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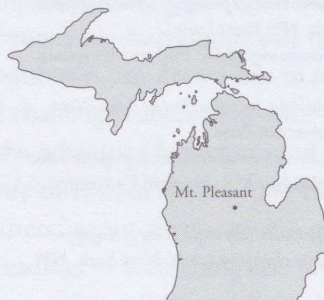
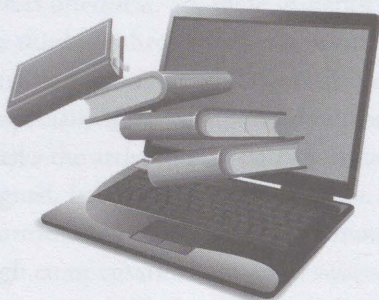
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Disrupting Digital Literacies: What They Are, What They Could Be

by Troy Hicks, Ph.D.



Troy Hicks, Ph.D.

In January of 2018, as it has since 1997, the International Literacy Association (ILA) released its “What’s Hot in Literacy” survey findings, measuring literacy topics by popularity (gauging “what’s hot”) as well as by significance (gauging “what’s important”) (International Literacy Association & YouGov, 2018). One of the key findings this year is that, among a total of 17 different topics, “digital literacy” is rated as the hottest topic, but only number 13 in order of importance (Figure 1). These new literacies were defined by ILA as “teaching children how to compose and communicate using digital technologies as well as how to comprehend and evaluate information in digital forms” (p. 21).

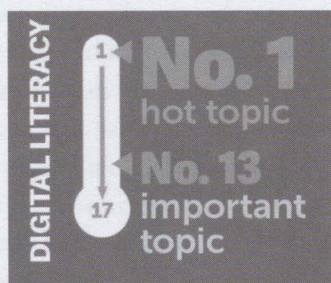


Figure 1. ILA digital literacy thermometer

It will come as no surprise for anyone who knows me that I believe that new, digital literacies are essential for our students, that teaching them both the technical skills and the habits of mind for reading, writing, and communicating in our technology-mediated world is a core part of our work as literacy educators. However, others—at least those completing the survey for ILA—did not see the integration of new literacies in the same way.

A literacy coordinator from Cameroon quoted in the report characterized the disconnect in this manner: “Digital literacy is being overemphasized... Modeling, moving from support to independence, and critical thinking are far more important than the mode of presentation” (International Literacy Association & YouGov, 2018, p. 16). That final phrase, “mode of presentation,” certainly caught my attention, and it points to yet another tension with which we must all come to terms: characterizing digital literacy in a passive, rather than active, manner.

Now, given that there were over 2000 participants—most of whom identified as classroom teachers, reading specialists, or instructional coaches/coordinators—it is certainly important to acknowledge their concerns about digital literacy. In schools around Michigan and around the world, technology is often presented as a potentially easy solution to much deeper problems. As summarized in the *What’s Hot* report, educators are worried “that digital-everything is being turned to as a quick fix. And some expressed strong feelings that a focus on digital literacy, especially at very young ages, is crowding out a focus on foundational literacy skills” (p. 8).

Certainly, I do not want to be dismissive of these concerns. I can agree, on one level, that digital literacy as it is often described and enacted in schools is, indeed, far too popular and not nearly important enough.

Before this essay is done, however, I'm going to take issue with this argument. Though this conception of digital literacy may be prevalent, it is pervasive for the wrong reasons. Additionally, though digital literacy may not be perceived as important, when defined clearly, critically, and creatively, it certainly should be. If this is what the definition of digital literacy is for at least 2000 of our colleagues around the world, how can we disrupt that view? Given the opinions that surfaced through the survey and the competing definitions offered, what do we really mean when we say *new literacy*, *digital literacy*, or even *21st Century skills*?

These tensions around new or digital literacies have captured my attention over the course of my career. Though I am not sure I will conclusively resolve any of the conflicts that we face when bringing these literacies into our classrooms, I appreciate that the *MRJ* editors have invited me to take a swing at it. Let me give it a try.

Rethinking Our Definitions of "Digital Literacy"

Rather than launching into an academic treatise on definitions of what digital or new literacies are, I'd prefer to start by describing what they are not. Building on what I presume the types of technology uses the survey participants may have had in mind when completing their responses, I can imagine that they might have been thinking of any of the following:

- Reading programs that provide comprehension-level, multiple-choice questions and generate Lexile scores;
- Apps listed in the iTunes or Google Play stores, including ones for phonics, word fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling;
- Digitized versions of books, ranging from interactive picture books through ePub or Kindle versions of chapter books;
- Keyboarding/typing tutors and games that rely on disconnected texts, ranging from practice of letters and words up through the sentence and paragraph level;

- Apps and websites that are designed to create multiple choice, cooperative—and sometimes even competitive—quizzes.

