

Research Statement by Kirk Widra M.Ed

My research interests focus on the ever evolving relationships between the design and use of images and words to shape the narrative of our collective global community. I am particularly interested in analyzing how technology has influenced our perceptions, our well-being, our behavior, and most importantly how that has effected the way we learn.

My current research focuses on the role technology plays in information literacy. Informational literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association, 1989). With the advancement and proliferation of technology, information literacy is of ever increasing importance as we are continually faced with a vast array of diverse information that affects our choices. Whether it be in our academic, professional, or personal lives, the "information age", as it has been dubbed, offers an unprecedented availability of information, "through libraries, community resources, special interest organizations, media, and the Internet--and increasingly, information comes to individuals in unfiltered formats, raising questions about its authenticity, validity, and reliability" (Association of College Research Libraries, 2010).

Herein lies the problem. The sheer volume of information available presents many significant challenges for those groups within society who do not have the skills or framework from which to critically analyze the various viewpoints presented. The important interplay between image and narrative may be lost or distorted as it is continually manipulated by various individuals and/or groups looking to further their latest agenda. Unexamined by an uneducated perspective, it serves as yet another divisive tool that further separates a society already divided along educational, and by extension, socio-economic lines. There is a clear need to educate citizens in the ability to interpret and synthesize information effectively. As suggested by Bloom's Taxonomy, to function fully in the emerging global community students must be able to:

- Recall and acquire useful knowledge
- Understand the significance and context of that knowledge
- Apply that to the needs of the situation
- Analyze the effectiveness of the application and the tools used
- Evaluate and present information for articulation to others
- Creatively apply that knowledge to other spheres

This is an important issue. In the mad rush to claim competency in meeting standards in today's world, communication and *informational* literacy are all too often confused with *technological* literacy. Although information technology skills are interwoven and support information literacy, they are not the same. Technology is merely an advanced medium of

choice to explore information; it is not the sole resource available and it does not interpret information in and of itself. This is an important factor in assessing the evolving state of communication and information literacy in education.

Technology in many ways has fundamentally altered the way we communicate and view the world. As such, special care must be taken by educators to teach students to not only make the distinction between process and tools but between purposeful arranging of knowledge to frame perception and the understanding of reality. Such learning environments create a culture of informational literate citizens who are able to cut through the clutter, participate in expressing their opinions based on educated perspectives, and to add to the dialogue that enriches their lives in immeasurable ways.

During my tenure at the Art Institute of Philadelphia and at Moore College of Art and Design, I have been part of the reaccreditation effort, which requires ongoing study of our institutional effectiveness, across the width and breadth of the college. It is through this lens that I am conducting an ongoing study of the use of technology in education by concentrating on analyzing the association between how students use technology and how this affects their ability to move from the retrieval of knowledge through to the synthesis of understanding in a creative manner. I continually contribute my findings to the ongoing evolution of our campus.

This process has served to highlight the core issue, the literacy of educators themselves. Teachers and students alike need to be led to the knowledge that technology is a tool and is not meant to supplant the process of teaching and learning; it is meant to compliment it. All too often both educators and students are often under the assumption that information they are gathering and assembling through the use of technology is enough to demonstrate learning. Though this may create a cursory level of knowledge, it does not foster understanding and the ability to abstract what has been learned to other areas of study.

The “digital divide”, as it is often referred to, is becoming a defining element of our society and culture. Educational leaders must take the lead in bridging the gap between knowledge and understanding. The most important advantage of technology, and the use of it, is how it can personalize the learning experience. Technology has allowed us to see an unprecedented amount of information from multiple vantage points. It really has made the world smaller and somehow larger all at the same time. It is the duty of educators to remind students of this fact and to also remind them this is merely a tool, and ultimately it comes down to their ability to critically examine and use this information to add to their discussion, not to simply cut and paste someone else’s ideas or personal truth over their own.

I continue to collaborate with other faculty members to introduce new or alternate blended teaching strategies to address the many needs of our diverse population.

References

American Library Association. Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Final Report. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989.)

Association of College Research Libraries, (2010). Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. Retrieved March 10, 2010 from <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#f1>

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