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COMMENTARY

Literacy Accountability in a New-Media Age

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Back to Story

Walking through the hallways of the middle school where I teach, I inevitably hear students talk about music Web sites, blogs, Web-based photo albums, Facebook pages, and other forms of new media.

If we judged these students' ability to interpret and gather information solely based on their mastery of print media, we'd be doing ourselves—and society—a huge disservice.

Oh wait, we already do just that.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act and standardized state curricula and assessments are stuck on a notion of literacy that does not reflect the reality of our time. Schools are accountable to report how well students read, but we're testing them on print media only. It's time for the accountability movement to demand that schools teach and foster responsible student use of new literacy forms.

Redefining literacy standards does not mean throwing away measures to assess whether a student comprehends the main idea of a passage of fiction or the purpose of a how-to feature article. But it should include an acknowledgment that our students are reading, interpreting, and creating new forms of media that require as much attention as books.

I want my students to be able to assess the validity of a Web site. I want them to watch thought-provoking YouTube clips and understand the point of view and potential bias of the presentation. I want students to read blogs and understand how or why certain images and videos are embedded within the text. I want them to be able to listen to podcasts and write down three features of the presentation that affect its tone and message.

If we forsake teaching and assessing such skills, our schools will not be helping facilitate the growth of responsible citizens. After all, these are the new forms of information that young people consume and create regularly.

Some may argue that it's a waste of time to assess other forms of literacy if students aren't "proficient" at more traditional forms of reading and writing. But here's the reality we need to face: "Reading" video, images, and other multimodal texts demands just as much critical thinking and analysis as a challenging excerpt from *Moby Dick*. If we develop critical literacy skills with new forms of media, the skills can transfer to the written word.

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Redefining the practice of accounting for literacy isn't limited to a utilitarian argument to keep up with the changing times. We also have a moral and democratic charge to teach students to understand these transformational forms

challenging excerpt from *Moby Dick*.

of media in more critical ways. Unleashing and teaching media skills results in student empowerment. This is scary to some, who are comfortable sorting students by their ability to perform traditional literacy tasks.These same students might be effective media consumers and producers, but not according to our current accountability system.

Gunther Kress, in *Literacy in the New Media Age*, predicts that the cultural and political elite will continue to use text-based documents, even as image-based media forms gain traction in society. Failure to embrace, understand, and assess new literacies, he says, will reinforce the status quo. If schools acknowledge the power of new media, they will ultimately empower their students. Should schools be accountable for this empowerment? Absolutely.

Accountability in literacy must be measured in how well all students are able to navigate the sea of information now available through the Internet, and how effectively they can interpret and disseminate information in a multitude of forms. Again, this doesn't mean we should throw away our teaching and assessment of traditional literacy skills. Rather, we must have a more balanced approach and yet be flexible at the same time, because as research emerges about the effects of media literacy and consumption, our assessment practices might need to shift again.

Writing will never be completely replaced by images, video, and sound as our chief means of producing and recalling information. But what if new multimodal forms rival traditional literacies in their usefulness to individuals and society?

I hope we don't have to wait much longer for U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and other leaders in the field to speak out on the importance of these new literacies. While it's always a challenge to alter the status quo, the best interests of our children, and of their present and future society, are at stake.

We must be open to the idea that *how* and *why* students read and write is in flux—and realize that we're not anywhere close to teaching and assessing these transforming and transformational skills.

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Vol. 29, Issue 04, Page 23