

The Sea Change Before Us

All of us understand, on an almost visceral level, the power and immediacy of imagery and sound. Art, music, film, photography, drawing—all have the potential to transcend traditional language. An aging photograph can reach across the years to evoke in us the emotion and angst of an entire era; the soaring sweep of a singer's voice can inspire us; a carefully chosen film clip can remind us of our humanity in ways that touch us deeply and individually.

That these media, and images and sounds in general, are powerful communication tools is nothing new, but the ease with which they are being used is very new. A province once occupied only by artists and filmmakers is increasingly accessible to ordinary people. A profound shift is taking place in the way that people, especially college students, communicate and express themselves—and this phenomenon is emerging in amazingly similar ways in countries across the globe.

The Internet has added a striking immediacy and a profound leveling to communication. We've all seen cell-phone camera snapshots assume iconic status overnight and bloggers replace mainstream media as trusted news sources, simply because they are there when the traditional infrastructure fails. Fueled by media that are increasingly crafted for a global audience, by goods and services that are available from ever-more-distant locales, by access to networks and communication services that span the planet, and by generational ties that transcend borders, a new concept of how to communicate effectively—and of what it

means to be articulate—is evolving.

This new form of communication incorporates visual, aural, and textual elements, as well as an immediacy that itself is an important dimension of effective communication. Technology, which has done much to make the creation and dissemination of written communication an everyday occurrence for most people, plays an especially important role, as tools that allow the sophisticated manipulation and creation of images, video, and sound grow more commonplace. The Internet is the preeminent driver of this transformation.

New Media Literacy

Recently, a considerable surge of interest has emerged within higher education around this phenomenon, which my colleagues and I have begun to call *new media literacy*. During the past year, the New Media Consortium (NMC) framed a major initiative around new media literacy and learning, resulting in an international conference on the topic, a summit of the world's leading policymakers and authors in this arena, a monograph,¹ and considerable thought and conversation among the NMC board and membership. As we studied this emerging phenomenon, we drew on the decades of work in cognitive

When applied at its best, this visually rich, multichannel form of expression can be powerfully compelling, engaging, and communicative.

science, semiotics, linguistics, media literacy, and literacy in general to inform our understanding of what is taking place.

What has become clear is that understanding this body of work is absolutely necessary yet is also, in the end, insufficient. Understanding is necessary because the language we have to describe the phenomena we are seeing has been developed within those disciplines (and others not listed). It is insufficient because we want to avoid the fate of those six blind men of *Indostan*: each made a very reasoned and learned conclusion about what an elephant was, yet each was completely wrong because he based his conclusion on an incomplete picture.

To compensate for our own blindness, we chose a multisensory approach. The NMC defines *new media literacy* as the set of abilities and skills required for proficiency where the aural, visual, and digital realms overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate, transform, and pervasively distribute digital media, and to easily adapt digital media to new forms.

This definition is both distinct from and resonant with definitions borrowed from work in literacy and in cognitive science. For example, the ability to un-

derstand, recognize, manipulate, and put to use the power of images involves a set of skills often referred to as *visual literacy*. Visually literate individuals have an imaginative ability to see and understand the messages communicated with images, as well as to create, modify, and use visual cues and images. An emerging concept, visual literacy overlaps with related areas like visual/graphic representation, visual communication, semiotics, and iconography. Meanwhile, *aural literacy* involves a similar set of skills related to sounds and music, whereas *digital literacy* complements aural literacy and visual literacy and adds a set of skills that draw not only on creativity but also design. Digitally literate individuals are able to manipulate and transform the images they see and the sounds they hear, to distribute them in new and compelling ways, and to easily adapt them to new forms. The ability to find what you need online, when you need it, is also an important digital skill, an area that overlaps with *information literacy*.

So, What's So New in New Media Literacy?

