# From Knowledge to Wisdom: Critical Evaluation in New Literacy Instruction

*"Most of the time, when teachers assign projects, it's like they ask students to use technology for its own sake. That's not to say that it's bad to use technology, but it should have a purpose. If you tell students to build a website and show them how, they'll do it. But they probably won't learn very much about when and why they ought to use a website to communicate."*

I read these words again and again, soaking in the implications. There was a precision in the language, a clarity in the thinking that was unsettling. Had the comment been written by an educator or media critic, I might have nodded approvingly or scribbled an exclamation point in the margin. But this was written by Kevin, a sophomore in my high school Media Ecology course, and his keen insight left me feeling uneasy.

Kevin's class had recently completed a discussion about the uses and abuses of technology in education, and the students had submitted written reflections to synthesize their thinking from the exploration. While many of his classmates echoed similar sentiments, Kevin's words seemed to cut through to the heart of the issue: in the effort to expose students to a wide variety of literacy practices, teachers often neglect the equally (if not more) important role of leading students in critical inquiry about when and why particular media ought to be used.

Reading Kevin's words was condemning. I knew that I was guilty of the offense he described. I knew that my lesson plan for the following day had me introducing my 8th-grade students to the capstone project for their unit on *Animal Farm*—designing a farm-based society and building a website to showcase its characteristics. But now, with Kevin's voice echoing in my mind, I was having second thoughts.

## The Literacy of "How" and the Literacy of "Why"

The tension that Kevin's words stirred in me isn't a new one. Since the birth of reading and writing, there has been debate about whether literacy instruction should be primarily oriented toward using literacy or evaluating its effects. Even as the written alphabet first spread through ancient Greece and threatened the foundation of the oral tradition, Socrates warned that the unquestioned adoption of literacy would breed pedantic students who "will appear to possess much knowledge because they know so many facts, but for the most part, know nothing of true wisdom" (Dirsch, 1973, p. 1).

At a time when literacy has an air of self-evidence, it may seem strange to admit it, but there is truth to be found in Socrates's words. His point is the same one that Marshall McLuhan would conveniently aphorize centuries later: "The medium is the message." Unlike the spoken word that dominated the oral tradition, the written word is a decidedly mute medium. Hackforth (1952) summarizes the limitations of print, saying, "[A

book] cannot defend itself against misinterpretation, clarify terminology, or repair deficiencies in logic in the same way that the medium of human speech is able" (p. 152). Furthermore, if a book is read by someone who is not prepared for the complexities of the medium, there is little hope for knowledge—much less wisdom—to be gleaned from its pages. For Socrates, literacy instruction without critical evaluation of the environment created by the medium is oxymoronic.

But this sort of critical evaluation becomes more complicated as the popular usage of "literacy" evolves and expands to include more multimedia and multisensory forms of communication. Kress (2003) argues, "It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from the vast array of social, technological, and economic facts" (p. 1). Alvermann (2002) posits that in light of these facts, the definition of literacy ought to "include performative, visual, oral, and semiotic understanding" (p. viii). With the inclusion of these new media in the scope of literacy, the "new literacy" that emerges could be loosely defined as the act of conveying meaning with and constructing meaning from any medium or form of representation (Kist, 2005).

As the definition of literacy evolves, educators have been quick to respond by integrating new technologies into instruction, and, in turn, by exposing students to a variety of new media. A cursory glance through recent professional journals yields a flood of suggestions for how teachers can engage students in rich multimedia experiences: designing Facebook pages for literary characters, directing movies to illustrate vocabulary, creating video games to accompany class novels, and assembling PowerPoint slides to lead class presentations.

But in the din and rush to encourage our students to utilize a variety of new media, is it possible that we have neglected to instruct them in the process of discerning the purposes, strengths, and limitations of our technologies? Kevin's words echo those of Socrates: students who create a website for a class project will have "the appearance of knowledge" because they are applying new literacy skills to course content. But if students have no understanding of what is gained and lost by choosing to convey information in one medium rather than another, can we truly say that they are "literate" in that technology? After all, when we employ technology with no understanding of how it affects our audience and message, then it is the technology that is using us and not vice versa (Postman, 1999). We become, in the words of Thoreau, "the tools of our tools."

