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Abstract:

The technological advance that has dominated various aspects of our daily life has led to the emergence of new literacies. This created a need for reconceptualizing the old notion of literacy which was restricted to the ability of reading and writing. It has been stated forward by many scholars that we now require a richer and more diversified concept of literacy that includes not only verbal literacy, but also visual literacy (Buckingham, 2007; Jewitt, 2005; Makin & McLachlan, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). In order for schools to respond to ‘digital native’ (Prensky, 2002) students, many of the new emerging literacies should be embedded in the curriculum. Working these new literacies into the curriculum will serve a two-fold purpose: keeping the ‘new digital divide’ (Buckingham, 2007) to a minimum and relating students’ out-of-school literacy practices to in-school literacy instruction.

In an effort to embed the new burgeoning literacies into the curriculum, I have created a classroom website that would allow me to rely on my students’ ‘digital capital’ that has often been overlooked. The website will also help students move from a monomodal approach that relies mainly on print-based text to a multimodal one that requires them to explore a variety of modes to get access to meaning.



Adopting a Multimodal Approach to Address the Multiliteracy Needs of My Students

Introduction

The move from the dominance of the page to that of the screen (Kress, 2003) over the past century has had great impacts on youths' out-of-school literacy practices. The supremacy of the book, which used to be our sole meaning-making technology, has been supplanted by the supremacy of the screen "that [is] colorful, that [has] animation, texture and dimensionality as governing technologies" (Rowse, 2006: 1). The adaptation from page to screen has changed the old concept of literacy. Jewitt (2005) posits that the shift "from the medium of the book and the page to the digital medium of the computer and the screen" (p. 13) has entirely altered what it means to be literate in an age of information. Formerly, meaning-making depended heavily on the written word in a way that literacy was merely "confined to aspects of learning to decode and encode print" (Spodek & Saracho, 2005: 156). However, today "language alone cannot give us access to the meaning of the multimodally constituted message" (Kress, 2003: 35) because meaning is spread across several modes such as writing, image, sound, video etc. This claim resonates with that of Carrington and Marsh (2005) in that "any understanding of literacy can no longer be about basic print skills" (p. 279). Accordingly, literacy should no longer be viewed as a singular construct, but rather as multiple literacies (Gee 2000; Luke 2000a; The New London Group, 1996, 2000 cited in Barone & Morrow, 2003). Luke (2000a) posits that multiple literacies draw on "a range of knowledge to make meaning of the linguistic, audio, and visual representations created by new technologies" (cited in Barone & Morrow 2003: 179).

The speedy advance of information technologies lies behind the emergence of a tech-savvy population that has grown up around computers and the Internet. Unfortunately, this population – referred to by Prensky (2002) as 'digital natives' – sees little or no connection between in-school literacy and literacies practiced in out-of-school settings. Wagner (1993) affirms that "literacy skills taught in school may bear only a partial resemblance to the kinds of abilities and knowledge utilized in the performance of literacy tasks in everyday life" (p. 188). The disparity now existing between students' print-based literacy learning and their out-of-school experiences with a wide range of technological and information resources is growing wider. Buckingham (2007) refers to this disparity between in- and out-of-school literacy practices as "the new digital divide". Rarely does any official curriculum acknowledge students' engagement with new texts and modalities such as the Internet, e-mail, chat rooms, instant

messaging, video games, teenzines, and the like in their out-of-school lives (Jetton & Dole, 2004). Given the nature of students' out of school literacy practices, many focal questions arise. How can we, as educators, respond to the emergent literacy abilities students bring to the classroom? How should the curriculum and instruction address the complex and demanding literacy needs of 'digital native' students? How can we put the burgeoning new literacies into good use to help our students acquire more traditional school literacies?

My paper aims to bridge the gap between students' out-of-school literacy pursuits and their in-school literacy instruction thus keeping 'the new digital divide' to a minimum. It also focuses on the multiliteracies pedagogy educators should adopt to move beyond a linguistically-based curriculum since "changing literacy practices require changing instructional modes" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005: 134). Because the Internet embodies the notion of multiple literacies, I thought of designing a classroom website the objective of which is to establish a multimodal approach to language learning which responds to the predominance of image and other modes of representation and communication on screen and addresses the literacy needs of 'digital native' students in digital environments (Jewitt, 2005).

