

Rethinking literacy: a modern approach to thinking and learning in a digital age



Professor and Canada Research Chair **Jennifer Rowsell** of Brock University, Ontario, has been reimagining literacy for two decades. Her research argues that whilst modes of literacy have changed, and books have been swapped for tablets, the children of today are no less voracious in their appetite to learn and create than they were ten years ago. Rowsell contends that instead of refusing technology entry to the classroom, we should be inviting it in, alongside the professionals who design it, to inspire and engage.

Traditionally, literacy, simply put, has been the ability to read and write. In modern Western society literacy has been cast as key to survival and, as well as enabling us to navigate everyday life (read ingredients on a food packet, interpret road signs, write a to-do list), literacy also engenders a feeling of community. The development of literacy skills brings with it a sense of social belonging, the ability to communicate and a way of 'joining in' with games and conversations. Imagine, if you can for a moment, a time when you were in a country whose language you did not speak. There is a sense of isolation and alienation when you feel like you cannot communicate effectively. In the 21st century, the meaning of literacy has come to encompass more than just the reading and writing of 'texts'; it also defines the ability to interpret images, animated text, and smart screens. We have all seen a grandparent or older person struggling to use a smart phone, and to all intents and purposes, without an understanding of this technology, there is a sense of isolation and alienation from contemporary forms of communication. With that in mind, and despite resistance from some educators, how can we start to think and learn through digital worlds and base literacy education on new media and technologies?

REIMAGINING LITERACIES

Professor Jennifer Rowsell holds a Canada Research Chair, and her work revolves around the belief that a student's interest and literacy development are critically linked to their own histories, hobbies and relationships, and no one person is the same. In 2018, educators must reimagine what literacy means in the context of their own classroom: what do young people know today? How do they understand text, technologies and media?

In Rowsell's model, it is those outside the education system (acting as catalysts for change in technology and media) that alter the rhythms of literacy: professionals who make things and solve problems in the 'real world', those who create and disseminate information.

In order for learners to stay motivated in the sphere of their own literacy development, they must be able to frame it in terms of how this will lead to competencies outside of the learning environment, as well as how it will be relevant to their own 'life story'. Rowsell addresses this in her own research, bringing the aforementioned professionals into the classroom. She argues that educational policy still cleaves to the 'comfortable', teaching children literacy with traditional materials based on a middle-class, white, 20th century notion of education that is anachronistic and bears little resemblance to 21st century

real-world roles. In interviews conducted with professionals from a huge range of cross-sector professions, Rowsell found two main themes that she believes should shape the curriculum today: that literacy should be taught with multimodal frameworks (e.g. sounds, images, video) and not just print, and that assignments using these materials should be approached through a more professional, design-based method, that is solving problems and being mindful of the process. Rowsell contends that inviting creative, business and media professionals into the classroom to work with educators could make the teaching of literacy richer and far more relevant.