With all these overlapping definitions, one might wonder what is really new here. Are we not simply engaged in the time-honored academic practice of hair-splitting? It may seem so—until one looks closely at the dynamics of communication among college and pre-college-age students. Today's young people, across the globe and with very few exceptions, have grown up in an era in which the Internet is commonplace. For most of them, cell phones are the only phones they have ever known. Years of gameplay have refined their visual pathways, and they are used to making entire classes of decisions at “twitch” speed. Social considerations about the digital divide aside, by the time these students reach college and university campuses, they will expect the network to be fast, invisible, and anywhere they want it. Their informal communications, which will typically involve as many as six open instant message (IM) channels at once, will use all the bandwidth available, both network and mental, for watching video files, listening to audio and music files, sending IMs, and sharing these files.

Looking for something to call this emerging form of communication, I've been referring to it as “Net-Gen communication,” since it is closely associated with the members of the Net Generation.² Reflecting on the ways people are employing Net-Gen communication to express themselves, to communicate, and to interact, several sources have reached some illuminating conclusions:

- *Net-Gen communication is multimodal.* Young people who are adept at interpreting meaning in sound, music, still and moving images, and interactive components not only seem quite able to cope with messages that engage several of these pathways at once but, in many cases, prefer them.³
- *Net-Gen communication is interactive.* Whereas verbal communication—speech—is very interactive, written language rarely involves real-time interaction. Print-based authoring is largely a one-way communication. Net-Gen communication encourages interaction, even in its more formal forms, and real-time immediacy is an important dimension.⁴
- *Net-Gen communication includes creative fluency as well as interpretive facility.* Just as traditional forms of literacy involve the ability to speak and write as well as to read, new media literacy implies the ability to articulate and create ideas in these new forms as well as to understand the layers of meanings they may convey.⁵
- *Net-Gen communication comes easily to digital natives.* Although the rules and constructs of these emerging forms of Net-Gen communication are not yet fully understood, they seem to be intuitive, at least to some degree, to young people. Digital natives easily grasp how visual and other multimedia components can enhance communication, even if their use is largely informal. As young people create casual multimedia, they are also creating the opportunity to experiment, learn, take risks, and become fluent.⁶

Reflective of this phenomenon of Net-Gen communication, and of the fact that they have been working with this

population for several years, virtually all major K–12 organizations in the English-speaking world are involved in some aspect of visual, digital, or new media literacy. Among higher education entities, however, the ship has been slower to turn, perhaps because the initial waves of the Net Generation have only recently begun to appear on college and university doorsteps.

But these students are on our campuses now, and higher education is facing an imminent sea change in the way students communicate. Young people around the world—in Japan, Europe, Australia, the United Kingdom, Latin America, Canada, and the United States—are already speaking this new language. Those of us in higher education must rise with this tide and learn from them. What this may mean for our curricula and our practices is uncertain at this point, but one thing is clear. When applied at its best, this visually rich, multichannel form of expression can be powerfully compelling, engaging, and communicative. If we can understand, encourage, stimulate, and model this new form of communication, the resulting applications could be profound. Imagine if we could put its expressive power to use for learning!

Notes

1. Laurence F. Johnson and Rachel S. Smith, *A Global Imperative: The Report of the 21st Century Literacy Summit* (Austin, Tex.: New Media Consortium, 2005), e-book, available at <<http://www.nmc.org/summit/>>.
2. Diana G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger, eds., *Educating the Net Generation* (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE, 2005), e-book, available at <<http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen>>.
3. Gunther Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2003).
4. Johnson and Smith, *A Global Imperative*.
5. Henry Jenkins, “Why Heather Can Write,” *Technology Review*, February 6, 2004, <http://www.technologyreview.com/articles/04/02/wo_jenkins020604.asp>; Adele Flood, “Defining the Visually Literate Individual,” *Australian Art Education*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2004).
6. Kristina Woolsey, “New Media Literacies: A Language Revolution,” prepublication draft, shared by the author, May 22, 2005.

Larry Johnson serves as Chief Executive Officer of the New Media Consortium (NMC), an international consortium of more than two hundred colleges, universities, museums, research centers, and technology companies dedicated to exploring and using new technologies that inspire, energize, stimulate, and support learning.

