

BEYOND LITERACY PANICS: DIGITAL LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL OPTIMISM

Abstract

Public debate over education has been beset in recent years by highly charged ‘literacy wars’ between conservatives and progressives, casting a pall of gloom over the direction of education generally. This article argues that the theme of ‘digital literacy’ has a potential to shift these debates, opening new possibilities for educational optimism. It draws attention first to the discipline involved in the use of digital media, challenging easy assumptions that such discipline belongs only to print; second, to cognitive processes over content or values, significantly altering the way we think about the social significance of media; and third, to the production end of media use, neatly sidestepping tired debates over media consumption.

‘Literacy’, over the last 20 years, has been a political battleground. As with the wider culture wars of the period, hostilities in Australia have generally taken their cue from the United States. The main lines of debate here can be traced back to 1980s polemics against orthodoxies in progressive education, such as Allan Bloom’s (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind* and E.D. Hirsch’s (1987) *Cultural Literacy — What Every American Needs to Know*. The fully fledged Australian equivalent has followed 20 years later, with Kevin Donnelly’s (2007) *Dumbing Down: Outcomes-based and Politically Correct — the Impact of the Culture Wars on Our Schools*. There are differences, of course — as indeed there are between Bloom and Hirsch. But there are also clear similarities in animating impulse: alarm at the supposed demise of the solid pedagogical principles of the past, a conviction that the blame lies squarely with the educational progressivism of the 1960s and 1970s, and determination to destroy its influence wherever possible.

The ‘literacy wars’, as Ilana Snyder (2008) has called them, have been a difficult time in which to maintain public optimism about education. The conservative program favoured by the likes of Bloom, Hirsch and Donnelly has attempted at times to put on a positive face — as, for example, in George W. Bush’s ‘No Child Left Behind’ initiative of 2001 in the United States, or the Howard government’s call for a national curriculum, overcoming divisions between the states and affirming a new pride and confidence in Australian national identity. For the most part, however, they have been so driven by a desire to slay progressive bogeys that they have had a distinctly punitive cast, with an emphasis on testing

and accountability and ‘skill-and-drill’ prescriptions for classroom practice (Gee, 2003: 3). With the political tide seemingly against them, progressives have been forced to adopt defensive postures, aimed more at holding on to past gains than projecting a positive vision for the future.

There is some question about whether the literacy wars have ever entirely penetrated to the level of classroom practice. As Snyder (2008: 67) writes, they ‘have probably had more life in the press and the professional journals than in schools’:

Reporters and scholars keep the debates alive, identifying the camps and detailing the philosophical, political and pedagogical differences between them. Teachers, by contrast, talk about the debates less and in the main assume balanced approaches in their classrooms.

This does not mean, however, that ideological differences over literacy have not had significant effects. They have created a pervasive sense of crisis over literacy education and made it difficult to frame policy in a way that does not appear narrowly partisan. This has affected morale within education and public trust without. As James Carey put it in a 1990s essay on the ‘political correctness’ debates in the United States, ‘both left and right seem to believe that the *raison d’être* of education is to serve as a site on which to conduct a political struggle’ (Carey, 1997: 284). The results of this have been demoralising, particularly for educators but also for society at large.

One of the attractions of the idea of ‘digital literacy’ is that it appears to hold some promise of a revival of educational optimism. An interesting recent example of this was Kevin Rudd’s proposal, during the 2007 federal election campaign, of a National Secondary School Computer Fund to ensure access to a laptop computer for all senior secondary students in Australian schools. Critics of the idea dismissed it as a gimmick, lacking a properly researched basis and distracting from serious infrastructure and resource problems in schools (see, for example, Allison, 2007). But politics is always in part about symbols. Like the Howard government’s Citizenship Test, ‘a laptop for every child’ should be assessed not only for its likely material effects, but also for how it invites us to imagine ourselves in relation to others and the world. On balance, the initiative probably did work as an emblem for the wider ‘Education Revolution’.

One of the more interesting pieces of media commentary on the Computer Fund was from technology commentator and virtual reality pioneer Mark Pesce. For Pesce, the significance of the idea was not so much what it might do for students as the challenge it might present to *teachers*:

Getting laptops into the classroom forces the teachers to think about their own skills and their own training and it forces the educational administrators to think about the curriculum and in the end it will force them both to change and that, I think, is the real goal. (quoted in Gearin, 2007)

It is perhaps questionable whether the policy had quite such a strategic aim, but Pesce may be right in pointing to its possible significance. Digital media should

not be considered only in terms of their functionality; they also provide a focus for a reimagining of social relations: ‘Although there is a minority of teachers who have kept up with the digital revolution, almost all teachers in the system are going to be less digitally aware than their students are and so immediately there is this sort of profound power shift.’