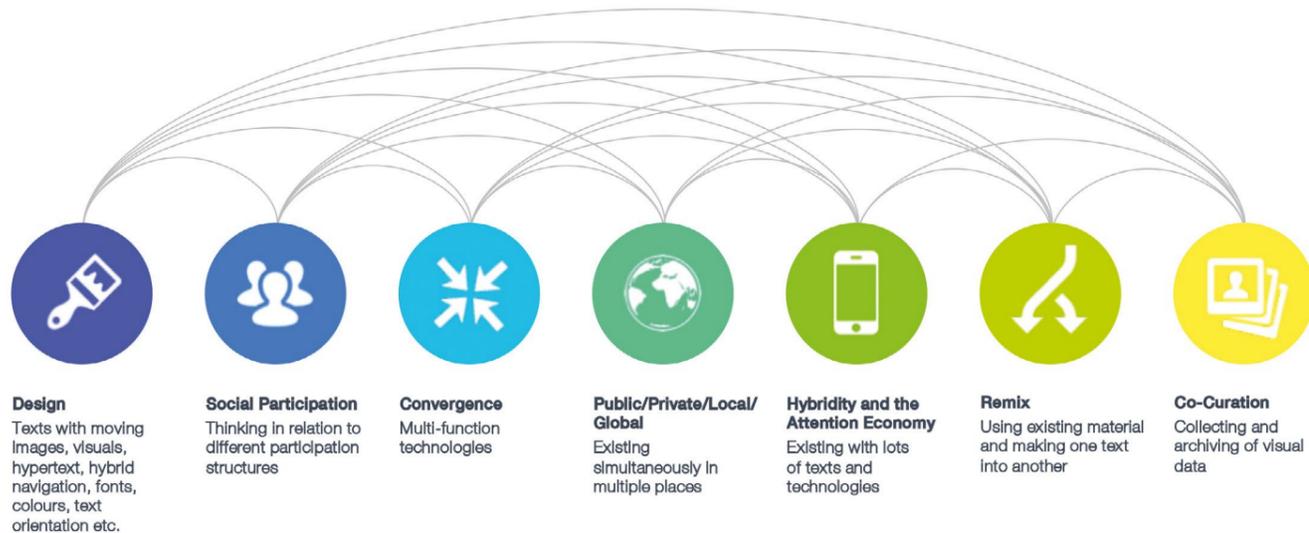
Rowsell has also conducted research inside the classroom exploring how the introduction of technology has affected the literacy development of students. Rowsell points out that until a child is enlisted in the formal education system, they are free to understand, interpret and express themselves in any verbal, physical or creative forms as they wish and see fit. In the 21st century this may well mean

Building connections and maximising existing capital from students' lived creative experiences is where we need to place our attention... One way of putting attention on contemporary repertoires of literacy is to isolate and reconcile strands that are operating when people make meaning

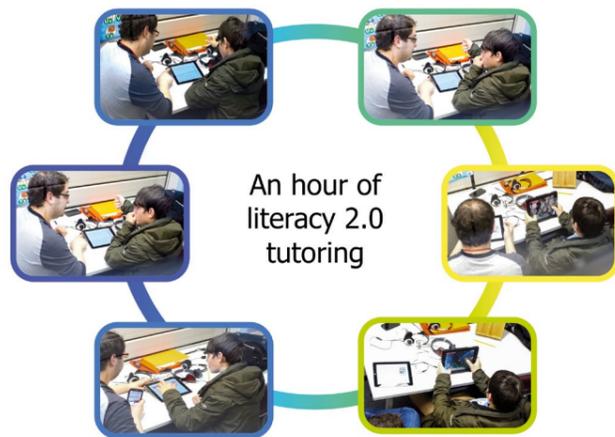


Modern Literacy Concepts

Hybrid Approach to Literacy Learning (Now)



Above: Contemporary Literacy Repertoires
Right: An Hour in Literacy 2.0



watching, playing and interacting with what they see on screen. Once at school, however, words become the *modus operandi*; Rowsell would like to see this change. In an ethnographic study of early-years students with access to iPads (tablets) within the classroom, Rowsell found that a visual form of literacy (in this case, the animated movie *Frozen*) led to a plethora of discussions (on marriage, family, and immigration), creation (pictures and songs) and cooperation between the children outside of the space of the technology. When questioned as to why they

liked the film, it was apparent that each child drew from their own history and personhood in their understanding of the story: one student liked it because they could watch it with their sibling, another because of the songs and a third because it has a moose in it!

MAKER LITERACIES

In an ongoing research project (Maker Literacies) in elementary and secondary schools in Ontario, Canada, Professor Rowsell aims to instil confidence in the new literacy teaching methods discussed above,

championing multimodality, individual agency and creativity. Focusing on five modes of communication – film-making, graphic stories, videogame design, photography, and coding – the four- to six-week research units are put together by teachers in cooperation with media and arts professionals. So far, the ethnographic research and analysis has shown that there is in actuality a *need* to nurture young people as flexible, multimodal makers. Children should be encouraged to participate in the ‘open production’ of ‘texts’ and the transformation of existing ones in order to leave school fully developed as communicators, designers, and makers.

