
All in the Family: New Literacies Connect Culture to Classroom

Renee Hobbs

Keynote Address, International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA)

September 29, 2011

Renee Hobbs:

Good morning. I'm so glad to be here and thank you Frank and Joan for inviting me to come to address your group. Actually it was only a mere 50 years ago that I attended my first IVLA Conference in 1988 in Blacksburg, Virginia. Today what I'd like to do is address you in relation to the shared, the stakeholders that are now kind of emerging in the new literacy's arena because actually it's a time of great momentum in our field. I want to share with you some ideas about how the way I see visual literacy in relation to the new literacy's landscape. Of course I'm using a visual metaphor and motif from a show that many of you maybe familiar with. That show is "All in the Family." For five years in a row, "All in the Family" was the top rated Nielsen program. For those of you from outside the United States or not old enough to remember this show, the stories featured the lives of a working class family with the patriarch Archie, his lovely wife Edith, their daughter Gloria, and the son-in-law Meathead.

VIDEO: Opening sequence of "All in the Family" from series premiere in 1971

In fact today I will argue that essentially the new literacy community is a lot like the family in "All in the Family." In fact, we have a whole constellation of literacies that are emerging and have been emerging for now more than 60 years. These new literacies are redefining our understanding of the term. I define literacy as the sharing of meaning through symbolic form.

Of course, print literacy dominates the education landscape and in every manner of ways it dominates our education system. But in fact, for at least the last 50 years another set of voices has helped us recognize that the little black squiggles on the white paper aren't the only symbols that people use to share and express meaning; moreover, a whole constellation of symbol systems work together as we share with each other an understanding of ourselves, our society and the world.

Visual Literacy. Let's do a quick review of all the new literacies, starting of course with visual literacy because it is the oldest of the new literacies. Many of you in this room can well appreciate the legacy and the challenge of being first. How hard it was back in the 1960s as this community came together in up state New York to identify what it means to use images as forms of communication and expression. Your association brought together communities who participate in both the construction and the making of images and in the interpretation of those images.

Information Literacy. The next set of stakeholders historically were the information literacy folks, the librarians. The 1970s ushered in the need for information specialists like librarians, who had these new powerful

technologies at their disposal. Databases changed everything about the way we thought about accessing information, about retrieving it, about organizing it. New skills were needed to be able to find information and so the information literacy community helped us understand what new competencies and new skills were necessary for being able to access information and use it to solve problems and to get things done.

Media Literacy. Well then came media literacy in the 1980s. By then, we were experiencing the advent of the 500-channel universe, when cable television dropped into our lives and we had a constellation of programming available via VHS tapes. All of the sudden we could bring the image-based technology of television into classrooms and our communities. Equipment got smaller and more portable so we could begin to do video production in schools and classrooms. The media literacy movement became the next new literacy historically. They emphasized two big ideas: the idea that all media messages are constructed; and that messages circulate within an economic, political and cultural context. To understand how media messages work we have to understand those institutional, political, and economic contexts.

Computer Literacy. This picture shows Archie Bunker with a laptop. It took me a long time to find that! As educators started to recognize the knowledge and skills that we needed to be able to use that desktop computer, we started to explore how computer programming could help support students collaborative and critical thinking skills. We needed to help students understand the difference between hardware and software and to learn file management, techniques, and to understand how to use software to compose with images, with words, and with interactivity. By the mid-1980s, computer literacy joined the new literacies club.

Critical Literacy. Then we started to hear from the critical literacy folks. They really had been there all along – riding on Paulo Freire’s coattails-- but they started wielding their knives in the 1990s as the cultural studies community gained more prominence in the academic landscape. Critical literacy scholars like Doug Kellner started inviting us to ask questions about how power is exercised through the sharing of meaning through symbolic form.

It’s important to understand how messages work to reinforce certain kinds of value systems and push out certain kinds of voices and perspectives, and how the representation of people, events, and of cultural artifacts shapes our understanding of the world and our personal identity.

News Literacy. When journalism came started to crumble, we started hearing journalists talk about news literacy. It took a while for journalists to recognize that there were going to be no next generation of newspaper readers if young people didn’t establish a newspaper reading habit or value the quality of information they receive about current events. In the late 1990s, we watched the Newspaper and Education programs get dismantled as newspaper revenues tightened up and people began to find

their news and information from other sources. So the folks in the news industry came together using the phrase news literacy, arguing that there were a set of knowledge and skills that people needed to be able to understand how news gets to us, how to evaluate its credibility, how to recognize the difference between public relations dreck and quality investigative journalism.