But if the idea of digital literacy does suggest a transcendence of the literacy wars, it must be recognised as a subtle one. Indeed, from a certain perspective, the idea could be seen as deeply imbricated in them. Many of the tensions of the literacy wars can be related to a crisis in the very meaning of ‘literacy’ — a crisis in which digital media have played a central role. Historically, the definition of the term was firmly anchored in the practices of print. To be literate, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, was to be ‘acquainted with letters or literature’ or, even more simply, to be ‘one who can read and write’. But as print has been displaced as the clearly dominant medium, its meaning has tended to drift. An extended sense of ‘literate’ to denote ‘a liberally educated or learned person’ — a sense which dates from the eighteenth century — has been detached from print and applied promiscuously to produce a range of hybrid offspring: ‘visual literacy’, ‘critical literacy’, ‘media literacy’, ‘cross-cultural literacy’, ‘computer literacy’, ‘technological literacy’.

This development has occasioned an ongoing series of literacy *panics*. While the extension of the concept has often been suggestive, it has also meant that it has increasingly suffered from conceptual fuzziness. The breadth of its deployment has sometimes meant that all that is left are its positive connotations of ability and accomplishment, allowing it to be hijacked as a hurrah-word for special causes. When my critical or media literacy can be your *ill*iteracy, the concept has become emptied of definite meaning. While literacy is still central to most notions of education, it is increasingly unclear what exactly we mean by it.

The two sides in the literacy wars could be seen as opposing responses to this development, neither of which is entirely satisfactory. The response on one side has been to allow the concept of literacy to be fully relativised. All cultures, it is suggested, have a range of ‘sense-making practices’. That some are dignified as involving ‘literacy’ while others are not is simply a legacy of chauvinist assumptions by which some have imposed themselves on others. The problem with this is that it tends to throw into doubt any program for developing the technical skills required to master any one sense-making practice. Why these skills over those? Why this version of literacy over possible others? In practice, pedagogical energies are often dissipated in the demonstration of relativity, leaving a frustration at the lack of depth in any particular ensemble of skills.

The second response, developing in reaction to the first, has been a severe and often bloody-minded educational traditionalism. Kevin Donnelly is the most prominent Australian representative of this tendency. For Donnelly, we should reject the ‘edubabble’ of ‘critical awareness’ and ‘contextual understanding’ and return the classroom to what it was in the past: ‘a place to learn how to read and write’ (Donnelly, 2005). The problem with this, apart from its belligerence, is that it fails to register how the world has changed. It is not only through the

baleful influence of feminists, Marxists and postmodernists that the culture of the book has receded. It is also because the book is simply not the dominant medium it once was. While it claims the values of liberal-humanism, educational traditionalism has had strong authoritarian tendencies. The culture of the book is to be reinstated by force.

To promote the idea of 'digital literacy' could appear simply to provide further fuel for this debate. Is it not just another new-fangled hybrid, further weakening any concrete sense of what literacy really means? Indeed, digital technologies have often figured prominently in conservative fulminations over declining literacy standards. One of the best-known examples in Australia was the uproar in response to a question in the Victorian Certificate of Education English paper in 2005, asking candidates to compare the SMS message 'how r u pls 4giv me I luv u xoxoxo O:-)' with a famous Keats poem, 'You fear, sometimes, I do not love you so much as you wish' (Macnamara, 2005). Similar controversies flare up periodically in relation to the appearance of computer games and other supposedly 'trivial' forms of digitally mediated popular culture in schools.

There are a number of ways, however, in which digital media *do* have a potential to shift the terms of debate around literacy. In the remainder of this article, I will briefly outline three. Perhaps the most important is that the use of digital media can involve an exacting *discipline*. The argument has been made here in the work on computer games by education and media scholars such as James Gee (2003) and Henry Jenkins (2006). The pithiest case, however, is probably Steven Johnson's (2005) more popular treatise, *Everything Bad is Good for You*. As Johnson puts it when talking about video games:

The first and last thing that should be said about the experience of playing today's video games, the thing you almost never hear in the mainstream coverage, is that games are fiendishly, sometimes maddeningly, *hard*. (Johnson, 2005: 25)

Most contemporary games present the player with difficult challenges, requiring them to make decisions, to choose between alternatives and to prioritise. They absorb days, if not weeks or months, of sustained concentration and serious application. Many have become so complex that new players need to consult manuals in order to master them. Just as importantly, players *seek* challenges, rejecting games which do not continually provide them.

The significance of this for the literacy wars is that it neutralises one of the key axes around which they have been organised. It makes it difficult, on the one hand, to sustain the declinist narrative of conservative polemics, according to which contemporary culture is sliding towards a maw of immediate gratification and mindless entertainment. In fact, Johnson *reverses* this narrative, arguing that popular culture, and in particular digitally mediated popular culture, has actually 'made us smarter': 'mass culture is growing more sophisticated, demanding more cognitive engagement with each passing year' (2005: xi). This can be seen in the increasing complexity not just of computer games, but other popular cultural forms such as television drama (compare the *Sopranos*, *ER* or *24* with *Starsky*

and *Hutch*, *I Love Lucy* or *Dragnet*). There is, as Johnson suggests, at least a plausible connection between this development and the so-called ‘Flynn effect’ in IQ testing — the rise in average scores (in the order of three points a year once re-normalisation is removed) since the early twentieth century.