NEW LITERACIES

Whilst technology has evolved, and society changed in the last two centuries, educational curricula have largely stagnated. Professor Rowsell’s message is one of positivity; traditional texts do not have to be left behind completely, but they should be vastly supplemented and bolstered by modern forms and approaches should be changed to match this. Whilst essay-writing, for example, is a useful skill to have, written compositional skills should be supplemented with visual/moving image work and work that generally allows for two or more modes of representation and expression to be in play. Rowsell believes that literacy has not changed because of screens, but that screens have given us a new ‘canvas’ on which to reimagine the world; young people should be encouraged to become creators, not simply readers and writers.

Literacy has not changed because of screens, but screens have given us a new ‘canvas’

Q&A

The approaches you are advocating are quite radical; have you met much resistance from educators/institutions/academics at all?

Yes I have had resistance, for very valid reasons – younger generations still need to read and write. My response is, of course they do and they will; new literacies work is a dance between the traditional and the modern/vernacular and there are so many educators who combine them to powerful effect with dynamic learning where children, adolescents and teenagers respond and engage with literature in participatory, design-based and very clever ways.

Your research documents many positive responses from students to the new approaches; have you had any negative reactions?

There have been negative responses to multimodal, arts-based, and digital work by students and this is natural because learning is so idiosyncratic. Some students prefer quiet, solitary reading and writing and this should be celebrated. More often than not, the research that I conduct in schools, community centres, libraries, and museums ignites interests in young people because I try to always build on their own interests and their preferred vehicles and mediums for expression and representation.

I cannot tell you the number of times that I have worked with a young person who eventually shares a remarkable interest such as being a professional coder, a poet, a music composer, a digital artist, or a professional gamer. Time and again, students who seem switched off at school or unable to get excited by subjects (even with the most talented teachers) have hidden gifts and competencies that get

drawn out through DIY, multimodal forms of teaching.

Do you think there is any truth in the belief that technology has shortened the attention span of learners?

Yes, although it is purely anecdotal from observations, attention, for all age groups, particularly generations born into technology, has shortened. Nicolas Carr talks about ‘the shallows’ in terms of how we read and write shorter, abridged text without the patience for longer, deeper reading and writing. I suppose that I see this as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. I see that our minds, bodies, and social practices have changed and there is always a loss with gains. There is such cleverness, originality, creativity, and inspiration in new media genres and newer forms of composition on social media and digital texts. There needs to be more meta-teaching of the difference between sustained reading and writing versus fast, curatorial, media-driven reading and writing. The challenge of modern teaching is this dance and teaching students the difference between these thinking processes and practices.

What aspect of your research are you most proud of and why?

Reflecting on my career, I am most proud of my work in schools in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Doing multimodal, arts-based work with and without technologies has allowed me to connect with young people in such meaningful ways that I feel so strongly and passionately about reimagining ways to teach today. Teaching through new literacies is more about the relationship building that happens when you really listen to a young person.

Teaching through new literacies is more about the relationship building that happens when you really listen to a young person

Detail

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Professor Rowsell’s work focuses on literacy and the way that it has transformed in response to societal, technological and communicational developments.

FUNDING

Canada Research Chair Secretariat, Social Science and Humanities Research Council, and Canada Foundation for Innovation

COLLABORATORS

Sandra Abrams (St. Johns University, USA), Kate Pahl (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK), Cynthia Lewis (University of Minnesota, USA), Cheryl McLean (Rutgers Graduate School of Education, USA), Diane Collier (Brock University, CA), and Candace Kuby (University of Missouri)

BIO

Jennifer Rowsell has written and edited twenty-three books on such wide-ranging topics as multimodality, youth and popular culture, digital literacies, multiliteracies, ethnography and the digital divide. She is co-editor of the Routledge Expanding Literacies in Education book series and she is Department Editor of Digital Literacy for The Reading Teacher.

CONTACT

Dr Jennifer Rowsell
Professor (PhD), Canada
Research Chair in Multiliteracies
Department of Teacher

Education

Office: WH 376

Brock University
Niagara Region
1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way
St. Catharines
ON, L2S 3A1
Canada

E: jrowsell@brocku.ca

T: +1 289 241 1409

W: <https://brocku.ca/education/faculty-and-staff/dr-jennifer-rowsell/>

W: www.makerliteracies.com/