1. Background and Context of the Study

Teaching and learning in most schools of the UAE has always been print based. Even those who claim that they are incorporating ICTs into their daily teaching practices are indeed morphing new technologies "to fit traditional practices with 'the familiar physical world (book space) being imported into cyber... space,'" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003: 33 cited in Kevin & Nixon, 2005: 23). A print-based text, which is scanned to be simply displayed on a computer screen, an LCD projector, or an overhead projector, still adheres to the traditional print-based approach to language teaching. Faced with such a practice, students explore nothing more than the linear, monomodal, and print-only dimension of a given text. There is more to integrating ICTs into the classroom than merely using them as display tools only. It is counterintuitive to ignore the affordances that these new technology tools have and deny students "opportunities to engage in digital multimedia and multimodal" literate practices (Walsh, 2006: 50).

In my previous assignment, I have shown that many students have rich experiences with multimodal texts in out-of-school contexts and demonstrate technological and multiliteracies proficiencies through their engagement with one particular semiotic domain: MMORPGs.



Operating on the premise that “website design is the new literacy of power” (Lemke, 2006 cited in Walsh, 2006: 50) and in an effort to build on the ‘digital capital’ my students bring into the classroom, I have designed a classroom website (<http://www.freewebs.com/down2earth78>) on which I represented part of the curricular knowledge to be learnt during the second term (Unit Six: Nutrition and Health). When they have access to the classroom website, students will be exposed to the multimodal nature of texts, which unlike traditional, monochrome printed texts, now requires students to process both verbal and visual information simultaneously.

2. Classroom Website Description and the Learning Potential

What should be taken for granted is the fact that the worldwide web is going to play a central part in the students’ learning experience (Lewin, 2001). Although the Internet is not used to its full potential, many teachers use it to strengthen the curriculum. Without question, “the classroom website can be a valuable

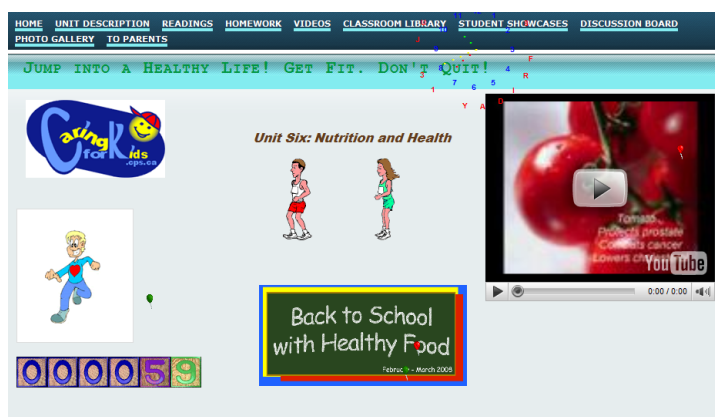


Figure 1: UAE English Skills 10 website (Home page)

tool in developing the classroom learning community” (Lewis & Moorman, 2007: 281), enhancing students’ learning, and helping them acquire a slew of new literacies and multimodal competencies. I have developed my classroom website under the assumption that teachers should build on their students’ ‘digital capital’ and flexible approaches to combining print, speech, sound, image, and video in all activities (Spodek & Saracho, 2005). The classroom website I have designed is “to demonstrate current applications and serve as a baseline for new ideas and implementations” (Huffaker, 2005: 19). The website offers students a wide range of modal resources for meaning making. It conflates image, animation, writing, sound, video, special effects, and other modes. This resonates with Huffaker’s (2005) claims in that “reading and writing should not only include words but also images, and the development of both verbal and visual literacy is essential for success inside and outside school walls” (p. 9). The website also provides students with useful material pertaining to the classroom theme they are studying (Nutrition and Health). The hyperlink environment, one of the affordances that puts the Net at a



great advantage, allows them to move around the Internet by jumping from one webpage to the other.

