

Chapter 51

Fostering Collaboration and Digital Literacy With Mobile Technology

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ABSTRACT

Multimodal literacies are an essential construct of the 21st century classroom, and mobile technology will serve to facilitate the collaborative creation of multimodal digital content. The mission of this chapter is to highlight the potential of mobile technology as a means for enabling collaborative activities and fostering effective communication. Over the past several decades, there has been a tremendous shift in how educators and students communicate, learn, and share ideas. The proliferation of mobile computing devices to a near-ubiquitous level has amplified this shift and compels educators to seek ways to harness the power of these devices to break down the barriers of the traditional classroom in an effort to make way for a more collaborative, reflective learning experience. Drawing on recent research on the cognitive benefits of multimodal literacy instruction and its potential for increasing opportunities for student engagement, this chapter provides a rationale for and subsequently sketches a practical approach for fostering collaborative, multimodal literacy practices through mobile technology.

INTRODUCTION

For many, literacy in today's society is not simply a specific skill but a process, one that utilizes the dynamic, social, and collaborative aspects of digital technology (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lewis and Fabos, 2005). The image of literacy as a student reading a bound book has given way to multiple students connecting together through digital networks to not only read text, images, and interactive content but also to share, retool, and reshape the content for different audiences. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) describe the New Literacies movement as one that recognizes literacy as a social, collaborative activity incorporating digital technologies, and as such, becoming literate in the 21st century means that one must decode and comprehend multimodal digital texts and be able to purposefully engage with these texts with others.

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As instruction in multiple literacies, especially those that are digital, becomes more widespread, the more teachers will be able to take part in the literacies as a collaborative partner, learning and sharing alongside the students. This point is echoed by Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2009), who argue that teachers should actively encourage students to network and collaborate in digital environments with them in order to distribute and leverage information and knowledge. The challenge then becomes what form best suits the skills needed to interact productively in a collaborative environment. The answer may lie in mobile technology. A rising number of students have access to wireless mobile devices, such as smartphones, tablet computers, and laptops, giving educators increased potential to engage students using a multitude of powerful, dynamic tools, many of which were designed primarily for collaboration.

The central message of this chapter is that mobile technology offers students opportunities to engage in multimodal literacy that engenders collaborative meaning-making. If we ask students to consume, create, and collaborate with familiar technology, we create a platform for engagement and development of critical thinking skills. In addition, we give students an opportunity to engage in tasks that meet all six standards set by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) for students (NETS-S):

1. Creativity and innovation,
2. Communication and collaboration,
3. Research and information fluency,
4. Critical thinking, problem solving and decision making,
5. Digital citizenship, and
6. Technology operations and concepts.

MOBILE DEVICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON EDUCATION

We see school-age children constantly interacting with mobile devices, at restaurants, at the mall, on the street, and that should be no different at school. Mobile devices, from MP3 players to smartphones and tablet computers, are integral to the working lives of today's younger generation. Mobile technology has proven to be a global gamechanger. Internet-capable smartphones have been widely available for less than a decade, and it can be fairly assumed that in workplaces around the world that people now continually access digital resources through a variety of mobile devices and have become quite accustomed to, even demanding of, this access. The saturation of mobile devices has extended to younger members of our society, and the question becomes, why not allow them to harness the resources available to the world in general? Why not allow them to enrich their learning with mobile, multimodal experiences?

It is not uncommon to find many teenage students with access to some type of mobile device at school but are restricted from using the devices while in the classroom. According to the 2011 Teens, Smartphones, and Texting survey, sponsored by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, teenagers are increasingly using smartphones (Lenhart, 2012). According to the poll, 77% of teens (ages 12-17) have cell phones and nearly a third (31%) of those aged 14-17 say they have a smartphone. The 2012 NCL report Parents, Tweeners, and Cell Phones: Attitudes and Experiences found that 56% of parents have purchased mobile phones for their children, 68% of whom use a basic phone with

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