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New and Social Media

Big Idea

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Literacy as Communication

When it comes to new and social media in education, the big idea is really about how they shape and change our literacy practices. An NIE Research Scientist explains why.

What was life like before the Internet? During those days, anyone who could read and write would be considered literate.

“Now, it’s the screen that has central importance,” says Dr Phillip Towndrow, a Senior Research Scientist from NIE. “The ‘reading’ of images and other graphics require new skills that take us beyond what we used to know as literacy.”

“Literacy is now measured, in part, by how easily we can find the things we want on the Internet,” he continues. “But some people tend to get lost in navigating websites immediately!”

This calls for a different way of getting things done. “Not only do students need to learn how to read and write on the printed page, they also need to be able to read and create graphical representations of knowledge.”

Literacy 2.0

“The fact of the matter is that the outside world has changed so much, and the inside world of the classroom has to reflect that reality,” says Phil.

Children and today’s youth are exposed to different media. Most of the time, they are not only consumers, but also producers of content, especially on social media. They are now “prosumers” who can publish content to the masses by just hitting the “Enter” button.

“Their literacy experiences outside of school may not always match what they learn in school,” notes Phil.

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- Phillip Towndrow,
Education and Cognitive
Development Laboratory



An Institute of



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Why Use Social Media?



Welcome to the Online World

RESEARCH within REACH

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- Phillip on multimodal literacy

Phillip Towndrow is a Senior Research Scientist with the Education and Cognitive Development Laboratory at NIE. His language-teaching career began in Northern Spain where he taught English in a private academy and then at the British Council in Bilbao. Among his many research interests are English Language pedagogy and practice, task design, new literacy studies, multimodal analysis and the use of info-comm technology in education.

To prepare students for life after graduation, schools will have to work on helping them learn how to communicate effectively across a range of different media, and not just with pen and paper.

Because of this belief, Phil thinks that in using new and social media for educational purposes, the big—and ultimate—idea is literacy for communication that is fundamentally multimodal.

Designing a Message

Communication now consists of different modes, such as written texts, images, movies and animations, and students need to start thinking like designers or architects to effectively achieve their desired purposes.

“As a multimodal author, I have to bear many things in mind. It’s not just a question of having texts and graphics together like that,” says Phil. “It’s that when we pull these elements together, we have to do so very purposefully and with specific meanings in mind.”

For example, a teacher may instruct a class to create a website with intuitive navigations. Or students may be tasked to think about how they can give directions via social media to a friend who needs to get to a particular restaurant. Would they point their friend to an online map, or type out step-by-step instructions on how to get there?

“Students need to learn how to put texts and images and other representations together in a certain way. It’s certainly not a random process,” explains Phil. “Design underpins what we see and how we experience or understand the intended ‘message’.”

A Designer–author’s Perspective

When students create content using new media, it is common for teachers to use certain rubrics to assess them in media production from a technical point of view, such as their animation skills or their use of music and sound.

Seen in the light of multimodal communication, the students’ intentions as producers and the effects of their messages matter too. These aspects are “intangible, shapeless, personal and highly subjective,” says Phil.

Teachers can find out more by probing students with questions such as: “What would you like your listeners to feel after hearing your story?” or “How do you feel after writing this blog entry?”

“I think it’s important for learners to describe, explain and justify their work from a designer–author’s perspective when they are producing content for others,” Phil notes.

“The Real Me”

Students often welcome the opportunity to use new or social media to create content for their peers. Perhaps they see such use of their literacy skills as being closer to what they enjoy doing in their daily lives.

“In my own research on the use of laptop computers in English Language learning, when I ask students what their intention was and what story they were trying to tell, they’ll say, ‘I’ve a real opportunity to express myself and how I feel about something. This is the real me. This is my world and I can express it in ways that are really personal to me.’”

This process of creation is not a one-way traffic, says Phil. “Using all these mediating technologies and media changes who you are and the way you think. That’s what I’m interested in, that is, how the use of such technology changes who we are as people and our literacy practices.”

There are many other questions that both educators and researchers are asking about the use of new and social media in the classroom.

Would students benefit from learning with such media? How? What can we do with new and social media that we cannot do with other forms of communication? How do we encourage the participatory spirit of such media and reconcile it with the established classroom culture at the same time?

Researchers like Phil who are searching for these answers have a busy time ahead of them. And as he says, “Stay tuned!”

Learning Ethics with Social Media

Can English Language teachers make use of social media to teach not just language skills but also important lessons about ethics? Researchers from NIE certainly think so!

Linking Literacy to Social Media

Media literacy is now part of the English Language curriculum in Singapore. But the funny thing is, even though Dr Csilla Weninger and her research team found that visiting social network sites tops students' media use outside the classroom, teachers refer to social media texts the *least* in the classroom.