The website I have developed comprises ten section pages each of which serves a well-defined purpose.

2.1. Home page: This page adequately sets the students' expectations for what the website contains. As soon as they log on to the site, students will realize that the unit is about nutrition and health. The understanding of what the main objective of the unit is (to help students develop both a knowledge base and a skills base to encourage them to pursue a healthy lifestyle throughout their life span) is achieved thanks to the affordances offered by the multiplicity of modes I have made use of to make meaning more accessible to the students. The banner at the top of the web page, for instance, reads: "Jump into a healthy life! Get fit. Don't quit".

2.2. Unit Description: On this webpage, students learn about the structure of the unit. The goals for this thematic unit, as it is stated, are for the students to gain a fertile understanding of how important it is to follow a healthy lifestyle. Students are required to describe how each person meets the five food group requirements with different foods. Also, they are sensitized to the active role sports play in the life of the individual. Besides, this webpage serves as a reference guide for parents. It gives them a comprehensive idea about what the thematic unit is all about and keeps them apprised of the work their children are doing.



Figure 2: Unit Description

2.3. Readings: This webpage includes selected reading passages that students should read. I have tried my best to bring a number of modes together to facilitate the reading process. Students can construct meaning through the affordances that

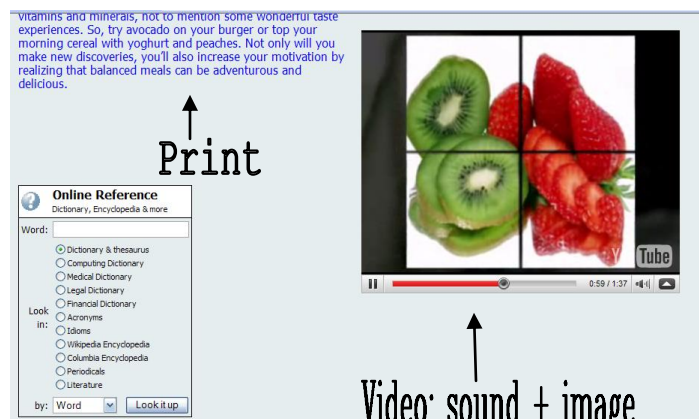


Figure 3: The Reading Webpage



each mode has. In order for them to fully access meaning within the printed texts, students need to go through the visual learning experience by examining pictures relating to the current theme and watching the accompanying videos. If ever there is a difficult word, they can look it up in the online dictionary available on the page.

2.4. Homework: The homework webpage includes all the assignments students are to complete at home. To ensure that students understand electronically-delivered information, I have provided them with a set of guiding questions and specific website links



Figure 4: Home assignment sample

to help keep them focused on one thing only (Fig. 4). All the websites have almost the same information yet presented in different modes because I take a good stand in favor of Kress's (2003) claim that "'literacy' [alone] is by no means all there is to contemporary communication" (p. 21). Once they have found answers to the questions, students post them on the threaded discussion board webpage to share and discuss them with their friends.

2.5. Photo and Video Galleries: The classroom website I have developed not only promotes my students' verbal literacy but also enhances their visual literacy skills. Walton (2004) maintains that "the visual sense allows access to many different forms of communication, each with its own conventions and grammars" (p. 95). By exposing my students to a multiplicity of modes of representation, I will help them move beyond print-based representations and explore multisemiotic and multimodal forms of communication (Walsh, 2007). Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) posit that

"multiple literacies involve reading across varied and hybrid semiotic fields and being able to critically and hermeneutically process print, graphics and representations, as well as moving images and sounds" (p. 96).

The videos and images I have uploaded are closely related to the reading passages. In order for them to realize meaning, students have to draw on a wide range of modes because "the

realization of meaning in the mode of writing is now just one possibility among others” (Kress, 2003: 12). Now meaning can be disseminated through image and sound as through writing. This is what Kress (2003) refers to as the redistribution of semiotic power.