Digital Literacy. Today we have a newcomer to the new literacies field: digital literacy. Digital literacy folks talk about participation in a new online world where there's another set of competencies and skills that are required to navigate in the Web 2.0 world, where social media participation is the mechanism by which we share meaning and express our points of view. These folks wonder about how people acquire a deep understanding of their ethical responsibilities as communicators in a multimedia landscape where anonymity makes it possible to "be" anyone and "share" anything.

Now I would like to make a little transition by inviting you to think about how Norman Lear and Michael Jackson are actually really connected. Of course if we were to make a Venn diagram to visually depict their similarities and differences there would be some differences that we would have to note. Norman Lear is living happily in Southern California where his organization the Norman Lear Center operates at the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication. He's still contributing actively to the creative communities in Southern California. Michael Jackson died in 2009 and is recognized as the most successful entertainer of all time. Many of us have been watching the trial of his physician. More than 35 million albums were sold worldwide in the 12 months after his death.

Michael Jackson and Norman Lear actually have quite a bit in common. Both of them were associated with controversy. In 1971 when "All in the Family" launched its unflinching look at the challenges of contemporary American family life, its insistent focus on exploring social issues like abortion, the Vietnam War, homosexuality was quite controversial. The show features issues like "women's liberation" which was, at the time, absolutely controversial. In fact when it launched in 1971, I was 13 years old and I was not allowed to watch the show because it had words like 'spig' and 'gimp' and 'jap' and all kinds of ethnic stereotypes and slurs that my parents thought were objectionable.

In fact when it launched we could say that "All in the Family" was as controversial as the "Jersey Shore" is today. Of course Michael Jackson entire life has been surrounded by controversy. Michael Jackson and I have something in common: he also was 13 years old in 1971 when "All in the Family" launched. Norman Lear was king of network television with five years at the top of the Nielson Ratings and Michael Jackson, the king of pop, although he died \$400 million in debt, was the nation's most prolific entertainer and at the top of the charts in terms of the number of awards he received. Michael Jackson was clearly a major figure of the 20th century music entertainment scene.

All this is merely to point out that I'm using visual images that connect "All in the Family" and Michael Jackson to illustrate the equally big connections between the new literacies.

Disciplinary Squabbling and Great Debates. All right so these new literacies have been rising for 50 or 60 years, but over the last 15 years, these folks haven't always played well in the sandbox together. In fact, there's been some disciplinary squabbling and some great debate.

I'll have to take credit for some of that squabbling and great debates because I have a vivid memory burned into my brain. Who was at the IVLA conference in Phoenix in 1994? I remember sitting someplace in a bar arguing with some of you oldsters (perhaps you're in the audience) about whether people needed to "learn" to "read" the "grammar" of film? Now that was indeed a heated and vociferous debate. The disciplinary squabbling and great debates go all the way across the whole new literacies landscape. People say nasty things about information literacy, about media literacy, news literacy, critical literacy, and even about digital literacy. We each see our own discipline as offering the most productive lens on a particular problem and tend to diminish or trivialize the perspectives offered by other disciplines that we don't understand as well.

In fact, it's one of the joys of coming to an interdisciplinary conference like this, where sitting at your table might be an art historian and an artist and a librarian and a graphic design professional, and a teacher of graphic design, right? There's simply so much you can learn here.

More, and more, we rely on interdisciplinary communities to look at what we have in common across many different specializations. I would submit to you that right now at this time in our cultural history, the time is ripe for us to stop paying attention to our differences and start paying more attention to what we have in common.

So I have been proposing an expansive conceptualization to unite all the new literacies. The suggestion, the proposal, the ring as it were, has two components. One, a set of shared **conceptual principles** that underlie all of the new literacies. I wrote a scholarly article about this in 2006 as a lead chapter in a book called *Technology and Literacy*. I also think there's a set of **learning processes** that all of the new literacies embrace. These two powerful sets of ideas have a lot of value for those of us who are working in the context of K-12 and higher education where we're trying to better improve the quality of teaching and learning for students of all ages.

Authors and Audiences. Let's talk about the key concepts. I propose there are three big key concepts that connect us together across the new literacies landscapes. The first one I call Authors and Audiences, because any formulation of thinking about how people share meaning through symbol systems has to do with, in the classic communication

formulation, senders and receivers. But more than that, the concept of authorship implies an appreciation of the institutional context in which messages circulate.

And the concept of audiences implies the practices by which audiences are gathered, formulated and of course, in today's economy, sold. When we think about the author's purpose and point of view, and when we think about audiences as consumers and their attention as a product that is commoditized in information-age economies, we are exploring this big set of ideas.

