by Lorna Collier

The Shift to 21st-Century Literacies

Scene One: A 20th-century secondary English classroom. A teacher gives a presentation on a novel under study, using handouts, the chalkboard, and a poster; students take notes using pens and paper, in preparation for an essay assignment.

Scene Two: A 21st-century English classroom that uses 21st-century literacies. Here, students and teacher are grouped around computers, where they are collaboratively using movie-making software to edit a video book trailer about a novel, which will be posted on a classroom wiki.

Obviously, both traditional and 21st-century classrooms involve more than these quick snapshots, and share classroom methods and goals. But 21st-century literacy-oriented teaching offers additional benefits to students, allowing them to incorporate the technology they increasingly use in their everyday lives, and which they will need to master in order to find success in tomorrow's workplace.

"Literacy has always been intimately tied to a technology," says Kylene Beers, NCTE vice president, who notes that to writers in earlier centuries, advanced technologies included chisels and stones, ink and papyrus, or the printing press.

Yet, says Beers, "the demands of 21st-century literacy are more complex and challenging than those of 18th-century literacy. . . . As technology continues to evolve, always moving toward the more sophisticated, our literacy capacities must also grow more sophisticated."

To help students thrive in the world of 21st-century literacy, teachers need to become fluent in the language of newer technologies—but this isn't the only way to incorporate more modern thinking about literacy. The definition of "21st-century literacies" also includes new ideas about what can be considered texts.

"We have opened up what counts as valued communication" in the classroom, says Sara Kajder, assistant professor of English education at Virginia Tech and program director for English education at the school, who has written on the topic. Other forms of communication might include rap lyrics, graphic novels, still images, audiotext, and oral performance, she says.

"It's not that those are necessarily new tools or new ways of engaging, but I think that we are a lot more open in the English curriculum right now in thinking about those as ways of engaging and communicating meaning."

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Though rap lyrics and graphic novels aren't necessarily high-tech, many changes seen in 21st-century literacy classrooms are being driven by the rapid advance of new technologies. Students today typically arrive in the classroom fluent in the languages of text-messaging, instant-messaging and blogging, often to a far greater degree than their teachers.

This shift from a page-based to a screen-based society is causing "a drastic change in literacy," says William Kist, associate professor at Kent State University and incoming director of the NCTE Commission on Media. "It's a different way of encountering communication or thought or human expression."

As a result, students have changed, says Kajder, and teachers need to alter teaching methods accordingly. This is not only to keep students engaged and motivated, but to better prepare them for a technologically oriented workplace.

Workplace Demands in the 21st Century

"Out-of-school [and workplace] literacies are becoming more and more divergent from in-school literacies," warns Kist. "Blogging, instant messaging, podcasts, video production, desktop video editing, and graphic design are all things kids are going to encounter as they move out into the workplace."

Teachers who assume students already know all the "tech stuff," and need only to have their writing and thinking skills sharpened, miss the point. First, not all students have technological knowledge; second, even those who do have it need to know how to manage these skills. "They still need teachers to be working with them to teach them how to learn and communicate with an emerging tool," says Kajder. "Students need to learn from us how

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to engage in online spaces and still have academic discourse, to do it for purposeful, functional needs, because the toolset can't be completely different whenever they step into whatever their future jobs might be —and yet that is what the reality is right now."

In order for teachers to know how to teach students using technology, says Kajder, they need to use this technology themselves. This means, she says, that teachers might want to start their own *MySpace* pages and keep blogs, as just two examples.

Kajder herself is trying an even-newer technology— "Second Life," a virtual world where participants interact graphically with other people, to the point of holding virtual jobs and spending virtual money. She hasn't finished

> Although technology is important to literacy in the new century, other dimensions of learning are essential. Studies of workforce readiness show that employers rate written and oral communication skills very highly.—*21st-Century Literacies: an NCTE Policy Research Brief* (see this issue, pp. 13–20)

planning yet, but believes she can work the world of Second Life into classroom instruction. It's an attempt to keep up with technologies that seem to be flying faster and more furiously every day.

"Here's the deal: technology is not going to slow down," says Kajder. "Because the technology is always changing, and because the tools are always changing, it's a hugely challenging time to be a teacher."