"Both teachers and students need to see the use of social media as an act of literacy," Csilla notes.

To foster the kind of media literacy that is relevant to students' daily lives, Csilla and her research team developed a framework with four components: functional, critical, ethical and aesthetic (See box story next page to find out more about the different components). In particular, the ethical part is something she feels needs more attention in the English classroom.

"From the classroom observations we made, we saw a lot of the functional and critical components being taught," shares Csilla. "However, the ethical or aesthetic aspects were barely touched on. So we wanted to develop something where the students are required to put themselves in someone else's shoes."

Both teachers and students need to see the use of social media as an act of literacy.

- Csilla Weninger,
English Language and
Literature Academic Group



Csilla (second from right) and her team (from left: Suzanne Choo, Katy Kan, Hu Guang Wei and Patrick Williams) find that social media can be used to inculcate ethics in learners.

Understanding the "Other"

In a virtual world where people can hide behind a pseudonym, cases of cyberbullying are rampant among youth.

The ethics component of the media-literacy framework by Csilla's team asks that students acknowledge and act upon the recognition of the perspective of the other, and take responsibility for their actions.

"If you develop this idea where you have to be able to look at things from a different perspective, then you're working towards reducing instances of cyberbullying," Csilla adds.

It may also help students avoid the trap of becoming more and more polarized in their views when they are online. Online discussions sometimes become heated because people care deeply about certain issues, says Csilla.

It may not always be possible for everyone to come to an agreement. The key, she explains, is to “learn to live with and accept differences, which is only possible if you try to step into the shoes of the other”.

A Media-literacy Framework

To help foster media literacy, Assistant Professor Csilla Weninger and her team developed a framework to be implemented in the English classroom.

“The first component is *functional*. You need to be able to read, write and create multimodal content to be a media-literate person.

“The second is the *critical* component, which has to do with

higher order thinking skills, such as asking students how they infer meaning from a blog or an online Facebook post.

“When students are using social media, to what extent are they aware that their online actions have consequences on people’s lives? This is the third component—the *ethical* part. It has to do with the participatory culture of social media and not only taking the perspective of

others, but also to be able to act upon it.

“The last component is *aesthetics*. It looks at the aesthetics of media use and media production, which doesn’t always get taught. This could include elements of design or playfulness in language, both when you produce something and when you consume media or texts of a different nature.”

Creating Personas

Cultivating students who care about others while simultaneously covering the English Language syllabus is definitely possible, says Csilla. While teachers usually focus on specific skills, for this project they decided to focus on a theme.

Csilla’s project team worked closely with English teachers from a school on the theme of SG50 (Singapore 50). They developed an idea that groups of students would each represent a social group in Singapore, such as foreign workers, National Servicemen and families with young children.

Keeping in mind that the English teachers have their own set goals, Csilla’s team used the theme to foster students’ ethical perspective while developing their language skills as required by the syllabus.

For the project, students researched on their respective groups, and read materials such as a blog published by a taxi driver. This helps them understand the concerns and contributions of the group.

To weave in the skill of report writing, they were asked to write a report to their Member of Parliament about a problem their social group is facing. “It is really important that the students understand that the things they are learning have a real connection to their lives outside school,” Csilla emphasizes. “Literacy is a social practice. It’s not something you do in the classroom, examine, and then forget about.”

Csilla notes that in the end, the teachers were able to meet all their set goals. “That’s the wonderful thing—it’s possible to meet all those requirements and everybody’s learning objectives, but have it done in a way that’s more meaningful than just a unit on report writing!” she enthuses.

Moreover, she found out that it was not just the two teachers she worked with that used the materials—all the other teachers teaching the same level joined in because they thought it was interesting for their students.

Being Relevant versus Being Intrusive

Csilla suggests that teachers keep themselves updated about social-media happenings and talk about them in the classroom. “Things like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge—have discussions about them, ask students for their reactions, and how they participate in social media,” she says.

Csilla Weninger is an Assistant Professor with the English Language and Literature Academic Group at NIE. Her research interests include critical discourse analysis, discourse, identity and ideology, media literacy, and critical language awareness.

However, she cautions that while it is important to establish relevance and connections, teachers should be careful not to intrude students' privacy to a life outside school.

"It's a delicate balance," she notes. "It's important to prepare students for what they encounter online and empower them to be active media users. But it's also critical that we leave them the social space where they can enact agency and talk about issues they don't want their teachers to talk about."

Striking that balance is not easy, but Csilla believes that it is especially important for a holistic education.