Messages and Meanings. Next up is a constellation of ideas I think of as Messages and Meanings. Again this idea of thinking about the authors choices, what image to put, what wine, what font to use. How to use interactivity, right? How to use color and design. Many of you teach about the careful design of messages in order to achieve particular kinds of communicative effects, right?

But there's an even bigger idea that happens when you connect Messages and Meanings. That's the idea of meaning making as a process that's inherently active and social and participatory as we co-construct meanings not right here inside our individual heads but actually in our social heads collectively as members of a community.

Representation and Realities. We might ask: why do messages, why do media, why do images, why do they speak to us, why do they have power, why can they can change our minds, why can they can change the world? Messages have power precisely because they speak to the human condition. They speak to our lived experience. They shape our sense of possibility for ourselves and our world.

Even a fantastical set of ideas that are abstract and impressionistic are used by us to make sense of our own lives. Even science fiction and fantasy, as crazy and unrealistic as it can be, are genres we use to make sense of our here-and-now existence.

I would submit to you that these three big sets of ideas can be found across all the new literacies framework. In visual literacy, media literacy, information literacy, news literacy, critical literacy, and in digital literacy, we're all kind of talking about these big ideas in one way or the other.

Let me talk to you a little bit about one way I've tried to translate some of these big ideas into actual practice. To do that, you have to take a look at my Media Literacy remote control. it's a remote control. Let's take a look at the Media Literacy Remote Control and I'll show you how to use it.

VIDEO: <http://mediaeducationlab.com/what-media-literacy-0>

As you can tell, I love using visual metaphors (like remote controls and rings) as a way to think about abstract ideas like authors and audiences, messages and meanings, and representations and realities. Like I said, the ring has two parts. There's the inner side of the ring and there's the outer side of the ring. The new literacies have a shared conceptualization of the learning process and this is something that I articulated in a policy paper that I wrote for the Aspen Institute and the Knight Foundation last year called "Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action." The model has five components.

Access. When it comes to the little black squiggles on the white page, access involves basic decoding skills. You got to decode those symbols into sound and then you have to comprehend in order for them to be meaningful at all. Access has different meanings in visual literacy in terms of approaching the text. In information literacy access has some other meanings. In the critical literacy, access has to do with who gets access to the kinds of social power that communication technologies embody. Although the meaning of access has nuances across the new literacy community, fundamentally this big idea of access is shared by all of us.

Analysis. Of course at the heart of all of the new literacies is the focus on analysis. This is the process of looking carefully at the constructiveness of messages to understand how they're put together and why they work. Because literacy is about the sharing of meaning, the process of composition is a fundamental literacy skill. In fact it's been at the heart of the great debates-- this tension between analysis and composition, for more than 150 years when the art historians first broke away from the artists and started having their own discourse community separate from creative professionals.

Composition. The ability to manipulate symbols to share meaning is something that all the new literacies value and celebrate. Today, I prefer to use the term 'composition' rather than the more technical term 'production' because it connotes the careful, rhetorical and design choices that an author makes in selecting how to create and share meaning.

Reflection. What I've only come to understand more recently is how analysis is so deeply connected to the process of reflection. By reflection I've picked an image here that doesn't quite work for the meaning I want to convey because you might think reflection is a kind of prayer. Yes, to reflect means to think meta-cognitively, to think about your thinking, to move inside yourself and think about how symbols work in relation to your own lived experience.

But it turns out that the best reflection is inherently social --- and it's the reason why we've come to this conference. Because our own reflective practice is inherently deepened as we encounter the other. We hear other people's interpretations and we get our own interpretations challenged. We come to understand more deeply how we make meaning by

encountering people who are meaning making in similar but different ways.

Action. The final phase of the learning process I identify as a form of action. For a lot of years in my own learning trajectory I was very nervous about this. I wasn't sure as a young teacher if I had the authority to invite my students to think about their power as communicators in the world outside the classroom. How arrogant. Wouldn't I risk acting as an agent of propaganda myself?

It's this practice of social action that Henry Jenkins has just right when he and his colleagues talk about the value of participatory culture. Now I see how, to fulfill our obligations to support the development of citizens in a self-governing arena, we need to include this in our pedagogy. In doing so, we help create the society we want to have in the world by the social actions we take.

I think in a lot of ways the opportunities for new literacies to contribute to that practice of democratization and genuine empowerment is right here in front of us. We saw earlier this year with the Arab Spring that all over the world, people are hungry to share their sense of what needs to change in our society, to formulate the cultural values that treasure and celebrate what we value and marks off as transgressive and aberrant that which we abhor.

I think our obligation to help our students understand their power as communicators is absolutely part of our responsibility as educators, as artists, as creative people. I think it's really important that we reflect on socially responsible ways we can use that power in meaningful way.