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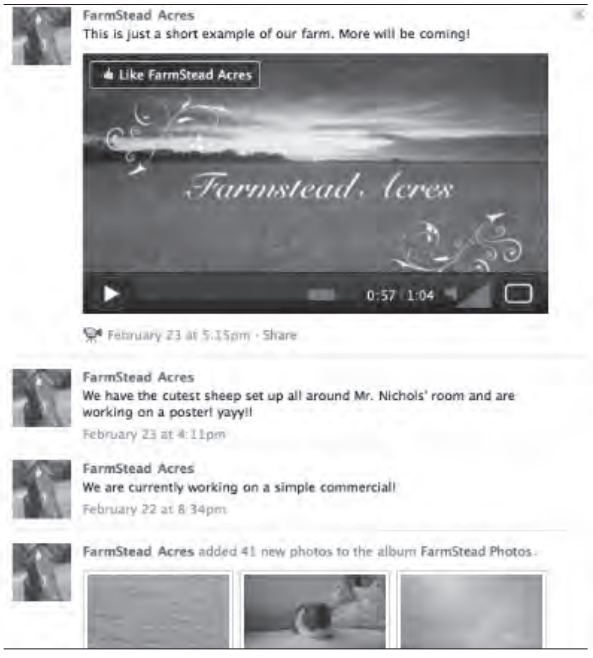
Kevin's comment was a rude awakening. I realized that in the same way that the scope of literacy has expanded to include a variety of media, I needed to, likewise, expand the scope of my literacy instruction to include not only exposure to a breadth of media environments (i.e., the "how" of literacy), but also critical and evaluative inquiry into the ways these environments influence human interactions, behavior, and rhetoric (i.e., the "why" of literacy). And the 8th-grade *Animal Farm* project seemed like an appropriate place to begin.

## The Ideal Society Project: Applying an Evaluative Lens to Media Environments

The Ideal Society Project is the culmination of a unit-length inquiry into the question, what is the ideal society? In the early stages of the unit, students work in groups to research the basic human rights that ought to be recognized in an ideal society and to distinguish between different political and economic structures that societies have adopted through history. Using this understanding as a framework, the class reads the core text of the unit, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and evaluates the successes and failures of the animals in living up to the standards of the society

they had envisioned at the start of the book. The capstone project gives students an opportunity to synthesize the material discussed throughout the unit by allowing them to take on the role of the animals in designing their own society from scratch.

This year, thanks to Kevin's insight, rather than having each group compile their completed work on a website, I decided to add a new dimension to the project: after designing their "ideal society," students would need to create a strategic marketing campaign to advertise their farm's strengths. These marketing campaigns would culminate in an actual election in which the 9th-grade class, who read the book the previous year, would vote on which group had designed and advertised their farm most effectively. In addition to providing a clear target audience for their work, this new element in the project would also allow time for inquiry into the costs and benefits of using different media for purposes of persuasion and the ways that a medium does, indeed, shape the message it is intended to convey.




Students who created videos utilized Facebook to share their work with a wider audience.

Students spent three days engaged in small-group discussions about the nature of the society they were creating. Like any government planning, the initial conversations were a heated medley of conflicting priorities and opinions; however, as I conferred with each group, the tone gradually became more civil. The students realized that in order to make a society function, there would need to be compromises. And by the end of the third day, each group had outlined the political hierarchy that would govern how money would be earned, spent, and dispersed in the society. Each group wrote up these details in a formal constitution, which was then distributed to the 9th-grade students who would ultimately be voting.

With the initial planning phase complete, it was time to begin our inquiry into the strengths and limitations of the media available for advertising to the 9th-grade class. I reminded the students that in the same way that real-life politicians use a variety of media to get support for their ideas, they would need to be strategic if they were going to get their message to their intended audience.

We began brainstorming some of the media that would be most effective in reaching the 9th-grade class. The initial list included: posters, speeches, Facebook pages, websites, videos, and one-on-one interactions. Taking posters as an example, the class discussed the benefits of the medium:

**ALLISON:** If the poster looks nice, it could grab the 9th-graders' attention, and it would get word out about the farm.

**HANNAH:** Yeah, if a group put pictures of a farm on a poster, it could give people an idea of what the farm would really look like if it existed. It could make people want to live there.

**KYLE:** You could also use posters like billboards. Like some companies use billboards that are funny or interesting to show off their positive traits.

**ALLISON:** And they use a motto or picture or something so you know that the billboards are from the same company.

**KYLE:** Like the Nike "Swoosh."

Though the students didn't realize it, their discussion about the strengths of posters had led them into a fairly advanced analysis of how companies use branding to establish a visual identity. Their conversations about the limitations of posters were equally insightful. One student mentioned that the visual nature of posters makes it difficult to convey substantial information without them becoming "cluttered" or "ugly"—an acknowledgment that visual media tend to be biased against persuasion through detailed linear arguments, or what Aristotle called "Logos." Another student recognized that for a poster to be effective, it requires a prominent location—one that is in a high-traffic area for the target audience. This provoked a conversation about the delicate balance of getting word out about the farms without overwhelming the 9th-grade students by the sheer volume of posters.

