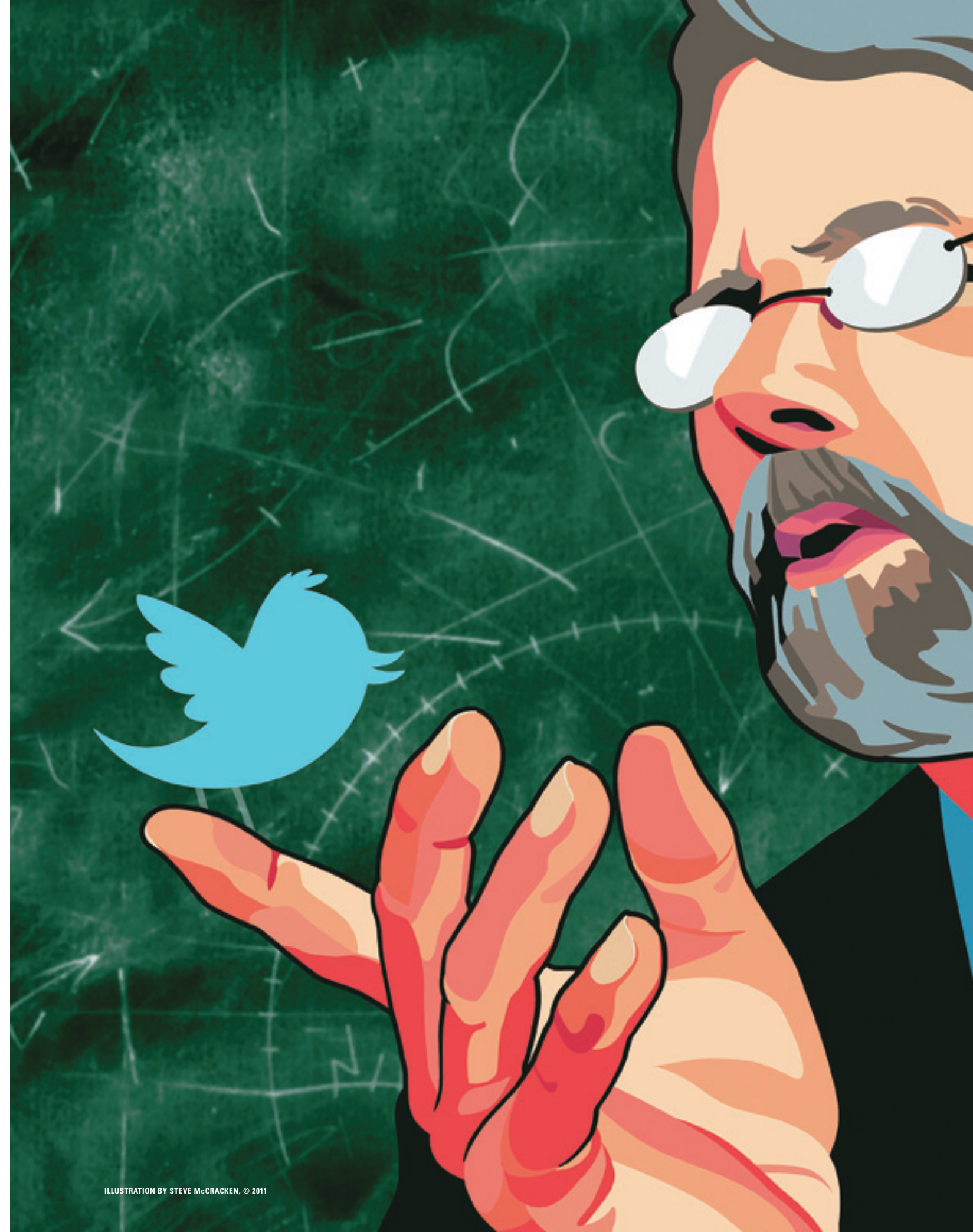


On Teaching

By David Parry

Mobile Literacy

In the book *Smart Mobs*, Howard Rheingold argues: “The mobile internet . . . will not be just a way to do old things while moving. It will be a way to do things that couldn’t be done before.” In part because of this, he then suggests: “A new kind of digital divide ten years from now will separate those who know how to use new media to band together from those who don’t.”¹ Rheingold wrote that in 2002. In other words, that ten-year horizon has nearly expired. While recognizing that digital access is not evenly distributed in the United States, which is to say nothing of the global distribution, we can safely say that this transformation is already here; we are already at the moment in which the ability to use social media, and particularly social media as amplified through the power of the mobile web, has become a key literacy. (*Literacy* here is perhaps the wrong term, for the skills needed to navigate and take ownership of these spaces far exceed the comparatively simple skill of comprehending written text.)



