Adult Basic Education

in the Age of New Literacies

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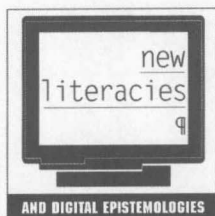of the Council of Library Resources.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this book to all of the adult learners and teachers I have worked with over the years. I have always drawn strength from your commitment to your own learning projects and I have gained insight from your questions.

I would also like to recognize my family – Shirley, Aki and Teo – and thank them for understanding the many times I have had to miss an event or two (or three) in order to complete this project. Thanks also to my sister, Jennifer, who has had to carry more than her fair share of the load while I pursue my professional muse around the world.

The project would not have existed if not for Michele Knobel's initial encouragement and essential on-going support. Thanks also to all of my colleagues who are always willing to talk about the logistics and implications of new technologies (this means you, Stephen Francoeur and David Rosen).

I'd like to thank Victoria Purcell-Gates and Donaldo Macedo for supporting me during the early years of my career and for being models of committed academics. Finally, I want to let Duffield White know how much I appreciate his introducing me to the ideas of Bakhtin. I didn't know it at the time, but it turned out to be a life-changing experience.

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Introduction

Pronouncements about how advances in technology will change the world forever are commonplace and range from genetic cures for serious illnesses to the ability to turn off the light without having to get up from your chair. Regardless of the lasting value of the new technology, there seems to be an urge to identify potential ontological or epistemological changes underway, perhaps as a way to mark current perspectives as unique. This can be realized as a nostalgia for what has been lost (e.g., "virtual life destroys a strong sense of community") or a celebration of what is being realized in the moment (e.g., "social networking sites provide a strong sense of community").

Examples of this can be seen in writing about how digital technologies are affecting education, language, and literacy development. These technologies have changed the communicative repertoires of individuals and societies to the extent that analysts posit new epistemologies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006a) and new, radically collaborative social orders (Suoranta & Vadén, 2010) At the same time, other analysts are worried about what these technologies are doing to our brains (Carr, 2010) or our society (Turkel, 2011).

This period has clear analogies with previous generations of scholarship on the impact of the written word on human society. For example, Eisenstein's (1983) influential study of the invention of the printing press associated it with broad changes in Western culture. Other studies (Goody & Watt, 1968; Ong, 1982) went back further to analyze the written word itself as technology and suggested that this shift in communicative resources was responsible for the development of types of cognitive facilities that we associate with civilization (e.g., science, logic, history, etc.). Ultimately, this 'great divide' theory was criticized for being too deterministic and generalizing in its description of cognition before the invention of writing (e.g., the suggestion that without writing a community has no 'history' certainly privileges a particular conception of what constitutes 'history'). This framing of development also created sharp dichotomies between modern and traditional that had uncomfortable echoes of contemporary inequities in sociopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics.

Forty years on we are faced with a new 'great divide,' with talk of digital natives and digital immigrants. Then and now, there is a fascination with what literacy can tell us about being human. For example, commentators love to discuss 'the Millennials'—a cohort that has grown up not knowing a

time without some popular pieces of technology (e.g., the Internet, cell phones, texting, etc.). The claim is that they have a fundamentally different way of understanding and being in the world than previous generations that were socialized with older, analog, forms of technology. On the one hand we are expected to pity or mock the poor digital immigrants fumbling with their new-fangled smart phones, but on the other hand, politicians like President Obama play up the fact that they are not 'up to speed' with these technologies to connote some of the gravitas of reaching a particular age.

As with essentialist conclusions about the benefits of print, claims about ontological differences between generations need to be critiqued. One reason for this is the built-in limitations of our frame of reference. I believe that we do not have the epistemic distance to have any clear sense of the long-term existential impact of these technologies (either for the good or for the bad). Stephen Malkmus, formerly of the group Pavement, remarked in an interview once that during the 1980s, bands that proudly occupied different subgenres of popular music all thought they sounded drastically and identifiably different from one another. Thirty years later, he noted, those bands sound remarkably similar because they all used the recording technology of the time. What in the moment seemed to provide crucial distinctions (e.g., tempo, instrumentation, etc.) is lost to the similarity of the production. To ears in 2011, past subgenres collapse into something that sounds like 'the 80s.' I would make an even larger claim, in that most of rock music for the last sixty years has been recycling the same blues and R&B structures over and over again. I think this has a clear analogy with technology. The multitude of social networking platforms struggling to capture users' imaginations all tout unique features that set them apart, and many people move from one to the next, identifying closely with each one ("MySpace? It's all about FourSquare, baby! I'm the Mayor of this place!"). In retrospect, most, if not all, of these platforms will resemble each other so closely that they will seem to be part of one big general experiment. As such, the issues may be what commonalities any given social-networking platform had with other technologies that focused on communal experiences (e.g., attending a movie in a cinema) rather than any particularly new way to experience being human.

