

What Does it Mean to be Literate in the 21st Century?

Overview

One of the pressing challenges of educating students for success in the 21st century is that, as technologies evolve and knowledge expands, we are aiming at constantly moving targets. A viable definition of literacy must be both broad and deep enough to allow for the dynamic nature of the information, skills, and tools that our students will need to survive and succeed in the digital society of both today and tomorrow.

In her article “The Measure of Our Success” literacy expert Kylene Beers explains that “literacy is a set of skills that reflect the needs of the time. As those needs shift, then our definition of literacy shifts.” Literacy in the 21st century responds to the demands of a society in which, according to author Daniel Pink, “making meaning and connections will be valued, as will focusing on the multiple possibilities of any situation over seeking one solution” (qtd. in Beers 8).

According to Beers, the past needs of our society have developed over the past two hundred or so years from literate people being able to sign their names, to people being able to read, write, and recite, to people being able to read for meaning and to analyze texts. Today, what society needs from its citizens (and what it offers its citizens) far outstrips the limits of all these previous definitions of literacy.

The field of education is moving towards an expanded definition of literacy that can respond both to the shifting needs of a global society and to the pervasive and ever-evolving role of technology in all facets of daily life. Middle school 21st Century Literacy Specialist [Kim Cofino](#) synthesizes these efforts into three [essential understandings](#).

Students and teachers will need to become:

1. **effective learners**
2. **effective collaborators and**
3. **effective creators.**

Effective Learners:

Because technology, tools, and information are constantly changing, we need to ensure that we equip students with the abilities and attitudes that will allow them to engage confidently in learning throughout their lives. The idea of life long learning is no longer an ideal to which we hope our students will inspire but a necessity which we must instill in students if they are to be able to participate in the 21st century.

Effective Collaborators:

Collaborative learning once meant that students sat in a classroom and worked with peers to solve a problem, organize information, or plan a presentation. In the 21st century, our students need to be able to engage in those same activities, but with different tools. Now, via the internet, their classroom can truly be the world, with their peers working with them from classrooms in South Korea or Canada or Saudi Arabia. Together, they need to know how to navigate a diversity of cultures and perspectives in order to collaboratively solve

problems, access and evaluate information, and create and communicate new ideas.

Effective Creators:

In such a connected, international context, our students must know how to choose and use the best tools in order to create and present information and ideas around the world. If they are to be successful in the 21st century, our students must be experienced in finding and synthesizing information and using it to create their own ideas and make their own unique contributions to local and global communities.

21st century society demands that its members be able to pursue multiple perspectives, to develop dynamic, multi-faceted solutions, to connect and collaborate in global problem-solving, and to access, harness, and use their creativity.

Our definition of 21st century literacy must therefore enable us to cultivate in our students the skills they need to become confident learners, collaborative workers, and creative thinkers in the global society in which they are already living.

References:

Beers, Kylene. "The Measure of Our Success." Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promises into Practice . Ed. Beers, Kylene, Robert Probst and Linda Reif. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishing, 2007.

Cofino, Kim. "Essential Understandings for 21st Century Literacy." Always Learning. 7 December 2007.

<<http://mscofino.edublogs.org/2007/10/04/essential-understandings-for-21st-century-literacy/>>