What makes this moment ever more complicated is that just as we have introduced computers into the classroom—just as we have started to come to terms with the idea of wired learning spaces, mediated laptops, and occasionally the now-dinosaur-like desktops—the mobile web is about to make all this technological adaptation rather outdated. The unwired learning space is about to substantially alter the landscape of teaching with and through technology. As my colleague Dean Terry likes to point out, we are in the “Late Desktop Era.”² Some educators have responded by banning this new technology from the

changes not only how we teach, but what it means to be knowledgeable and educated in our culture. And just as important, the mobile web opens up a host of pedagogical possibilities. Let me sketch out a few literacies that we ought to be striving to teach our students:

1. *Understanding Information Access.* A mobile web often creates a situation in which information is quickly and easily available online. Within the classroom, this means nearly any bit of factual information we need is accessible in a matter of seconds—if one knows how to navigate the web efficiently. Frequently I will say in class: “I am not sure: look

2. *Understanding Hyperconnectivity.* I often encourage students to Twitter during class. This is not to suggest that I ask them to ignore what is occurring in the classroom space in favor of following a Twitter stream; rather, as a class exercise, students often tweet about what is going on during class. This serves as both a collaborative note-taking exercise³ and a demonstration of how conversation can be extended beyond the classroom space, similar to the way Twitter is now a popular tool at conferences. But there are also times in class when we will talk about how engaging in this type of hypermediated experience can distract from directing

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learning space, demanding that students turn off their smartphones and keep their tablet computers stowed in their bags. This approach, I would suggest, is precisely the wrong tack to take. The future our students will inherit is one that will be mediated and stitched together by the mobile web, and I think that ethically, we are called on as teachers to teach them how to use these technologies effectively, to ensure that they end up on the right side of the digital divide: the side that knows how to use social media to band together. Teaching mobile web literacy seems to me as crucial as teaching basic literacy.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that educators encourage students to text each other during class. Instead, I feel that one of our obligations as educators is to consider how the mobile Internet

it up.” I do this for several reasons. First, I often do not know things, and I think admitting to not knowing is good modeling for students. But second, in articulating this not knowing, I am inviting students to practice the skill of information access and see this activity as a valuable part of academic conversation (and not just as the fastest way to answer any trivia question). This task can be effective even in a wired classroom, using desktop computers or laptops, but having students use mobile devices demonstrates to them how finding information is not contingent on access to a not-so-mobile device. They are therefore able to practice the skill of quick information access and credibility detection—a skill that will be useful throughout their lives regardless of what they choose to do professionally.

full attention to a particular event. Again, one of my goals is to teach students when and how to effectively use this technology.

3. *Understanding the New Sense of Space.* This is perhaps the most important and also perhaps the hardest literacy to explain. I am not sure that our society has become fully aware of the degree to which geo-location and the mobile web will change our daily practices. Web services like Gowalla (<http://gowalla.com/>) and FourSquare (<http://foursquare.com/>) are just the very beginning of the massive amounts of data that we are going to be layering on top of the physical world and that will substantially alter how we can interact with space. Even augmented reality applications such as Layar (<http://www.layar.com/>) and Wikitude ([16 EDUCAUSE review MARCH/APRIL 2011](http://www</p></div><div data-bbox=)

.wikitude.org/en) are just the initial offerings in what is going to become an increasingly complex, data-rich landscape. So here, again, my goal is to get students to begin to understand how one can use a mobile device to both create and access spatial information. When our class reaches the point during the semester at which we discuss the increasing prevalence of cameras in our daily life, I have students use their mobile devices to begin to document all the cameras they see. I have them take a picture of any surveillance camera they notice during the day. I then have them share these photos with each other, mashing up the data to make a map of all the cameras (<http://cameraseverywhere.us/>).

With all of these activities, my goal is to have students begin to understand

and practice using their mobile devices. And with all of these activities, there are many other ways to accomplish these goals, as well as many other mobile literacies that I think educators need to help students develop. For me, the key piece is recognizing that the mobile computing power in our pockets radically changes not merely our classrooms but, more important, the spaces that students inhabit and the conversations they have outside of our teaching. I want to teach students to take ownership of this type of change so that they can shape the mobile transformation as much as they are shaped by it. ■

Notes

1. Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Publications, 2002), pp. xiv, xix.
2. Dean Terry, "Location Literacy & Foursquare in

the Classroom," *MediaCommons*, March 13, 2010, <<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/content/location-literacy-foursquare-classroom>>.

3. Marshall Kirkpatrick, "How One Teacher Uses Twitter in the Classroom," *ReadWriteWeb*, June 1, 2009, <http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/how_one_teacher_uses_twitter_in_the_classroom.php>.

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