This is not to say that new things are not happening around communication or literacy. There are certainly a plentitude of new devices, processes, and resources that are being invented and explored. Educators and others are racing to address what impact new technology has in the classroom and the learner's world outside of school. In their analysis, Lankshear and Knobel (2006a) make a helpful distinction between what they

call "new technical stuff" and "new ethos stuff" (pp. 73, 82). By this they want to highlight how an individual can participate in literacy activity using a new resource (e.g., a computer) without representing a fundamental change in their literacy practices (e.g., a belief in the efficacy of writing a love letter). A love letter written on a computer is only new in the chronological sense—the technology didn't exist previously. What is interesting to Lankshear and Knobel, and others working in this area, are potentially new literacy practices altogether. For example, given the technology, a prospective suitor could create a multimedia text that is sensitive to the location of the recipient (shifting visuals, sounds, or even the text). The idea of distance tailoring a message in real time might be a new development in communication, a new way of creating a sense of immediacy.

Indeed, a key demand on communication and expression for many people (but not all) is a facility with a range of technologies that are digital in nature (e.g., digital cameras, MP3 players, electronic readers, etc.). The prominent presence of these devices has led some to posit the idea of a digital literacy. For example, because digital technologies incorporate sound and visual images in addition to print, Lanham (1995) sees digital literacy as "being skilled at deciphering complex images and sounds as well as the syntactic subtleties of words (p. 200; cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2006a, p. 22). Taking this idea bit further, Lankshear and Knobel (2006a) suggest the development of 'post-typographic' forms of text and text production (p. 24).

I believe this may be a bit premature on two accounts. First, even with the invention of the printing press, typographic communication never fully supplanted images or sound as a primary mode of text production, so despite the changes the written word may have wrought, communication itself has remained multimodal. Additionally, while uploading, editing and sharing a video certainly involves a host of nontypographic practices (e.g., image construction, the use of sound and image together), much of that activity relies upon typographic skills. Indeed, it can be argued that with the increased use of texting and Internet searching, some societies and communities are more typographically active than ever. For every movie made or still photo shared, hundreds of thousands of messages are sent and read.

More importantly, I believe positing something called 'digital literacy' makes the same mistake previous accounts of literacy did by assigning too strong a definitional essence to the media being used. One of the responses to great divide theories was what has been called the New Literacies Studies (e.g., Street, 1994; Heath, 1983; Barton & Hamilton, 1998), whose key methodological stance is to look for specificity in how individuals and

communities use the written word (in combination with other semiotic resources). The breakthrough of the New Literacy Studies was to identify how specific variations in literacy practice (e.g., the nature of parent and child shared storybook reading) may have dramatic impacts on literacy development in other settings (such as formal education). To posit a singular digital literacy is to again mistake the media for the practice. Rather, we need to move from a fixation on momentary choices of media towards identifying more general literacy routines and values that involve digital resources. This book is an attempt to do this within the context of adult basic education.

"Adult basic education" has always been a complicated term given that there are contested notions for each of the individual words contained in it. Learners, practitioners, and theorists can give very different answers about what it means to be an adult, what constitutes basic skills, and what role education may or may not have in developing said skills. However, within the broader field of adult learning—which includes areas of focus like lifelong learning and human resource development—adult basic education tends to refer to the provision of a baseline set of skills or content knowledge that all adults are expected to have acquired during compulsory education. In official documents and policy "adult basic education" often refers to specific classes for students mastering literacy and some content areas. In practice, however, the term is often used loosely to describe a whole range of programs, including basic literacy, adult secondary education, GED and GED-prep courses, alternative diploma programs, and English language classes. In this analysis, ABE will refer to this larger sense of the term. At times, efforts around workforce development (e.g., particular job skills) or citizenship classes for immigrants are also included in this mix. Although they do serve different purposes and at times different populations, they are typically closer in conception to adult basic education than to lifelong learning. For that reason, when appropriate they will be included in the discussion.

Adult education more broadly understood does have a long history of interacting with newly developing technologies of communication. A case can be made that distance education began in the second half of the nineteenth century with the advent of structured exchanges of print materials, including assignments that learners would get feedback on. Over time, the means of transmission changed. Adult education efforts were realized subsequently via the telegraph, radio, television, and computer-assisted instruction. Beyond the level of individual initiative, such projects were often intended to provide resources to learners in remote areas. Indeed, in the United States, the 1950s saw the growth of a number of video projects that sought to identify expert science, math, and language teachers who

could spread their expertise to students across a region or across the whole country (Askov et al., 2003, p. 3). By the 1980s, such efforts explicitly addressed the needs of some adults to prepare for the GED and to look for work.

