

Chapter XII

Empowerment Rationale for New Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter defines empowerment, describes an empowerment rationale for new media literacy, and articulates a schema for empowering curriculum design. Empowerment is all about control, and an empowered person has mastered the arena in which he/she is operating. Using an empowerment rationale as a basis for designing curricula ensures a focus on mastering critical concepts and developing confidence in the student's ability to create solutions. An empowering curriculum design centers on essential skills, plans small steps, ensures success in mastery experiences, and requires reflection to make connections. The author argues that an increasing level of new media literacy is required for citizens in a global community to contribute to the growing online participatory cultures such as MySpace and YouTube, and there is too much to learn in times of exponential change. These factors are driving the need for educators to focus on empowerment as the underlying principle for curriculum design.

INTRODUCTION

There is no question that **new media literacy**, commonly known as communication and computer technologies, plays an important role in current educational environments and will play an essential role in the future (Brunner, 1999; Gunter, 2004; Hobbs, 1997; Tally & Brunner,

n.d.; Thoman & Jolls, 2005). Today, information is delivered to the consumer not only in text, but through an array of powerful images and sounds in a media-rich culture. In order to exercise full citizenship, residents in a world community must be able to not only understand and evaluate media messages, but also to converse in multiple media and create their own content to contribute.

The danger is that those possessing new media skills will emerge as digital elite, leaving behind those lacking digital savvy floundering with technology. In addition, **new media literacy** is a moving target with an increasing level of literacy required for individuals to contribute to the current, emergent, online participatory culture. Talk of the *digital divide* is shifting to discussions of *participation gaps* within digital cultures where students have unequal opportunity to participate in interactive, creative, media-rich environments (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2006; Perkel, 2007). Some of those environments assume the ability to create and post digital content on websites such as MySpace and YouTube. Blogging is being transformed into video blogging, sometimes shortened to vlogging, requiring increasing production skills and equipment. The inequalities in opportunities, resources, and experiences shape a person's ability to fully participate in various contexts. As Jenkins notes in a white paper produced for the MacArthur Foundation:

What a person can accomplish with an outdated machine in a public library with mandatory filtering software and no opportunity for storage or transmission pales in comparison to what a person can accomplish with a home computer with unfettered Internet access, high bandwidth, and continuous connectivity. (Jenkins et al, 2006, p. 13)

While **equity** is a complex issue that includes assets, economics, and access, to name a few, this discussion will focus on the increasing breadth of skills that afford one the ability to fully participate. Because we live in *The Age of InfoWhelm* where technology changes at an exponential rate (Jukes, 2007a), there is no way to teach all of the new media skills necessary for citizens to function in a future society. A new **methodology** must be developed to ensure that individuals are not only literate with the new media, mastering critical

concepts, but empowered with the confidence in their own ability to problem solve and learn new technologies that will most surely be employed in future times. Those with effective command of media will dominate world communities, and those who can quickly adapt to new technologies will shape the landscape of global societies. **Empowerment** with new media cannot be underestimated, and educators must find ways to cultivate **empowerment**.

Educators themselves struggle to keep up with technology while futurists, those who speculate to provide analysis of the future, implore them to change the whole educational paradigm to accommodate digital natives (Prensky, 2006). According to the futurists, the traditional **curriculum** must be trimmed to make way for 21st century subject matter (Jukes, 2007b). In addition, teachers are called on to be flexible with teaching methods and allow students to identify their own educational goals. Furthermore, the futurists suggest that students be allowed to follow their passions in group inquiries, utilizing tools of their choice (Prensky, 2007). Educational reformers call for educators to make the educational experience more relevant to the preferred, connected, media-rich environment using convenient, accessible, pocket tools. Incorporating this kind of flexibility along with utilizing exponentially changing mediums overwhelm educators and make the learning outcomes varied at best.

In the midst of educator efforts to infuse technology and reform **curriculum** to adjust to the nature of digital natives, there is an alarming trend on college campuses of providing remedial courses. Somehow many of the digital natives entering higher education are not exiting high school with **mastery** of essential skills despite their pervasive use of technology (Asera, 2006). They may be equipped to traverse the Internet and access each other quickly with all of the latest gadgets, but their prowess with communication technology is not ensuring their success in higher education. They seem to be lacking in core essentials. Ac-

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