Media Literacy is the Message

–*R.W. Burniske*

For anyone who has worked with educational technology over the past quarter of a century, a collection of essays like this one signals an important milestone. In a sense, these essays reinforce McLuhan's (1964) claim that "the medium is the message," but they also take us one step further, proclaiming "media literacy is the message" for educators in the post-modem era.

Looking Backward: Scaling the Fortresses of Academia

I began experimenting with computer technology for teaching and learning purposes in the early 1980s, when I was an English teacher at a New England boarding school. We had no personal computers at the time, just a mainframe network that featured password-protected accounts. Documents were saved on a massive machine located in the school's science complex. There were no floppy disks or CD Roms for data storage. The only video cameras in the school belonged to the athletic department, which used them to record varsity football games on betamax tapes.

What's more, the divisions between academic disciplines were so distinct that faculty members spent the majority of their time sequestered in departmental fortresses. This did not breed a collaborative, nor collegial, atmosphere. At times, it prompted hostility, as I discovered when I requested permission to teach a one-semester elective, *Journals and Journal-Keeping,* in the only computer lab at the school.

When I asked the computer coordinator, a curmudgeon who preferred machines to adolescents, if I could reserve the lab for my students to compose electronic journals, he looked bewildered. "What would an English teacher do in the computer lab?" I tried to explain, but it took several meetings and the intervention of my department head before I was allowed to reserve the lab. I was granted 10 minutes a day, at the start of each class period, after which I would take my students to a conventional classroom. Meanwhile, some of my colleagues in the English department frowned upon my endeavor, boasting of their "computer illiteracy" and disdain for anyone who bothered to "process words" on a machine instead of grabbing a pen and parchment to connect with the Muse.

Voices from the Classroom

I share this anecdote to describe how far we have traveled with respect to the integration of technology for teaching and learning purposes. It may explain why I found it refreshing to hear Matsunaga and others praise supportive principals in this issue of *Educational Perspectives;* equally encouraging, and instructive, is Yamashita's recommendation that educators develop a support network that extends beyond their immediate community. Support for this kind of work is a relatively new phenomenon, one initiated by the integration of technology in our schools over the past decade, but nurtured by teachers' growing awareness of the challenges inherent in the use of information and communication technology (ICT).

As a young teacher, I was astonished by the territorial behavior of faculty members responsible for the integration of educational technology at the K–12 schools in which I worked, including international schools in Egypt, Ecuador and Malaysia. When I asked the computer coordinator at Academia Cotopaxi in Ecuador if I could use the computer lab to teach composition skills with the aid of an LCD projector, he hesitated, then granted permission, but only on days when he could supervise my sessions. The reason—he didn't feel comfortable letting "untrained" faculty touch expensive equipment. That was 1987. Five years later, I found a more welcoming, though still wary, computer coordinator at the International School of Kuala Lumpur. Ironically, in Malaysia my greatest difficulties stemmed from colleagues in the humanities, self-proclaimed "Luddites" who celebrated their "computer illiteracy" while blaming technology for students' poor writing skills and general indifference to the humanities.

Fortunately, in the past decade the walls separating the academic fortresses have been breached by inter-disciplinary endeavors; technology has supported such efforts by enabling collaborative learning, project-based learning, and other forms of constructivist pedagogy. However, the rapid integration of educational technology has often limited the public's exposure to authentic voices from the classroom, particularly the voices of teachers so busy meeting the challenges of technology integration that they have not had time to share their experience and expertise.

This issue of *Educational Perspectives* allows us to eavesdrop upon networked classrooms, enabling educators to learn vicariously from the trials-and-errors of innovative colleagues. Along the way, we hear honest accounts from teachers trying to overcome persistent challenges, from Gillespie's steep learning curve while trying to teach video production within the constraints of short class periods to Yamashita's conscious effort to muster the courage to take great risks and Chun's personal ambivalence, yet professional satisfaction, with her students' video productions.

Such candor has often been missing from public discourse about educational technology. While classroom practitioners in higher education have shared pedagogical strategies and researchers have established theoretical foundations, K–12 teachers have frequently suffered the hype of self-serving politicians and policymakers more concerned with questions about physical infrastructure (hardware, internet access, etc.) than the challenges facing classroom practitioners wondering how to use technology to improve learning activities for students. Meanwhile, business people have behaved predictably, placing profits before pupils, promoting various products as simplistic panaceas for a host of complex educational ailments, both real and imagined.