On the other hand, there is also a challenge in this for progressives. Digital literacy cannot easily claim the romance of liberation and youthful pleasure that is sometimes suggested in breaking with the tyranny of obeisance to the book. As Johnson puts it, again in relation to computer games:

The dirty little secret of gaming is how much time you spend not having fun. You may be frustrated; you may be confused or disoriented; you may be stuck. When you put the game down and move back to the real world, you may find yourself mentally working through the problem you’ve been wrestling with, as though you were worrying a loose tooth. (2005: 25–26)

In this perspective, digital literacy has a Ruddish rather than a ruddy complexion. As with any discipline, it involves a certain earnestness, and at times even tedium. Print literacy and digital literacy cannot be mapped on to a colourful opposition between oppressive and liberating impulses. They relate to each other in a greyer Foucauldian fashion of differences within the same.

A second point to be made about digital media is that they draw attention to cognitive processes over content or values. One of the most common lines of criticism of digital cultures is that the content is banal and the values questionable. To stay with computer games, *Grand Theft Auto*, which has sold over 70 million copies, revolves around thinly developed protagonists whose mission is to work their way up through the criminal underworld through bank robberies, assassinations, pimping and street racing. But despite the ink that has been spilled over the ‘themes’ of the game, its interest for players lies more in the architecture of problems and challenges it presents. As Johnson puts it: ‘Games are not novels, and the way they harbour novelistic aspirations are invariably the least interesting thing about them.’ (2005: 21) Their real significance lies in quite different qualities — the way they require the player to weigh evidence, analyse situations and make decisions with reference to long-term goals.

This places digital literacy outside the usual terms of the culture wars, which have focused almost obsessively on meanings and values. It is tempting to speculate that the textual ‘front’ of a title such as *Grand Theft Auto* has been deliberately designed to give equal offence to progressive and conservative semioticians. With its basic premise of violence, illegality and acquisitive self-interest, it can hardly be read as a model of ‘political correctness’, but nor is it likely to appeal to those who are looking for affirmations of a traditional moral or aesthetic order. The ‘meaning’ of the game, in this context, could almost be decoded as a refusal of debates over meaning — the perfect face for those who know that the interest of the game lies elsewhere. To engage with this latter interest is also to open up quite different kinds of questions.

A third point about digital literacy is that it is suggestive of skill sets at the *production* end of cultural processes. One of the most striking qualities of digital media is their tendency to blur the roles of producer and consumer. As John Hartley (2004: 136) puts it:

the popular audience is achieving a ‘read and write’ capacity in publicly distributed media via its participation in shows like *Big Brother* and in private communication, where digital equipment for making audiovisual texts and messages is close to achieving the banal and autonomous status of the pen.

What is more, there is clearly an *economic* significance in mastery of this ‘pen’. There is an important difference between blogging or uploading images on file-sharing sites such as Flickr and more traditional forms of media use. They are much more clearly continuous with professional functions in media production such as journalism, public relations and graphic design.

This also has a transformative effect on debates around literacy. While ‘critical literacy’ and ‘media literacy’ have been ridiculed in the literacy wars as playing games at the consumption end of media use — looking for ‘phallogocentric constructions’ in fairy tales or soap opera — digital literacy cannot be dismissed in quite the same way. One only has to consider what might have happened if Kevin Rudd had promoted ‘critical literacy’ against a seasoned culture warrior like John Howard to appreciate how differently digital literacy plays. Confronted with ‘a laptop for every child’, the well-honed lines of attack on progressive education found nothing on which to fasten. One could almost sense Rudd *daring* Howard to try these lines one more time, so that he could turn the tables by posing again for the camera with the ‘toolbox of the twenty-first century’.

Rudd’s cheesy grin while holding up a laptop during an electioneering visit to a school in Brisbane is not what some might desire as inspiration for a renewal of educational optimism — particularly given that the actual machine, as picked up by Crikey (2007), was over 10 years old and all but obsolete! There are certainly many questions that can be asked about the real commitment of the current Labor government to the ‘Education Revolution’. But it may also be shortsighted not to recognise that the ground for thinking about literacy has shifted or that there may be significant opportunities in this for those who do care about the future of education. If we are indeed seeing such a shift, then digital media have played a significant part in it. To promote the idea of digital literacies in this context may not lead to an upland plane of educational enlightenment, but it may hold out a real possibility of a more hopeful and constructive debate about the sorts of skills needed in negotiating media of all kinds than we have recently seen.

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Mark Gibson is a Senior Lecturer and Academic Course Coordinator in the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University. He has broad research interests in communication and media studies, particularly from a cultural perspective, and has participated in funded projects on the everyday uptake of new technologies in master-planned suburban developments and on the development of creative industries in the suburbs. He is the author of *Culture and Power: A History of Cultural Studies* (Berg, 2007) and the editor of the international refereed journal *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*. He is also Vice President of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia and convenor of the 'Cultural Literacies' node of the ARC Cultural Research Network.