

Extended interviews with educators on the meaning of "21st century literacies," recommendations for using new technologies, and ideas for updating lesson plans to support 21st century learning.

How do you define 21st century literacies, and how are they different from 20th century literacies?

"One of the problems when talking about 21st century skills or 21st century literacy skills is that this is a nice buzzword, but nobody really defines it very well," says Karl Fisch.

As for what's different: "When I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, our conception of what literacy was very, very different. For the most part, it was being able to read at a certain level, and certainly there was some writing in there, but so much of the focus at that point was on reading to acquire information."

"One of the big differences today is that we live in a world that's info-abundant. Finding information isn't the big problem—the big problem is we have too much information and we don't know what to do with it. It's a very different problem that's going to involve some different skill sets."

One definition of being a literate consumer might be that in addition to "being able to download information to your brain," says Fisch, you also are able to "remix it and repurpose it and share it back out to the world."

For Dawn Hogue, 21st century literacies are "all about a community and sharing and collaboration; it's absolutely about collaboration. It's really also about classrooms with no walls and no constraints of time. In an ideal school, you could be having class with people in a different country, engaging with partners who go to a different school."

Will Richardson has a similar view. He says the big difference in the 21st century is that educators and students aren't "as dependent on physical space or time" as in the 20th century. "If you have access and you're connected, it really is anytime, anywhere learning . . ."

"We have a lot more opportunities now to get the information that we need when we need it, and learn the things we need to learn at the moment we need to learn them," says Richardson. "We don't need to be so pigeon-holed into a curriculum that treats everyone the same way, that really doesn't provide a lot of personalization or license to pursue those things that are of interest to you."

"It's a very difficult thing for teachers to get their brains around."

Ernest Morrell points to three major differences between 20th and 21st century literacies: vastly greater communications technologies in the 21st century, such as the Internet, laptops, and iPods; rapidly changing demographics, with an increase in Latino and other minority populations; and a change in how students are expected to process information—critically, rather than simply regurgitating what they have consumed.

"Literacy is defined by communications technologies and by your culture and your community," says Morrell, who also works with high school teachers in the Los Angeles area. "A literacy is a way that people communicate with one another, so if we have been assuming erroneously that the prototypical American student is white, middle-class, and lives in the Midwest, and we have a school system where that's not the case, then we have to think of literacy differently."

Indeed, says Morrell, "literacy is always changing. It's not novel to our time." Literacy was mostly tied to reading up until about 200 years ago, says Morrell; then it referred to basic writing.

"We always have to ask: how do people communicate in our time? However that question is answered is how literacy is defined."

Today, says Morrell, "we're in an information age, where information is the primary form of capital. Reading and writing play a huge role in our contemporary society, more so than in past societies, because we deal in the production of information. Economics are tied to one's ability to read and write in ways that they haven't necessarily been in the past, so what we have is increased literacy demands in the 21st century, just for ordinary citizenship. Where my grandparents would not necessarily have had to be great readers and writers to have an ordinary quality of life, that's changed, and just in the past century."

Teachers need to take into consideration all three dimensions of 21st century literacy, says Morrell: multimodality, changing culture, and using information critically.