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## Assessing new literacies: Perspectives from the classroom.

Burke, A., & Hammett, R. F. (2009). *Assessing new literacies: Perspectives from the classroom*. New York: Peter Lang. 203 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1433102660, \$35.95. (paperback).

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In recent years, there has been a proliferation of research which rationalizes and calls for the implementation of new literacies practices in classrooms. Many academics have agreed that educators should be pedagogically rebelling against the incumbent regime of autonomous literacy skills and embracing multimodal forms of student expression, yet there are few who offer practical suggestions for the implementation and assessment of such practices. In *Assessing New Literacies: Perspectives from the Classroom*, editors Anne Burke and Roberta F. Hammett have compiled a remarkably diverse body of essays that propose applicable teaching and assessment frameworks for new literacies educators. Although the technological and modal content of these essays varies significantly, several common threads are woven throughout the collection. Each author offers a theoretical rationale for the adoption of new literacies practices in education and then conceptualizes practical frameworks that outline methodologies for teaching and/or assessing students engaged in multimodal work.

In presenting the case for new literacies, many of the authors begin by framing their argument around the ubiquitous yet legitimate nature of adolescent technology use. The space in which students' voluntary literacy events occur is now a multimodal, digital realm, yet traditional curricular knowledges are still grounded in print. In Chapter Three, "Checkmarks on the Screen: Questions of Assessment and New Literacies in the Digital Age," Anne Burke discusses the superior cultural capital that student-created digital texts afford in the adolescent world. The level of sophistication required even to read on the internet is beyond most secondary teachers' literacy expectations, Burke argues. As students click through hyperlinks and navigate layers of text, they are authoring a reading trajectory by assembling texts in order to acquire new content knowledge that aids in the production of their constructed identities.

Texts that students create within social networking platforms such as Facebook and MySpace are further examples of adolescent literacy practices that receive inadequate acknowledgment in traditional literacy classrooms. In Chapter Six, "My Life on Facebook: Assessing the Art of Online Social Networking," Jennifer Rowsell delineates the vast array of skills users employ as they author and manage these digitally produced, socially situated, identity framing artifacts. Facebook users remix and appropriate texts, synthesize design elements and salient content for specific authorial purposes, and concurrently connect as literate peers with members of their online discourse communities. Twenty-first century adolescents are using multimodally sophisticated rhetorical devices to forge identities in digital spaces, voluntarily employing literacy skills their English teachers are unwilling or unable to notice.

The disconnect between the lived literacies of students and their educational experiences is another point of contention for the authors as they advocate for new literacies education. Jill Kedersha McClay and Margaret Mackey's chapter entitled "Distributed Assessment in OurSpace: This Is Not a Rubric" characterizes the current shortcomings of our educational system as problematic at best. At one end of the spectrum, even when schools supply adequate resources and relative curricular flexibility, allowing teachers the freedom to explore new literacies, many teachers are resistant to change. Other schools may have restricted resources, or sacrifice their teachers' creativity for standardization, which means that willing, competent teachers are not able to explore the possibilities of new literacies. Teachers must weigh the possibility of negative repercussions that result from high-stakes standardized test scores with the risks involved in implementing an innovative, multimodal pedagogy. The precariousness of this choice stifles new literacy practices in many classrooms. As Burke and Hammett write in their introduction, "By its very nature, assessing is a political act—act of power—that is usually

carried out by gatekeepers who define and codify knowledge” (p. 7). As long as standardized testing reigns over educational policy, teachers will always be limited in the scope of new literacies practices they can employ. All of the authors in *Assessing New Literacies* call for a radical shift in the way teaching, learning, and consequently, assessment, are conceptualized.

After providing a solid rationale for the new literacies revolution, many of the authors offer concrete examples of how their theories can be implemented. McClay and Mackey suggest re-conceptualizing Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as a means of re-framing the student/teacher relationship. The authors interpret Vygotsky’s ZPD as positioning teachers as experts who convey knowledge to their less competent students. McClay and Mackey argue for a shift in the directionality of traditional knowledge transfer. Skills, ideas and assessment should flow between teachers and students, who can then become co-constructors of knowledge, harmoniously inhabiting a classroom that is transformed into “OurSpace.”

In Chapter Eight, “Valued Knowledges and Core Capacities for Digital Learners: Claiming Spaces for Quality Assessment,” Kay Kimber and Claire Wyatt-Smith’s detailed framework outlines the skills and knowledge students will need to participate constructively as literate citizens of the twenty-first century. The basis of this framework is four “foundational knowledges” that new literacies students must possess: Community knowledges (students’ voluntary interests), curricular knowledges (schools’ course offerings and selected content), curriculum literacies (the capabilities needed to use and produce knowledge within the curriculum), and criterial knowledge (an understanding of assessment criteria). Teachers who explicitly communicate and foster these knowledges break down the institutional barriers that can hinder student achievement. The skills needed for twenty-first century learners to build upon these foundational knowledges are what Kimber and Wyatt-Smith label “Essential Digital Learnings” (EDLs): e-proficiency (the ability to select and utilize a variety of digital tools), e-credibility (the ability to critically evaluate the trustworthiness of cybertexts), and e-designing (the ability to purposely and innovatively blend content and design elements within textual creations). Teachers armed with this framework will be able to make instructional decisions that judiciously support students in their twenty-first century literacy endeavors.