Media Literacy: Looking At and Looking Through

Quite often, what one chooses to leave out of a story is just as important as what one includes. One item missing from this collection of essays is the term *computer literacy*, a concept that has lost popularity within the field of educational technology as a whole. It seems to have gone the way of classes devoted to keyboarding or computer applications. As this issue of *Educational Perspectives* demonstrates, classroom practitioners must now look well beyond the keyboard and computer applications if they wish to integrate video production and ICTs in a meaningful fashion.

The rapid evolution of information and communication technology suggests this trend will continue, compelling educators to continually revise their terminology, pedagogy, and curricula. In *Literacy in the Cyberage: Composing Ourselves Online* (Burniske, 2001) I defined *media literacy* in the following manner:

> *Media literacy is the ability to read and understand a communications medium by looking through the processes it enables, interpreting its signs and symbols, while also looking at the medium's impact on an author, audience and message. (p. 16)*

I believe this definition applies to the exemplary work of the educators who have shared their stories in this issue of *Educational Perspectives*. When a teacher like Smith asks students to watch television more critically, she raises their awareness through a sophisticated process of *looking at* the messages conveyed through television commercials and the impact of those messages upon an audience; meanwhile, Ohta's students learn how to *look through* the lens while creating video parodies, which compels them to *look at* the culture that inspires their spoof, including the media. Whether they *look at* the media more critically, or *look through* the media lens to actively participate in video production, students must apply critical thinking skills that should serve them well when they watch television programs or cinematic productions in the future.

If we step back from these essays and consider them within a national context, we can see how they contribute to a subtle graduation from *basic literacy* to *critical literacy*. If this issue of *Education Perspectives* had been published ten or fifteen years ago, it probably would have featured stories that emphasize *how* and *what* the teachers did instead of *why* they did it. The same would have been true of their pedagogy, which would have focused primarily upon *how* the technology worked and *what* students could do with it, instead of asking them *why* they wanted to make a certain film and *why* they wanted to produce it in a particular way.

Early uses of digital video equipment and computer editing programs, much like early uses of word processors, emphasized basic, functional literacy skills considered necessary to succeed in a future workplace. Overall, the classroom narratives captured by this issue of *Educational Perspectives* tell us that educators have constructed a more robust definition of *media literacy*, one that compels students to "step back from the machinery and look at computers, networks, and the interactions they enable in order to learn how to 'read' and 'interpret' their impact" (Burniske, 2001, p. 16).

McLuhan's Legacy: Remediation

Over forty years ago, Marshall McLuhan (1964) declared "the medium is the message." Many critics dismissed his claims as radical hyperboles, including his definition of media as "any technology that creates extensions of the human body and senses" (McLuhan 1995, p. 239). McLuhan's work was an attempt to make the effects of media, particularly electronic media, more visible to mainstream consumers.

He believed electronic media had been neglected because they were essentially invisible. In one memorable case, he used the example of electric light to make his point. "The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no content," he wrote. "And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 24). For McLuhan, light may be invisible to the naked eye, but it illuminates the world. Like Plato, the Greek philosopher, McLuhan believed that to understand light we must examine its source, considering how it shapes our world, rather than gazing upon the objects it illuminates or the shadows they cast (Plato, 1968).

"The medium is the message," McLuhan proclaimed, because media creates its own environments, ones that favor some types of information and messages at the expense of others. Fortunately, McLuhan's work inspired many educators to study the impact of media. Bolter (2001) has introduced the idea of "remediation" to help us understand how new information and communication technologies draw upon the past while helping humanity build bridges to the future: "Remediation involves both homage and rivalry, for the new medium imitates some features of the older medium, but also makes an implicit or explicit claim to improve on the older one" (p. 23).

The rapid emergence of word processors, laptop computers, email, and the World Wide Web have inspired the convergence of various technologies that "remediate" their predecessors while compelling educators to re-invent their pedagogy and curricula. What does this mean for education? First, it means *media literacy* should not be treated like a fad; rather, *media literacy* must remain an integral part of school curricula. Second, media literacy should be considered both a *subject* for study and a *set of skills* that strengthen students' critical acumen, enabling them to interrogate both information and the media through which they receive it, rather than become passive consumers.

