologies and curricular goals.

**Vignette 1: Getting to know someone**

A grade 4 teacher and a teacher-librarian worked collaboratively with students to create a multimedia project on poetry. To begin, the students were immersed in poetry. Their teachers read and dramatized poems and talked about characteristics of the different forms of poetry. Students were then divided into two smaller groups, one using computers to learn the software needed for the project and the other to do choral readings of poems for two voices. The choral readings were taped using a digital video camera and then edited using video editing software. Students also wrote poems; they illustrated them with crayons and pencils and used a word-processing program to publish them.

As a cumulative activity, the class collaboratively wrote a poem entitled “We Know Someone” and videotaped and edited a performance of it. Finally, all the pieces were pulled together using the video editing software. The project resulted in a multimedia video that included video clips, voiceovers, background music, titles, and transitions. Once their work was complete, the students had an opportunity to share it, giving families a chance to see the diversity of the students in the class and how hard they worked together (from Pahl & Rowsell, in press).

**Vignette 2: Peer pressure**

Youth were provided an opportunity to create multimedia projects as part of the curriculum of an alternative literacy program. Two First Nations
(Native American) girls developed a video on the peer pressures they face. They decided to use photographs of their lives along with critical questions and statements. As photographs of the girls and their friends in various social situations fade in and out, the written text appears with voice-overs from the girls and includes questions such as “Why do you dress the way you do?” and “Why do you act the way you do?” They close their video with the statement “Above all, be true to yourself.” The James Horner composition from the film soundtrack of A Beautiful Mind (Howard, 2002) provides cohesion to the piece, integrating the music, voice, text, and images into a powerful statement about their lives. They are now in the process of posting the project on a secure website (Rogers & Schofield, in press).

Vignette 3: Imperial China

Students were engaged in a multimedia project that coincided with a museum exhibit of artifacts dating back to China’s earliest emperors. The students were encouraged to explore various facets of life in China during early imperial dynasties. They were also given access to the exhibit and related resources, including experts on that period, videos, laser disks, photos, and print materials. The students grouped themselves around common interests and, in the context of Web searches, began gathering resources by reading books and pamphlets, scanning photographs, and interviewing experts. Each project became a multimedia composite, involving development and capture of conversations, observations, scanned images, and video clips, and provided firsthand experiences of the cultural life of Imperial China (Tierney & Damarin, 1998).

Interacting with new literacies

As students interact with these new literacies, we must think anew about assessing, responding, and supporting them. What assessment criteria and practices might capture and support the richness of the processes and products in these vignettes? Consider vignette 2, part of a multimedia project in which youth integrated literature, creative writing, visual art, and digital video (Rogers & Schofield, in press). An assessment rubric was developed that emphasized the genesis of the projects, including biographical, imaginative sources of storytelling;

- the integration and transformations of texts across media and genres;
- the flexible use of various print and media tools;
- the links across students’ out-of-school literacies (including cultural resources) and their in-school literacies; and
- reflections in the form of “artist statements,” including the ability to create and critique their own and others’ imaginative representations.

The criteria were developed and refined in the context of classroom conversations with students and were in addition to evaluations of the students’ ability to work together to achieve their goals. Listen in to one evaluation conversation with one of the girls as she talked about her project: “We wanted to create something that could help people; all the kids seemed to be going through this.” What texts and tools did you use and how? “We used a storyboard and knew what images we wanted to use, and then we learned how to put it together using [the editing software].” How did the film connect your life in and out of school? “It was an opportunity I fell in love with. I could voice my own opinion.” What did you take away from the experience? “I learned I don’t have to be bothered by peer pressure.... But my next film will be more autobiographical and address issues culturally, because people see First Nations people as drinkers, disruptive, getting pregnant...but there are people like me who have direction.” The teachers then encouraged this student to further develop her cultural voice and media skills by creating her own video.

With the help of students, the teachers and collaborators participating in the Imperial China project (vignette 3) used a combination of approaches: (a) digital working portfolios as depositories for students’ plans, research material, early drafts, and various clips; (b) show-and-tell discussions stemming from sharing their projects and describing their process; and (c) self-assessment that included narratives and rubrics based upon looking at their work through a variety of lenses. These included the following.
Project development: selecting and using resources, designing the projects, and recursive goal setting. For instance, students discussed what they wanted to do as they directed team members to materials on the Internet and to books and images and suggested how they might interact with one another. They addressed content and resources in terms of relevance and the ways images and text might be juxtaposed or linked in a hypermedia environment.

- Collaboration: how students worked together to shape the project, and what they individually and collectively negotiated and contributed. We considered how students were socially positioned and how that helped them to explore, develop, or establish expertise.

- Products: what was presented and how the information was integrated in the multimedia environment. We were especially interested in the juxtapositioning and complementary nature of the media.

- Self-critique: in terms of content knowledge and literacy learning. In particular, we wanted to know what students learned about China and how they improved their literacy range and expertise through their engagement with the project.

The integration of print and multimedia technologies illustrated in these vignettes provides students with opportunities to integrate multiple literacies for a variety of purposes. We define literacy as “the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communication technologies via spoken, print and multimedia” (Education Queensland, 2000a, p. 9). More broadly, these digital technologies “enable students to become: capable information technology users; information seekers, analyzers and evaluators; problem solvers and decision makers; creative and effective users of production tools; communicators, collaborators, publishers and producers; and, informed, responsible, and contributing citizens” (International Society for Technology in Education, 2002, p. 4).

These examples of assessment criteria reflect the lenses and approaches we are beginning to use, and they include assessing the interrelated and recursive aspects of process, content, design, and critique. Evaluating multimedia projects is difficult. We need to develop criteria that support the dynamic, creative, and even edgy work students produce. Each digital project requires unique criteria developed in the context of evolving (rather than existing) examples. Multiple lenses help make us attentive to what the new technologies and the students are teaching us.

We see the main goal of evaluation as promoting productive ongoing conversations (Johnston, 2003). We expect any learning initiatives enlisting new technologies to expand conversations among teachers and students about plans, progress, and future directions, along with support for the advancement of students’ strategies. As changes take place at “breakneck speed” (International Reading Association, 2001), assessment must be dynamic and generative or risk limiting students’ development. We recommend assessment approaches that emerge from, rather than supersede or constrain, classroom-learning possibilities. Finally, we recommend dynamic assessment tools, such as electronic portfolios and homepages, which can serve three purposes: as construction zones where plans, resources, and learning pursuits are housed; as a space where products can be archived and critiqued; and as a vehicle for communication among schools, students, and families.

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References


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