"Our students are human beings with emotions, and they have agency, desires and plans. As educators, we should pay attention to those other parts of our students as well, to develop them as a whole person. And this is where media literacy is important in this current age."

Classroom

Why Use Social Media?

Social media are increasingly being designed into the curriculum to make classroom learning more relevant for students. We talk to a few teachers who took the leap and included social media in their lessons.

After asking his History students to create a photo montage about the Cold War for a project, Mr Lloyd Yeo faced a question: Where should he showcase their projects so that the students can appreciate each other's work?

The Lead Teacher from St. Gabriel's Secondary School asked his students to upload their photo montages on Edmodo, a social learning network, where he had created a closed group for his class. There, his students can share, view and comment on each other's work at their own convenience to help the creators improve the subsequent versions.

Lloyd points out that this is just one of the many ways social media come in handy in the classroom.



(From left) Chew Ee, Lloyd and Ezal believe that social media lend itself very well to learning in the Humanities classroom.

Leveraging Technological Affordances

Social media have many functions, and the ways they support teaching and learning are termed as technological affordances.

To enhance his lessons, Lloyd uses the mobile app version of Edmodo. With the app, he can upload resources and notes for students to access anytime, create discussion boards

to engage them, create quizzes to check their understanding, and allow the students to post and share content.

Mr Chew Ee, a Senior Teacher from St. Andrew's Secondary School, adds that social media not only allow students discuss anywhere and anytime, but more importantly, they makes their thinking visible.

"When you deliver the lesson, do you really know whether the students are paying attention?" Chew Ee points out. "Even if you ask them to contribute answers, only a few might put up their hands, and you just don't have the time to call out every single student."

Furthermore, social media act as a *cordon sanitaire*, according to Lloyd. "It's a closed, sanitized environment for students to work in and share."

For students, a safe environment is important. When they feel comfortable, they will not mind contributing and the platform becomes conducive for their learning. In fact, Mr Ezal Sani, a Senior Teacher from Fairfield Secondary School, notes that social media can give a voice to the voiceless.

"It's interesting to see how students who are quieter in the classroom become more forthcoming online," Ezal adds. "We also have students who suddenly develop a keen interest in the subject because they can explore it in a different manner!"

Planning for Social Media in the Classroom

Introducing social media into the classroom requires planning for any challenges that might arise. Mr Lloyd Yeo shares some points for consideration.

"Student safety and security is number one. Keep in mind that your activities are for students, so create a closed and safe environment for them so they would want to participate.

"Secondly, social media should not be used in isolation. In the curriculum design, they should be an add-on to enhance the class.

"Teacher presence is important. You can't set up a social-media platform for the class and be absent half the time. Feedback should be constantly given.

"Clarity of the purpose is important—be clear why you're using social

media. If you're going to use it to assess discussion, tell the students on Day One that you're assessing their discussion.

"Finally, the choice of social media is important. Choose a platform that is appropriate because social media are useful only as long as the teacher and student are comfortable!"

Developing Confident Students

Part of education is grooming students to be confident individuals with a sense of self-worth, and social media lend itself to that.

Students who create outstanding content within closed groups can have their works uploaded on YouTube, where people outside of their school and even beyond Singapore can comment on.

"This motivates students to do well," explains Lloyd. "When they know their work is good enough to be shared, they feel that their work is being appreciated. So, their creation brings some level of extrinsic rewards as well as intrinsic joy."

Giving Social Media a Try

Lloyd believes teachers simply cannot ignore social media's growing prominence. By introducing social media into their classrooms, teachers also get the opportunity to educate students about their usage of such media.

"I get to socialize the students to have the right etiquette and values when they're on social media," he says.

However, teachers might be hesitant about incorporating technology in the classroom because of potential logistical hiccups. Chew Ee recalls with a laugh, "Forgotten password, spoilt screen, missing mouse...something always goes wrong in the computer lab! But with smartphones, it's now much easier and more intuitive for both students and teachers."

Lloyd Yeo is a Lead Teacher at St. Gabriel's Secondary School. He has been teaching for 19 years. **Ezal Bin Sani** is a Senior Teacher at Fairfield Secondary School. He has been teaching for 11 years. **Chew Ee** is a Senior Teacher at St. Andrew's Secondary School. He has been teaching for more than 13 years. They are all part of the Academy of Singapore Teachers Lead Teacher-Senior Teacher Network.

But it is not just the students who benefit from using social media. Ezal shares that because he gets feedback directly from students in Edmodo, he tweaks his pedagogy accordingly. Edmodo then becomes a tool he uses for reflection.

While not all teachers are digital natives who take to social media easily, Ezal advises teachers not to give up. "When you invest your time in it, it'll really be worthwhile."