While each of these types of technology use could, broadly, be described as a type of tool that requires some kind of digital literacy skill, none of them really require students to "compose and communicate," nor to "comprehend and evaluate," as described in ILA's own definition. Quite to the contrary, these types of apps, websites, and software programs keep our students firmly at the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy and do not invite, let alone encourage, acts of creation, synthesis, or evaluation. Most picture books translated for the tablet screen, for example, have only included distracting elements largely unrelated to the story and do not enhance a student's ability to make meaning from a digitized text.

As I consider the types of skills and abilities students *do* need in order to be both competent and successful while using new literacies, there are any number of actions that they will need to be able to perform and dispositions they will need to have, both as readers and as writers engaging in digital literacy practices (See Figure 2).

Only when we embrace a fuller, more robust definition of new literacies will we be able to help our students gain essential, significant digital skills. Fortunately, Michigan is moving in the right direction on this front.

The State of Digital Literacy in Michigan

Certainly, we know that no matter what opportunities we offer our students to engage in digital literacy practices, it always feels as if these opportunities come at a cost: taking away time in the school day, coverage of other content, and skills and processes needed for disciplinary learning. There are no easy answers; balancing every situation a teacher will face, as well as the myriad solutions that could be entertained, will always remain a challenge when we think about when, why, and how to integrate technology into our work.

Readers should be able to:	Writers should be able to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Search for and distinguish between a variety of genres of fiction and nonfiction texts across a variety of web sources including the open internet, academic databases, blogs, fanfiction websites, and social media. ● Effectively manage an ever-growing list of online sources through social bookmarking and other “read later” tools (e.g. Pocket or Diigo). ● “Read laterally” by conducting an initial search and delving into multiple stories related to a single topic in order to distinguish accuracy, reliability, currency, and discursive features or bias. At a minimum, readers should be comfortable opening and navigating multiple tabs. ● Initiate a reading sequence from a <i>Wikipedia</i> article using references listed there as well as the corresponding “talk” page for an article. ● Determine across a variety of genres when, where, how, and why authors use hyperlinks or multimedia to enhance a digital text. Additionally, manage distraction and make appropriate comprehension choices. ● Interact with “born digital” texts that require meaning making from hyperlinks, images, videos, maps, and more. Also, be able to reflect on one’s own experience of reading, viewing, and listening to these texts by talking and sharing with others to compare and contrast meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Compose web-based texts with specific attention to writing form (including readability and concision, as well as author’s stance and use of language) as well as additional media elements such as hyperlinks, images, video, maps, or timelines. ● Beyond the enhanced texts described above, create “born digital” multimedia texts with interactive features including digital stories, presentations, podcasts, and screencasts. ● Employ research skills related to searching for, evaluating, and documenting materials found online in order to avoid plagiarism and ensure fair use of copyrighted material. ● Communicate and work with peers in both a cooperative sense (e.g., providing and receiving feedback) as well as a collaborative sense (e.g., shared composing practice via synchronous or asynchronous tools) in a variety of writing situations. ● Communicate messages to a broader audience using social media and other digital tools and, in turn, then interact with and reciprocate with other readers and writers. ● Document and reflect upon one’s learning using a digital portfolio, annotation tools, social bookmarking, screen casting, or other related tools.

Figure 2. Skills and dispositions needed to read and write using digital literacies.

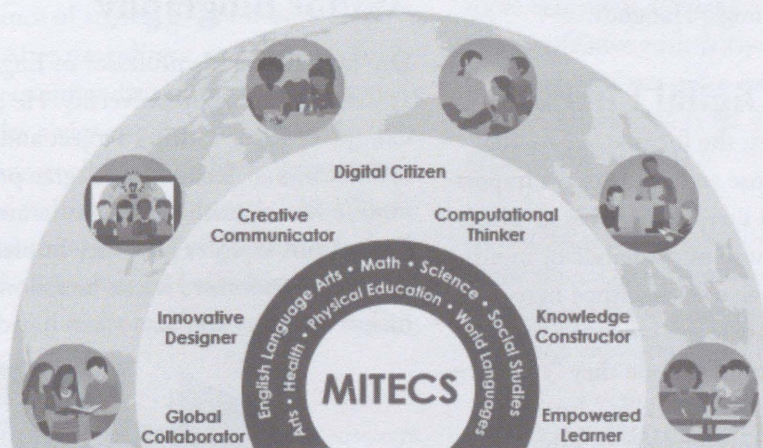
Still, we do have at least one new resource pointing us toward a more integrated, interdisciplinary view of digital literacy in Michigan. We can now look to the Michigan Integrated Technology Competencies for Students or MITECS (Figure 3, pronounced “my techs”; Michigan Department of Education, 2017).

