

Tyner, Kathleen. (1998). *Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates. ISBN: 0805822275.

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Literacy in a Digital World focuses on the changing definitions of literacy in an increasingly technological world. Writing a book review on an almost ten year old book is important due to the scope of the work as a historical perspective. Such a review highlights some of the contextual attributes of Tyner's book, in the discussion of the use of literacy and technology as discursive and complex operational tools for the upcoming students and scholars alike, in a fast changing world of information.

“Literacy” in current times becomes an encompassing term, carrying diverse and endless meanings to different people depending on economic and historical conditions as well as each person's own unique cultural and social perspectives. Since the 1980s, according to Tyner, literacy scholars have positioned literacy as discourse; one of many complex and salient discourses in a multicultural, multilingual society. James Gee categorizes discourses into two broad types: primary and secondary. As described in Tyner's book, primary discourses come from uses of literacy by those people exposed early in life through interactions with family members and within their socio-cultural settings – our first “social identity.” Acquired later, secondary discourses develop as “people are apprenticed as part of their socializations with various local, state and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization” (26).

Since Tyner locates literacy as discourse, presentation of one of the major contributions along these lines focuses on Walter Ong, who in 1982, at the beginning of the Internet Age, wrote about the convergence of literacies in his groundbreaking work, *Orality and Literacy*. According to Ong, “the electronic transformation of verbal expression has brought consciousness to a new age of “secondary orality”. Tyner maintains that Ong’s concept of secondary orality has important implications for contemporary teaching and learning, especially if one views secondary orality as a unique form of discourse – the discourse of media. New approaches to teaching and learning suggest the imperative to address multiple literacy modes such as technology literacy, visual literacy, media literacy and so many others stemming from the same mediated source of discourse. Tyner argues that the key to understanding the changing landscape of contemporary literacy is to study the specific areas where the rationale, skill sets, and purposes of various literacies converge and overlap for clues to common features, competencies, and pedagogies of literacy at this point in time.

Important to note that Tyner’s book was published when MUDDs (multiuser domains), MOOSs (multiuser object-oriented environments), and the potential for videoconferencing were all being explored. Almost a decade later, today, virtual environments and distance learning are commonplace in higher education and K – 12 classrooms in the United States. The key to successfully integrating new technology into the classroom is to provide students with opportunities to become information providers as well as receivers. Teachers can create projects that encourage students to become social change agents actively designing their own futures in “each of these spheres through the manipulation of language, discourse, and literacies” (80). And yet, a rear view of *Literacy in a Digital World*, almost a decade later, indicates that integrating

technology in order to actively engage students in the educational view of the world might still remain under the potential order, not a manifested actuality in the classroom.

Along with a large group of educational philosophers articulating the power of technological changes in the world of education, Douglas Kellner addresses in his writings of 1990s specifically the need to include media, digital communication, and a variety of literacies to empower students and to make education relevant today. A broader approach to literacy can promote multicultural education and challenges educators to rethink established teaching strategies to meet the challenges of our increasingly multicultural and technological society. Tyner points out that media literacy is embedded in the curriculum of almost all industrialized countries except the United States. Ten years after *Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information*, educators in the United States are still grappling with the changing definition of literacy. Once again, this review attempts to highlight more of a problematic of following up what Tyner had clearly envisioned in the past. The changing definition of literacy, the need to engage with the complex inherent changes of educational and communicative practices in relation to approaches to technological development, all such critical issues affect the notion of literacy, literacy as discourse, and the changing conceptualizations of such umbrella term in different cultural and socio-economic contexts. After all, do we know more now than when Tyner's book was first published?

Kimber and Wyatt-Smith (2006) recently proposed redefining (my emphasis) pedagogy to support students' efforts at knowledge creation, something distinctly different than knowledge acquisition in their article, *Using and Creating Knowledge with New Technologies: A Case for Students-as-Designers*. The call for redefinition becomes a mandatory action when literacy and technology become changing actors on a continuum time line. "Teacher agency" in the digital

age involves the creation of digital environments that go beyond an interest in computers to simply access and publish information. Prensky (2001) includes other distinctions that add to Tyner's birdview on literacy, namely identifying the "digital natives" of today, young people who have grown up with technology and learn differently than past generations in his frequently cited article, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*. Such 'digital natives' expect a highly stimulating and interactive learning environment. "Digital natives" are used to being in control of their media; listening to music arranged into personal play lists and watching television shows at their convenience on digital recorders. Gaston (2006) maintains in his article, *Reaching and Teaching the Digital Native*, that today's young people live in a different world than previous generations. "In their world, the consumer of information is in charge – not the producer" (Gaston, 2006, p.12). Many teachers are "Digital Immigrants;" not born into the digital world, speaking an outdated, pre-digital age language to a population that speaks an entirely new one (Prensky, 2001). Teaching "Digital Natives" requires more than the addition of technology skills alone; it also requires the desire to engage students in the learning process, yet, this time acknowledging **the changes** (my emphasis) of such educational endeavor. For, since Ong's perspective on literacy as discourse and Tyner's book on literacy, more and more educational writings have been inclusive when it comes to acknowledging the relationship literacy and technology. And yet, the problematic of the task of educators in the classroom, remains a call for action as pertinent in 1998, as currently.

New literacy tools, according to Tyner (1995), have the ability to overcome time, space, and distance to ensure access to isolated students and to enable a more diverse range of expression and a wider array of viewpoints. Tyner identifies that teaching and learning can be most effective when literacy, technology, and pedagogy are aligned toward a common purpose: a democratic

education that improves the life of all children. To achieve this, Tyner suggests a three-part approach:

1. Critical literacy that teaches *about* information, as well as *with* information;
2. Experiential education that employs communication tools for student use in experimental and investigatory ways; and
3. Critical pedagogy that supports constructivist, inquiry-based, and democratic practices. (p. 196)

Pedagogy, how teachers and students learn, is at the heart of school change and is the key to incorporating new literacy practices into the classroom. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, public awareness rose regarding the low-performance of American students and a growing consensus that standards and accountability were the solution needed. The standards movement gained support and resulted in the passage of *The No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001. Tyner noted, even before *No Child Left Behind*, that norm-referenced testing is what drives elementary and secondary education yet it has little to do with what is actually taught in the classroom (202). Standardized testing increases pressure on minority students who traditionally score lower. Test scores are used punitively in the United States to publicly humiliate schools, administrators and teachers.

Instruction does not only need to meet a set of standards, it also needs to be authentic for students to be able to relate to the material. A commonly cited criticism of *The No Child Left Behind Act* is that it has forced educators to “teach to the test.” The challenge, ten years ago when this book was written, is still the challenge facing educators today; how to effectively integrate instructional technology into the classroom so we do not create a divide between school and work, home, and play. Educational strategies that blend critical literacy, experiential

education, and critical pedagogy can help explain the relationship of literacy, technology, and society. Tyner, Ong, and the others cited in this book offer valuable historical contributions to the ongoing debate about the evolving nature of literacy. *Literacy in a Digital World* serves as a referential work in helping redefine the nature of literacy and illustrates how difficult the task can be a constantly evolving technological and educational landscape.