There is now an ever-increasing range of resources for adult basic education (the equity of distribution and access is a separate issue). The Internet is certainly an important development for distance education but so too are devices like smart phones. The presence of these tools may indeed be changing what is meant by 'basic' skills. Although working with digital technologies may allow adults who typically would be classified as in need of basic education a chance to develop their typographic literacy, content knowledge, and language skills, it also provides an opportunity to explore meaning making with other semiotic resources (e.g., with recorded audio, still photo, or video files). These potential changes in the practice of adult basic education need to be understood in a variety of contexts (local, national, international) and spheres (economic, political, cultural).

Thus, this account will consider adult basic education in the age of new literacies in two distinct, but related, ways. First, following Lankshear and Knobel, I will highlight both new technical aspects of adult basic education and potentially new literacy practices that are developing (i.e., "new literacies" as a focus on what is happening currently with technology and literacy). Second, following the New Literacy Studies, I will consider what opening up the definition of literacy has meant for adult basic education (i.e., "new literacies" as a method for identifying previously unexamined literacy practices of potentially older vintage).

This analysis will be divided into three parts—Learning, Teaching, and Organizing. The first part, "Learning," will focus on how digital technology may or may not be affecting the ways adult basic education students engage in learning. This part will also review research on the impact of technology use on the development of adult basic education students. The second part, "Teaching," will review best practices for instruction that supports learners' explorations of new literacies. A key concern in this section will be ways to plan instruction that take advantage of and address the requirements of digital technologies. This section will also address models of professional development for adult basic educators and what these models might teach us about online learning more generally. The third and final part, "Organizing," will examine how technology policy and related discourses are part of the reshaping of the field of adult basic education. This section will also address the nature of participation and discuss the need for learner involvement in decision-making about adult basic education. The final

chapter focuses on the larger socioeconomic context for adult basic education, paying close attention to the developing world. The concern here is how adult basic education is shaped by macroeconomic forces and how adult basic education can play a role in learners (and teachers) responding to those forces.

From the outset I can state that this analysis is in turn skeptical and hopeful. As someone who has been involved in adult basic education for going on twenty years, I have seen many large-scale efforts to support and extend the field come and go. Some have made an impact, while others have had no lasting effect. If the jury is still out on the impact of digital technologies on adult basic education, this means that we still have time to experiment, to explore, and to collaboratively decide what to make of them — and what they might be making of us. I take heart in the visions of previous generations of adult educators, regardless of the outcome of their specific projects. For example, Candy (2004) reports, "In a letter to the *Vermont Mercury* in August 1846, American academic, engineer and soldier Alonzo Jackman claimed that through the advent of a Transatlantic Telegraph between England and America, 'all the inhabitants of the earth would be brought into one intellectual neighbourhood'" (p. 11). Of course, similar claims are being made for the Internet now. Although it is easy to find amusement when such bold proclamations come up short, I think Jackman's profound desire for learning and for community is laudable and in keeping with the best traditions of adult basic education. Rather than feeling superior to our predecessors, it is our turn to give it our best effort.

Part One: Learning

Part One Learning

Chapter 1

Adult Basic Education and the Affordances of Digital Technologies

As with education more generally, there is a tremendous amount of interest within adult basic education (ABE) around digital technologies, particularly regarding the Internet and distance learning. One reason for this is that these technologies could offer a way to deal with the lingering problem of program capacity. The last National Assessment of Adult Literacy reported 93 million adults have reading, math, and/or English deficiencies (http://nces.ed.gov). The accuracy of those numbers has been debated, but they stand in stark contrast to the estimated 3 million currently receiving services (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education [NCSDAE], 2010, p. 2). From a different perspective, in a survey conducted in 2009–2010, 72% (986 of the 1,368) of the local programs reporting confirmed waiting lists. This translates into 160,000 learners officially waiting for access to a program—a sharp increase from 2008 when 80,000 learners were on the list (NCSDAE, 2010, pp. 1–2). Of course, these kinds of numbers do not tell the whole story, for three main reasons. First, the waiting lists undercount the number of students who want to enroll but can't because there are many who don't bother to put their names on a list when faced with a lengthy delay. Second, many learners are in programs of limited frequency and intensity, and just being enrolled in a program may not be enough to make significant progress. Third, many of these adults with literacy needs are engaged in self-study (Reder & Strawn, 2006). Digital technologies thus offer hope along several lines. They may help increase the number of learners served, they may extend learning beyond current classroom hours, and they may provide additional resources for those engaged in self-study.

Productive use of digital technologies in adult basic education programs might also increase the use of relevant and real-life materials in the classroom. If literacy practices outside the classroom are shifting, teachers need to be prepared to respond to these changes. For example, demographic shifts have changed the landscape of adult basic education, such that 41% of adult education students are now younger than 25 years of age and 16% are younger than 19 (National Institute for Literacy, 2010, p. 2; citing Welch &