Perhaps the most practical framework for implementing new literacies in the classroom (in that it operates rather seamlessly within the current system of strict content mandates) is the model presented in Chapter Five: “New Literacies and Assessments in Middle School Social Studies Content Area Instruction: Issues for Classroom Practice.” Researchers Margaret Hagood and Emily Skinner present the new literacies practices of two middle school teachers, Melissa Venters and Benjamin Yelin as they succeeded in fusing multimodal forms of expression (such as comic strips, digital storytelling and blended narratives) with state and federal content standards. Instead of working outside the system or attempting to change traditional schooling to reflect new literacies beliefs and practices, Venters and Yelin sprinkle multimodal projects into their teaching to enhance student engagement. Their methods are not radical, by any means, but they are a good bridge between traditional print-based education and the frontiers of new literacies. This middle ground provides the setting that many teachers will need to occupy until the era of standardization begins to subside.

One of the most polarizing issues in education today is assessment. Many of the authors in *Assessing New Literacies* criticize the current culture of autonomous, standardized, print-based testing, then offer alternative methods of assessment that align with new literacies instructional

practices. The importance of developing metacognition and self-reflective skills that promote student ownership is noted in many of the authors' essays. In Chapter Two, "Assessing Multimodal Texts," Eve Bearne grounds her assessment criteria for multimodal text creation in a process, rather than product oriented framework. Bearne emphasizes that both teachers and students should track the trajectory of growth as students progress along a spectrum of multimodal expertise, with descriptors ranging from "Multimodal text maker in the early stages" to "Independent multimodal text maker." Progression is marked by proficiency in four major skill categories: deciding on mode and content for specific purposes, using technical features for effect, structuring the design and layout of texts, and thoughtful reflection. Bearne also includes samples of multimodal texts created by children and models her assessment framework by thoroughly explaining her critiques.

In Chapter Four, "Making the Invisible Visible: Assessing the Visual as Spaces of Learning," Maureen Kendrick, Roberta McKay and Harriet Mutonyi argue that the narrative content of students' multimodal texts is rich, often conveying thoughts with a level of complexity they are not capable of expressing in writing alone. There are three vital moments in multimodal text creation where meaning is forged: at the site of production, the site of the image itself, and the site of viewing. The authors argue that as teachers assess student work, they should be mindful of these three inextricably connected sites, searching for value across and within them. They borrow Welty's (1993) distinction of listening *for* a story versus listening *to* a story. When assessing students' multimodal representations, teachers must search for meaning as they sift through multiple layers of text. Listening *for* a story requires more effort, but it is the only way teachers will be able to "make the invisible visible." Kendrick, McKay, and Mutonyi apply Warburton and Saunders' (1996) analytic framework in an attempt to assess Ugandan teen's visual interpretations of their AIDS/HIV content knowledge. First, they create an initial description of the literal visual and textual content represented in the drawing. Next, the authors assess the systemic connotation by discerning what the images and text signify. Then they consider the systemic connotation, or how the drawing functions within the communication systems employed by the creator. Finally, the authors piece together narrative threads by considering context and the situated meaning the drawing holds in the larger social discourse. Many teachers discount the legitimacy of visual images as vehicles of meaning, yet as the authors demonstrate, a sophisticated amount of content knowledge and rhetorical devices is evident in these dynamic texts.

Another author who legitimizes literacy practices that many dismiss as recreational or educationally irrelevant is Jennifer Rowsell in Chapter Six. She profiles three adult Facebook users, dissecting their profiles and the rhetorical decisions they make as they project an authored identity to their online audiences. The level of authorial intent displayed by these three text creators (and their adolescent counterparts) is sophisticated, yet remains unacknowledged. Intertextual skills that involve manifesting identities, building tropes, shifting tone, and remixing disparate multimodal texts to form a cohesive narrative have become naturalized; Facebook users themselves remain unconscious to the sophisticated literacy practices they are employing. Rowsell presents a framework that encapsulates these abilities, focusing on four main elements: the overall statement of the multimodal work, the organizational scheme, the multimodal salience, and the structural cohesion. The educational applications of Rowsell's framework are countless; these criteria could be applied to many multimodal endeavors, not just social networking texts.

*Assessing New Literacies* has begun to fill the void between theory and practice in new literacies studies. For researchers and practicing teachers, this collection of essays will inspire new pedagogical possibilities. The rich theoretical backdrop does as much to muddy the waters, though, and at times, complicates questions more than answers them. There is still the question of the appropriateness of assessing new literacies texts, which involve highly contextualized, socially constructed content and multiple layers of semiotic modes. These working texts are meant to be process, not end-product oriented. Many accessible theoretical frameworks were provided, but are the teaching methods involved with new literacies meant to be accessible? Doesn't adopting this theory mean discarding the notion of an autonomous, standardized view of education in order to create learning opportunities for the unique individuals that populate our classrooms? Will these frameworks even be useful to a majority of teachers who are employed in districts not willing to support their ingenuity? The theories and frameworks contained in this collection, as well as the questions the essays will no doubt spark in readers' minds, make *Assessing New Literacies* an important text for the consideration of anyone with an interest in the future of education.

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