While concentrating upon explicit tasks, consider the implicit lessons that students learn during the video production processes described in this collection of essays. Ohta's students learn not only video production, but also the art of parody; Chun's students gain new skills with technology, but more importantly learn how to work collaboratively, giving and getting respect; Yamashita's work inspires not only students, but the teacher herself, an act of renewal that enables her to find the strength to continue in an always challenging, often enervating, profession.

Together, these students and teachers engage in work that helps themselves, their schools, and their communities understand the process of "remediation." Their work enables them to actively engage in learning activities that re-define the classroom, pedagogy, and academic disciplines. By doing so, they empower themselves as creators and critics of media instead of waiting for textbooks to explain media literacy in dull, patronizing prose written for faceless consumers in a homogenized culture instead of the dynamic people from unique Hawaiian communities described in these essays.

The Power of Convergence: Nurturing Ohanas Online and Off

The power of convergence, which has transformed the "word processor" into a portable communications device capable of sending and receiving email while searching the Web through wireless connections or pausing to watch and edit video, has also turned our attention away from the limited and limiting notion of *computer literacy* to the more important concerns of *media literacy.* Technological convergence has prompted educators to *look through* online learning environments and explore how they might use them to reinforce real, face-to-face *ohana*. We would do well, however, to pause from time to time, *looking at* these online tools, technologies, and environments to ask how our involvement in virtual communities affects our engagement with face-to-face ones.

Building and sustaining meaningful online communities is much harder than most people realize, but it seems sensible to *look through* online communications while also taking time to *look at* them to understand how technology shapes such communities, simultaneously enabling and constraining human interaction. Sueoka's compelling account of the MeneMAC Online Learning Community reveals how online interactions can help build a shared sense of history; Angel's description of 'Olelo Community Television's partnerships with schools and the University of Hawai'i demonstrates how media can help support the exchange of ideas, empowering individuals while strengthening one's sense of identity and community; and, finally, Olague's summary of the Hawai'i Student Film Festival punctuates the importance of media literacy as an inspiration for students, one that challenges them to produce quality work that reflects favorably upon themselves, their *ohana*, and the state of Hawai'i.

Collectively, these efforts inspire a more robust set of questions about the integration of information and communication technology, the teaching of media literacy,

and the impact of ICTs upon our students, teachers, and communities. For example, how does technology created and shaped by humans eventually shape the people who participate in online *ohana*? What kinds of discursive habits do these media and communities foster? What are the best practices for sustaining healthy online *ohana*? What rules and regulations should govern them? How is the culture of an online community similar, yet different, from the face-to-face culture that engenders it?

Conclusion: Lessons Worth Learning

If we listen carefully to these voices from the classroom, we discover the importance of teaching students how to *look through* the lens of information and communications technology while simultaneously *looking at* technology in a critical fashion. By making time for this deliberate oscillation educators enable students to become critical readers of print and electronic media. However, this is no simple task. What readers may not gather from some of these stories, due to the seduction of mesmerizing voices and extraordinary tales, is just how much time, energy, and perseverance were required for these educators to succeed. In many cases, they sacrificed their personal lives, forfeiting time they might have spent with family or friends after school and on weekends, to overcome limited budgets and a lack of experience to fulfill ambitious, elusive dreams.

In other words, this collection bears witness to the work of *heroic* teachers. By no means a definitive anthology, this selection provides a glimpse of the exemplary work taking place in schools throughout the state of Hawai'i. There will always be more work to do, but this collection of essays should make educators throughout Hawai'i proud of our students and teachers, indicating just how far we've come in recent years. In the past quarter of a century, educational technology has evolved from mainframe networks to desktop computers, laptop computers, and PDAs. The incredible shrinking computer, and the exponential growth of transistors now dancing on the head of a chip, not only enables data storage to soar, but also inspires pedagogical innovation while challenging traditional definitions of the classroom and curriculum.

Information and communication technology did not begin with computers, nor will it end with them. For students, one lesson to learn is that, when it comes to technology, the only constant is change. This means K–12 students must develop good critical thinking skills, and be prepared to apply those skills as lifelong learners. For educators, one lesson to learn, once and for all, is that technology will never be a pedagogical panacea. Every technology has strengths and weaknesses; every technology has intended and unintended consequences; and every technology introduces new perils with its promises. It takes inspired and inspiring teachers to discover and invent meaningful, educational uses of technology.

Finally, for anyone concerned about the future of our K–12 schools, this issue of *Educational Perspectives* teaches an important lesson about curriculum and pedagogy: *Media literacy is the message*.

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