2.6. Classroom Library:

This webpage serves as a clearinghouse for quality websites pertaining to the theme in focus, nutrition and health. The carefully-selected links listed on this webpage contain culture- and age-appropriate material. The webpage



Figure 5: Online classroom library

has also links to teen chat rooms, most of which deal with nutrition and health. In order to foster a game-based learning environment where the element of fun is omnipresent (Prensky, 2002), I have included some links to food games, the most famous of which is ‘The incredible adventures of the amazing food detective’ (Fig. 6). When they have access to the classroom library, students can read online articles, chat with their peers and other teenagers sharing the same interests, and play video games.



Figure 6: Food Detective

2.7. Threaded Discussion Board:

A discussion board is an Internet-based communication form that holds great potential for enhancing students’ learning. This Internet technology creates opportunities for the students to interact around shared experiences and common interests (McKenna et al., 2006). There are four

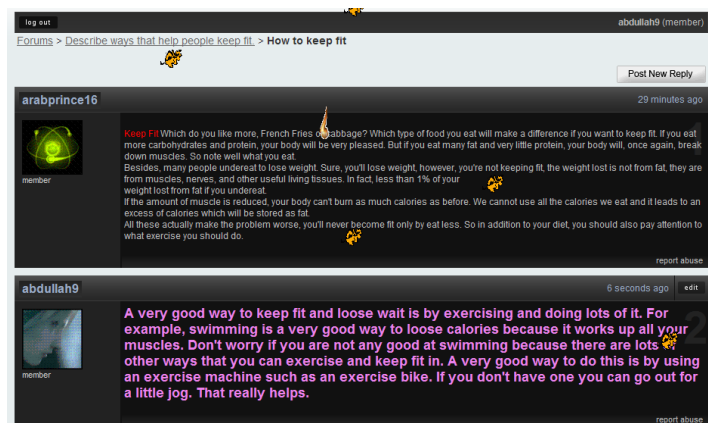


Figure 7: Classroom Threaded Discussion Board

main topics in the threaded discussion board: healthy food Vs junk food, food groups, the importance of exercise, and unhealthy habits that have detrimental effects on the individual



health. The aim of this threaded discussion board is for my students to generate a discussion about the four topics, or to use it as a collaborative tool where they post their own comments and critique each other's comments in the hopes of constructing their own knowledge (Huffaker, 2005). This student-student interaction will eventually help them meet the main objective of the unit: to pursue a healthy lifestyle throughout their lifespan.

2.8. Student Showcases: At the end of the unit, each student is required to compose a multimodal assignment on how to pursue a healthy lifestyle. The purpose of this assignment is to allow my students to move beyond print-based representations and exploit the semiotic potentials of other modes to piece together meaning. I totally agree with Walsh (2007) who asserts that “youth possess ... repertoires of practice which allow them to use their imagination and creativity to combine print, visual and digital modes in combinations that can be applied to new educational ... contexts” (p. 79). In addition to that, the student showcases webpage is of crucial importance in the sense that it gives the students a chance to publish their work to a wide audience.

2.9. To Prarents: This webpage has the potential of “bring[ing] parents into the instructional program” (Lewis & Moorman, 2007: 281) and interlinking them with the school community. It is also a good way to get parents more involved in their children's school life so that they can have a positive impact on their learning experience. Parents

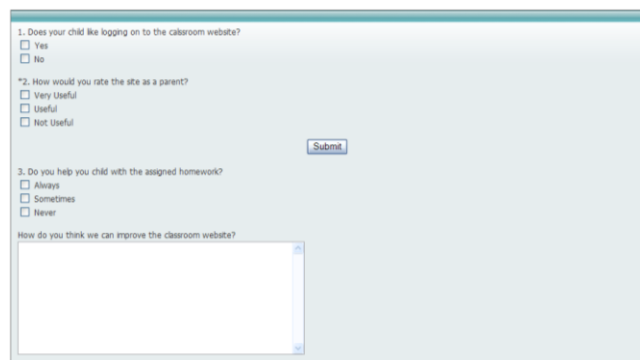
The image shows a screenshot of a web-based feedback form. The form contains three numbered questions with radio button options. Question 1 asks if the user's child likes logging on to the classroom website, with options 'Yes' and 'No'. Question 2 asks how the user would rate the site as a parent, with options 'Very Useful', 'Useful', and 'Not Useful'. Question 3 asks how often the user helps their child with assigned homework, with options 'Always', 'Sometimes', and 'Never'. Below the questions is a text input field for suggestions on how to improve the classroom website, followed by a 'Submit' button.