As noted on the MITECS homepage, “Technology should no longer be taught as a separate class, but rather integrated across the content areas enhancing learning” (Michigan Department of Education, 2017). As a part of the committee working on MITECS during the summer and fall of 2017, I am pleased to acknowledge the many ways in which we discussed, debated, and ultimately decided upon this approach. Recognizing that there will still likely be places in our curricula and school schedules that do provide (or require) separate technology courses, the primary goal for teachers is to read the MITECS and see possibilities for thoughtful, imaginative approaches to digital literacy across the disciplines.

For instance, under standard 3, “Knowledge Constructor,” students are encouraged to “Build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories, and pursuing answers

and solutions” (Michigan Department of Education, 2017, p. 2). Educators can work together to develop interdisciplinary units at age-appropriate levels that could fully embrace this standard. This may take the shape of a group of middle school students identifying a number of social justice issues in their own community as they relate to the broader study of American history. Then, in their math class, they could develop (and subsequently analyze the results of) a survey that could be distributed to members of their community, including parents and family, business owners, youth from other schools, clergy, and any number of other stakeholders. In partnership with science and language arts classes, students could then research particular topics as they relate to issues of climate change, pollution, water quality, or other environmental topics, and create a final report on their work. If this was a school that used the Google Suite of tools, certainly all of these tasks could be accomplished with Docs, Forms, Sheets, and Slides. Beyond these tools, there are numerous other technologies that could be employed, many of them free, as well.

As another example, under standard 6, “Creative Communicator,” students “Create original works or responsibly repurpose or remix digital resources into



Michigan Integrated Technology Competencies for Students

Figure 3. Image from <http://www.techplan.org/mitecs/> showing the MITECS competencies in relation to content learning.

new creations" (Michigan Department of Education, 2017, p. 2). In conjunction with the art and music teachers, an upper elementary teacher could work with her students to discuss and discover examples of artistic emulation—as well as examples of sampling or outright imitation—and design interactive media pieces like timelines or videos that demonstrate these concepts. Furthermore, students could create a Weebly or WordPress website, embedding YouTube videos, samples of music, and links to images of art and comparing and contrasting the originals with the mimics.

And, as one last example, under standard 7, "Global Collaborator," students are encouraged to "Use collaborative technologies to work with others, including peers, experts, or community members, to examine issues and problems from multiple viewpoints" (Michigan Department of Education, 2017, p. 2). In addition to taking advantage of the numerous resources available through our Michigan Electronic Library (Mel.org) such as Gale's (n.d.) *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, high school students could also use social media to communicate with other youth and adults from around the world. They could invite collaborators to contribute to ongoing public conversations using Twitter hashtags or a more private conversation using a tool like Edmodo or Schoology. Students could even invite collaborators to join in a live, video-based conversation with the class or small groups via Skype or Google Hangout.

(Re)Defining Digital Literacy

In all three of these examples, the focus is less on the technology itself, though those technologies are important, and more on the digital literacy practices in which the students are engaged as well as the habits of mind they will need to develop. The uses described here are not just a way for students to get content from a different "mode of presentation" nor are they "crowding out a focus on foundational literacy skills." Instead, each use is intentional, inviting students to explore and extend digital literacy in critical, creative ways.

Still, as noted above, digital literacy is, as it is often defined, far too popular and not nearly important enough. We need to flip this description, focusing on

the dynamic, not just trendy, aspects of new, digital literacies. There are technical and social aspects to these literacies that move well beyond content delivery. Disrupting our definitions of digital literacy will require us, as educators, to examine the ways in which we present ideas and lessons related to technology to our students and peers, describe what it means to be "digitally literate" when talking with administrators and parents, and model the types of effective, efficient, and thoughtful literacy practices in which we want our students to engage.

My hope is that, two years from now, when the next survey of "what's hot" in literacy is released, we will have helped reframe the discussion about new, digital literacies, noting that they can, indeed, be both popular *and* important for our students' success in school and beyond.

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Author Biography

Dr. Troy Hicks is a professor of English and education at Central Michigan University. He directs both the Chippewa River Writing Project and the Master of Arts in Educational Technology degree program. A former middle school teacher, he collaborates with K–12 colleagues and explores how they implement new literacies in their classrooms. He can be followed on Twitter: @hickstro