I have just presented to you these two big ideas: a set of ideas and a learning process. Now what I want to do is share with you a little video that I found on the PBS website, on this really interesting documentary. As you watch I want to see if you can see how the concepts I've just talked about are embodied

VIDEO: New Learners of the 21st Century <http://video.pbs.org/video/1797357384/>

We see in this little excerpt a lot of the ideas that have come from the 60 years that the new literacies folks have been playing in sandboxes all over this country and all over this world. In fact one of the reasons why I'm so excited about digital and media literacy and why I see an opportunity now in the education system to really start to shift as all different stakeholders start to get aligned along the same key dimensions.

With all different points of view, we're seeing more and more alignment. K-12 schools and universities are talking about this. And in cultural institutions like museums and in the business community. In the family we're all starting to realize these new competencies are fundamental for how we think about life today and how we think about the unthinkable, which is life ten years from now or even 20 years from now.

The rate of change in our society means that digital and media literacy become essential life skills – and it takes a community education movement to make these skills normative for all our citizens.

Today, we can't even imagine the changes that will happen as a result of this explosion of digital media technologies and how those tools can help us hold on to the traditions and the cultural values that are meaningful to us. But I'm convinced that digital and media literacy enables us to express our full humanity through the skillful use of the wide range of symbol systems that are literally at our fingertips.

Now for the last 30 years that I've been doing this work, it's really been the kids that are at the heart of the enterprise. I've spent most of my career working with teachers in K-12 settings, helping them to use visual literacy, information literacy, media literacy, news literacy, advertising literacy, critical literacy, and digital literacy.

In fact it turns out that a lot of people who teach children and young people have some deep fears and anxiety about the phrase digital and media literacy. That's because that phrase sounds an awful lot like technology. That's why I thank goodness for the visual literacy pioneers who, 60 years ago, helped us understand about how literacy happens as a result of the sharing of meaning through symbols.

Let's look at this little girl's comic. Let me read it to you. You can see in the top panel there are two girls sitting together and one says have you seen "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs" and she says, "Yeah, I really enjoyed that movie." Then in the second panel we see they're both thinking about the movie, right? "It was so funny," they both say.

Then we that when they start to share their thoughts more deeply, they have different reasons for liking the film. One says, "It was so gross when the kid puked because of all the ice cream his dad still missed him, eww." The other girl says, "Well, I thought it was cool when they went sledding off the roof and they fell into the dumpster." When we create space to share our interpretations, we discover the unique way we see media texts and recognize the beauty and integrity in the various possible interpretations of them.

Then the girl's comic shows an eyeball, yes that is an eyeball, right? Now we're moving into what appears to be a dream sequence. It says here, "I had a dream like this before." Now this little nine-year-old girl has created a fascinating little narrative, using images and words, where she is going to take us on the next panel into the world of her imagination. I am simply in awe of the sheer charm and loveliness of children's creative expression when they get a chance to use images and words to share ideas.

And I think that you pioneers, you visual literacy scholars and teachers and artists and creative people, have helped us to understand something truly important: you don't need technology to build the core

competencies of the new literacies. It's a way of thinking about the meaning making process --that's what really matters.

Today I've shared with you my belief that it's the distinctive members of the new literacies "family" that help create a community education movement. Rather than focus on our differences, we should focus on the shared conceptual principles and the learning processes that we have in common.

Now some of you might be wondering about my extensive use of copyrighted images, because the last time I was at IVLA you asked me a lot of hard questions about this. I remember you asked, "Renee, how dare you use all those copyrighted images in your work, what gives you the right?" Well, I wrote a book about that – Copyright Clarity: How Fair Use Supports Digital Learning," so I hope you take a look at that.

Of course I'm very proud of my new book "Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture to Classroom." In this book, I get to illustrate these big ideas that I've just shared with you in the context of middle school and high school learning.

Thank you so much for inviting me to participate. Jung and Frank, I'm really, really glad to be able to speak to your group today. Thanks again.

Moderator:

Thank you Renee for providing us with a context for the rest of the conference by situating visual literacy in this broad spectrum of literacy's. I do have one question about your talk. I was particularly impressed by the remote, but my question is this. Where did you put the battery? I couldn't—okay.

Thank you again Renee. I think it's quite apropos that you used "All in the Family" in your talk because I and I'm sure many other think of the International Visual Literacy Association very much as a family. I mean that in many different ways like the characters on the TV show, they have some squabbling. You knew that there was something that untied all of the members and there was a deep love for one another and for the common mission of the family. I think it's actually perfect.