Figure 8: To Parents webpage

are also invited to give their constructive feedback and suggest practical ideas on how the classroom website can be tailored and improved to better address their children's literacy needs.

3. Instructional Procedure

The instructional procedure involves three phases: the input phase, the discussion phase, and the output phase.

3.1.The Input Phase

The reading webpage is supposed to provide students with as much ‘comprehensible input’ (Krashen, 1984) as possible. The multimodal nature of the included texts requires students to exploit not only the print but also other modes of representations because each mode is a partial meaning bearer (Kress, 2003). Students will have to read the texts, watch the accompanying videos, and study the pictures so that they can gain access to content.

The homework webpage contains prompts and guiding questions pertaining to all the assigned readings. Students need to read these prompts and guiding questions beforehand “to set a purpose for their reading and hold on to their thinking as they process text” (Tovani & Keene, 2000: 108). The input phase is supposed to span over a two-week period after which students will have been familiar with the most important concepts around which the unit is structured. Such concepts include food groups, the food pyramid, healthy habits, lifestyle, and the like.

3.2.The Discussion Phase

The Threaded Discussion Board together with the chat room will be the sites of the discussion phase. After having developed their individual answers, students share them with their peers by posting them on the threaded discussion board. Their answers will be considered as threads of conversations that would get them involved in a fruitful discussion. They will then have to discuss answers, generate questions for further clarifications, and use their peers as a source of feedback. This whole process, which takes place in a scaffolding environment, will help students to actively construct and assess their own knowledge in a digital context.

Apart from using the threaded discussion boards, students also have the possibility of communicating their ideas better through the chat room available on the home page (Fig. 9). Since content takes precedence over form in chat (Albright et al., 2002), fluency will dominate over accuracy and students



Figure 9: The Website Chat room

will become more fluent at writing. What makes this chat room so special is that it is accessible

only by those who have already subscribed for the classroom website. The chat room gives my students a chance to connect what they read on the reading webpage and discuss on the threaded discussion board. It also offers them the opportunity to have easy access to their peers in case they should need any help.

3.3.The Output Phase

The rich variety of the input strategies I have used should, at its best, produce a rich variety of output. I have tried my best to represent part of the curricular knowledge in a way that is relevant to my students' out-of-school online lives. The main objective I intend to achieve is to “change the modality of some of the work that traditionally takes the form of typical pencil-and-paper school work” (Albright et al., 2002: 694). In this output phase, my students are required to go beyond traditional assignments based around print-literacy and explore a multiplicity of other modes of representation in order to design and produce a desktop-published assignment on how a person can maintain a healthy lifestyle. Encouraging students to become composers of multimodal texts is a good way to put their technological skills and digital literacy resulting from their engagement with the burgeoning new technologies to good use. It is also a good way to bridge “the gap between students' out-of-school literacy pursuits and their in-school literacy instruction and assignments” (Anders & Guzzetti, 2003: x).

4. Assessing the Classroom Website

Since my students are on a two-month summer holiday, I have found it really difficult to get multisource feedback pertaining to the evaluation of my website's efficacy. As I have the phone numbers of some of the students, I called them and asked them to log on to the site to give me their preliminary feedback. I was very