Not All Schools Are Created Equal

Despite the need, not all school districts can provide 21st-century technologies to their students. Some simply do not have the resources for computers, videocameras, and high-tech software.

"Access is very much an issue," says Kajder, who works with a variety of urban and rural school districts, some with much less equipment than others. "[Some schools] are lucky if they have one computer in a classroom."

Yet this doesn't mean that those students must be shut out of 21st-century literacies. Even if a classroom has but a single computer, if there is a Web connection, students can still develop podcasts and set up classroom wikis.

If schools have no videocameras or video-editing software, they can still benefit from the concepts behind the technology by creating hand-drawn storyboards, with written text beneath each picture; this way, they can conceptualize visual communication, and practice transitions and dramatic structure.

"One of my doctoral students taught in a rural school with limited access," says David Bruce, outgoing director of the NCTE Commission on Media, and professor at Kent State University. "They only had a couple of computers. She got them raw footage and had them make a story out of existing footage."

With Powerpoint and digital still cameras, says Bruce, "you can do a tremendous amount with a fairly low-end approach." Nonetheless, he adds, "there is no question if the school does not have access to those materials, they are going to be more limited to what they can do. It's unfair because the students are going to be expected to know how to do those things in the business world."

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Resistance by Teachers, Administrators

Sometimes teachers aren't eager to incorporate 21st-century literacies, which they see as an attempt to replace tried-and-true methods of print literacy. However, experts say when taught properly, both traditional and 21st-century literacies can, and should, co-exist.

"I don't believe that these 21st-century literacies should be thought of as being in competition with print literacy," says Kist. "I think it's too bad some English teachers see it that way. I think it's just an enrichment or broadening of our field to include more forms of representation."

If 21st-century literacies are used well, they don't eliminate existing curricula. Instead, teachers can use these literacies to broaden and complement what they've always taught.

"There's a fallacy that kids aren't reading and writing anymore," says Bruce. "They are, but they just are reading and writing differently than what we've traditionally done in schools. . . . A 21st-century approach [doesn't] say that print writing is bad. It's not *competing* literacies; it's *complementary* literacy."

Sometimes teachers are eager to incorporate new literacies, but can't due to administration or district policies. "Many teachers are constrained by a very prescriptive curriculum that is forcing them to cover great works of literature in lockstep fashion," says Kist. "Many teachers may feel that they are at risk of being penalized if they do open up their room to a little bit more 21st-century literacy."

Kist also finds older, more veteran teachers are more likely to have the freedom to try 21st-century techniques than those with less seniority.

"I hate to come across as negative," says Kist, "but I just think the way our schools are structured, it's difficult to incorporate some of these things; it's a challenge, especially for brand-new teachers."

State standards tests also are a factor, points out Kajder. "We are teaching and working right now in environments where very discrete skills are valued by the tests and the exams by which our students are held accountable. That's absolutely a reality that teachers are considering across the country."

21st-Century Literacies in Action

But when teachers are free to use 21st-century literacies, the results can be satisfying for their students, and they can be applied at any grade level.

For instance, children at Willowdale Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska, regularly produce audio podcasts (called "Willowcasts") about topics they have learned in school; the podcasts can be accessed by anybody in the world with an Internet connection, from their parents to strangers in other countries.

Bruce has used video production to help struggling high-schoolers improve text literacy. While teaching high school video and English classes,

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Bruce noticed that "the kids who couldn't write well would produce these marvelous productions. They spent all this time editing, composing, all these things they couldn't do with print." Bruce helped them see that the transitions and structure they imposed on their film projects were elements in text-writing as well.

"I have seen it empower so many students," says Bruce. "They say, 'I can understand what a transition is, and here's what it looks like in print.'"

Bruce also suggests capturing students' interest in a traditional topic by allowing them to pursue nontraditional methods to explore it, such as by translating Shakespearean passages into text messages. Doing this would involve

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"a really close reading of the text" while being accessible to kids, he says.

No matter how teachers make use of 21st-century literacies, those who do open themselves up to its possibilities should find rewards.

"I think it's a great time to be an English teacher," says Kist. "It's a rich time. You could make an argument that we've never been so inundated and immersed by language and creativity and imagination."

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