People

Welcome to the Online World

Parents tend to worry that their children spend too much time on online gaming and the Internet. An NIE researcher cum online-gaming enthusiast tells us that the online world is not all bad.

The world of online gaming and new media has always intrigued researcher and Associate Professor Angeline Khoo. To her, the online world can help develop certain life skills in individuals, but only if they are used correctly and in moderation. We talk to Angeline about her views on online gaming and how parents can better understand their children's involvement in this form of new media.

Q: How did you becoming involved in online gaming?

I was involved in a gaming project which I enjoyed very much. I realized that to be authentic, I had to be a gamer myself, and help parents who do not understand online gaming actually understand their children better.

My gaming experiences are rather outdated now, but what I have learned about the virtual environment still has relevance for those parents who are rarely in the online world.

I think one of the reasons why I found this project so meaningful was because we could help foster better communication between parents and their children. The lack of understanding regarding the nature of online gaming can cause them to drift further apart. Parents are afraid of their children becoming addicted and try to remedy the situation but imposing restrictions but in doing so, they can make things worse. And this can be quite heart-wrenching.

Many parents didn't know that they have to understand their kids' attraction to games first—what motivates them to keep on playing, what benefits they derive and what challenges they face.

Q: What is it that parents need to understand?

We find parents lagging way behind in terms of their experience and understanding of these issues but that's not surprising. The gap is even wider now because of new technology. Some parents may be on social media but they may not understand how children are using it.

Take for example the definition of privacy. You ask teenagers if they believe in privacy and they'll say yes, they do believe in privacy of information. But when you ask them for the definition of privacy, it's different from what the adults think. For adults, it means not sharing information with strangers. For teens, it means you don't share information with your parents!

Q: What can teachers and parents do in this kind of situation?

Teachers and parents need better understanding of the online world in order to communicate with children, and with each other.



I think one of the reasons why I found this project so meaningful was because we could help foster better communication between parents and their children.

*- Angeline Khoo,
Psychological Studies
Academic Group*

Parents need to understand what the game means to their children, and teachers can play a role in communicating this to parents.

- Angeline on the role of teachers

Angeline Khoo is an Associate Professor with the Psychological Studies Academic Group at NIE. Her research interests include Internet risks, online identities, video-gaming issues and communication and relationships. She will be leaving NIE after 25 years of service, to spend more time with her husband and grandson.

Some counsellors we interviewed found that generally, parents are not sure what to do about the gaming habits of their children.

For example, a father may believe that switching off the computer would solve the problem of excessive gaming, so he may say, "I've given you sufficient warning. If you're still online after I count to 3, I'll just pull out the plug!" So he pulls the plug while his son is in the middle of a game, or having a discussion with his friends. Of course, the boy will get very angry. In fact, some children may react violently. It's not that they don't respect their parents. They do, but at that moment, it's an impulsive response.

I think what teachers can do is to help parents understand these issues. And of course teachers must understand these issues themselves if they are to be a bridge between children and their parents.

Q: What kind of advice can you give to teachers and parents whose students and children are addicted to online gaming?

Parents shouldn't try to stop their children from playing games. They must understand what motivates gamers, and what needs are being met through playing these games. I'm motivated to play because I have enjoyable experiences in the game. There's a lot of social interaction, and I make new online friends. We may not meet face to face but the depth of our conversations show that such friendships are not inferior to real-life friendships. Only our avatars meet, but our avatars have taken on our identities. So if you think an avatar is just a pixelated character, you're wrong!

Not many parents understand that and think games are bad and try to stop their children from playing. Of course kids will rebel because they cannot give up what they enjoy, like friendship, teamwork, and the thrill of defeating a challenging enemy. Yes, games fulfil their need for social relationships as well as sense of accomplishment. Adults can learn a lot from games too. They can put into practice their leadership, conflict-management and problem-solving skills.

Parents need to understand what the game means to their children and teachers can play a role in communicating this to parents. Help the kids exercise self-control. The key word is self-regulation. If you impose too many rules, they are all very external controls. The kids do not have ownership of the problem and will find it harder to take responsibility for their own actions.

Help them exercise self-regulation, own the problem, and solve the issues themselves. This is not easy though. It takes a lot of time, patience and perseverance. Parents need to build rapport with their children because they will not want to listen to you if you do not have a warm relationship with them in the first place.

The first step is for the kids to acknowledge that they have compromised some aspects of their lives because of too much online gaming. And you must have enough empathy before the children will acknowledge that their gaming habits are having detrimental effects on them.

There needs to be a relationship that fosters negotiation and communication and this is possible only if there is an understanding and empathy. It's all about parenting as every child is different. A lot depends on how much parents understand what works for their own kids.

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Using Social Media in Learning