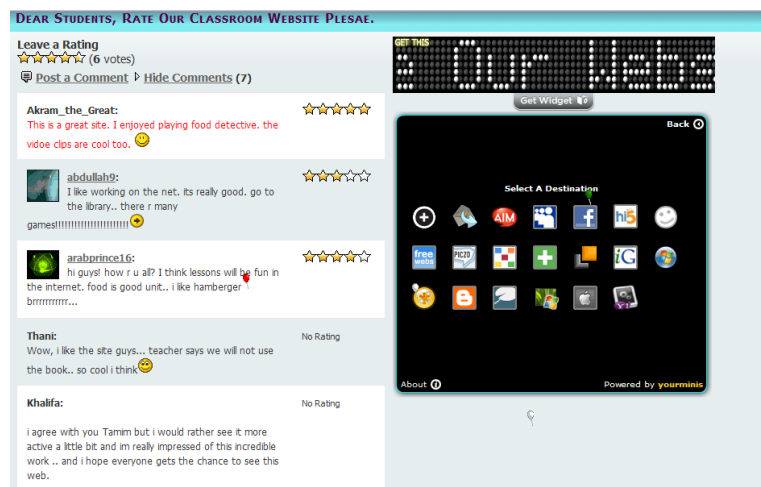


Figure10: Website Rating

pleased to read the comments they posted on the same day I called them. The table below illustrates some of the students' views about the website I have developed.



Akram_the_Great: This is a great site. I enjoyed playing food detective. the vidoe clips are cool too. 😊	
Tamim : using the net is better than using boring books... i think so.. this is gr8	No Rating
Tamim : I like the site. it's a lot of fun. thank u teacher.	
Khalifa: i agree with you Tamim but i would rather see it more active a little bit and im really impressed of this incredible work .. and i hope everyone gets the chance to see this web.	No Rating

Table 1: Students' rating of the web site

It is clear that the website has made a very good first impression. This indicates that the students who visited the website once are likely to visit it again. Besides, the web counter I have set up to track how many students have visited the classroom website shows that there have been eighty-nine hits so far and the number of hits is likely to increase in the future.

Undoubtedly, students want to move beyond the print-based literary sphere to a visual world represented on the computer screen. This desire is expressed by one of the students whose name is Tamim (see Table 1) in one of his comments “using the net is better than using boring books... i think so.. this is gr8”. Another student, Akram_the_Great, thinks that the site is great. He based his judgment on the pleasure he derived from playing the food detective game and watching the ‘cool’ videos. The comments that some of the students came up with are only preliminary remarks. What is really important is the fact that the classroom website seems appealing to the students. This means that the objective that is supposed to be achieved through adopting a print-based approach will be achieved through adopting a multimodal approach. The only difference between both approaches is that with the latter, students will be more engaged since they will be doing things they enjoy, which will certainly have a positive impact on their learning outcomes.

5. Implications for Teachers

It is evident that the advent of ICT has brought about major changes in the environment in which “students develop in society in ways that impact on the way they learn at school” (Ainley & Searle, 2005: 1). Consequently, broadening our concepts of literacy beyond ‘verbocentrism’ has become more of a necessity than a luxury (Labbo, 1996). Teachers should adopt the use of ICT as an effective and valuable tool to enhance students’ learning, develop learner autonomy, and respond to the challenges posed by the ubiquity of the burgeoning digital technologies. They should rely less on print texts and allow their students the opportunity to read and view a wide range of multimodal texts to meet their multiliteracy needs. By encouraging students to use the Internet for educational purposes outside school hours, teachers will keep the ‘new digital divide’ to a minimum and improve their students’ attitude towards school and school work in general (Ainley & Searle, 2005).

Conclusion

Over the few past years, notions of literacy have changed significantly due to the impact of the burgeoning new technologies. These changes have created the need to expand the scope of literacy in a way that it now involves literacies of diverse sorts (Makin et al., 2006). Many scholars argue that developing new literacies is of crucial importance to meet the challenges posed by new media and technologies. They also argue that “education needs to cultivate a variety of new types of literacies to make it relevant to the demands of the new millennium” (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002: 90).

My goal throughout this research paper has been to embed these new emerging literacies into the curriculum through the creation of a classroom website in an effort to empower my students whose ‘digital capital’ has always been neglected. By adopting such a multimodal approach, I hope to make my teaching practices more responsive to my tech-savvy students. I strongly believe that traditional elements of literacy are important in every student’s life; however, relying exclusively on one mode of representation – print – will deprive our students from the affordances that other modes of representation have to offer. Working the new emerging literacies into the curriculum will fulfill a two-fold purpose: the new digital divide will be kept to a minimum and schools and homes will be linked through the use of ICT.

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