Transitioning back into their groups, the students conducted a similar inquiry into the costs and benefits of the other media that were available to them. Each group then took on the responsibility of selecting the media that it felt would be most effective in reaching the 9th-grade class. Because the inquiry into the effectiveness of media was largely new to the students, they embraced it with a sense of enthusiastic experimentation. Though I only required each group to utilize two different media, many of the groups opted to do more in order to increase their chances of winning the election.

Over the next week, the class followed a familiar workshop structure. We began each day with a brief minilesson on a particular medium—first, looking at models of marketing campaigns that made use of it and evaluating its effectiveness; second, giving students time to experiment with the medium to consider whether it would be a helpful addition to their own multimedia campaigns. The remainder of class time was spent in groups as the students continued honing the visual identity of their farms, seeking out prime advertising space throughout the school, and planning the strategic release for multiple components of their campaigns.

One unplanned benefit of the project resulted from the fact that many students brought existing multimedia experience with them to the classroom. Even though I provided a basic overview of diverse media through daily minilessons, the students with a more in-depth knowledge of a given medium quickly positioned themselves as experts within their groups and helped teach their classmates the "insider details" of website creation, video editing, and poster design. This transformed the classroom work environment into what Gustavson (2007) calls a "youthspace" by recasting traditional classroom roles in a way that embraces student interests and out-of-school literacies (p. 160). During these workshop times, I conferred with the groups, both to encourage critical reflection as the students negotiated the varying media available to them, and to learn more about the resources, interests, and ideas that each student brought to bear on their group's work. These interactions allowed me to modify my understanding of the students' needs as I planned for the following day's minilesson.


Students used Facebook to connect and communicate with potential 9th-grade voters.

After nearly two weeks of synthesizing, planning, designing, critiquing, writing, composing, filming, and conversing, my students awaited the 9th-graders' vote on which farm they felt was most effectively organized and advertised. Surprisingly, those students who did not win were not frustrated that their hard work had failed to yield the desired result. Instead, the inquiry-based approach to the project led those students whose message had not been heard to consider the role their selected media had played in the outcome. During the next class period, the students reflected on the effectiveness of their media selection:

> Of all the media we used, the website was least effective. People were impressed that we made one, but not many people actually visited it. If I could do it again, I would have suggested that we use a Facebook page instead. Most of our audience is already on Facebook, so it would be more convenient for them to look at our farm there than to get them to go to a separate page.

Students recognized the need to pay close attention to aesthetic design in order to help their work stand out from that of other groups.

> We got lots of compliments on our posters, but it was really our one-on-one conversations that helped us get votes. When you're talking to people, it's easier to explain your farm to them than if you can only show them a poster.

> Our team worked hard on a speech to present to the 9th-grade. It took up a lot of class time to get it right, but it was worth it in the end. Being able to explain our farm and respond to their questions in person really let us show the unique aspects of our farm.

These responses reflect an understanding of media that goes far beyond "how" to use technologies. The first comment demonstrates an understanding that the medium of a traditional website is only effective if the audience is willing to make the effort to visit the page, whereas Facebook taps into an existing resource that a large majority of the audience is already using; this is why many businesses are now utilizing social media sites to supplement their traditional website traffic. The second and third responses recognize a fluidity of conversation that is not present in a visual or printed medium. A dialogue can spontaneously adapt to the confusion and interests of an audience in a way that a more static medium, like print, cannot. The observations of these students are in line with Ong's (1967) analysis of the difference between spoken and printed language: "[T]he spoken word is part of present actuality and merges with a total situation to convey meaning. Context for the spoken word is furnished ready-made. In written performance. the writer must establish both meaning and context" (p. 116). As the students wrestled to establish meaning and context with their posters, they learned that as a medium shapes a message, it alters the way an audience understands and interacts with it.

In each of these examples, the students were provided with an infrastructure to use media strategically and thoughtfully in order to "enter into the mind of a given intended audience" (Booth, 2004, p. 94). But the Ideal Society Project was not only intellectually demanding, the students genuinely enjoyed the opportunity to use creative strategy as a means of media exploration. The greatest testimony to this was the school-


Resources like GoogleSites allowed students to consolidate their work online in a way that gave them more aesthetic control than Facebook pages.

wide enthusiasm generated by the project; even now, the 7th-grade students have already begun asking questions about the project in anticipation of next year, when it will be their turn to persuade a new class of 9th-graders to vote for their ideal societies.

## Conclusion

When we bring critical evaluation of media to the forefront of technological instruction, the result is a far more nuanced literacy than if we were to merely expose students to the wide array of tools at their disposal. If we teach students to make websites, they only gain the transferable skill of being able to make more websites. But if we teach students to inquire into the purposes and limitations of a medium, then they will be able to transfer that inquiry to any new medium—including those that have yet to be invented.

Just as Socrates questioned the value of literacy instruction without evaluation, if we embrace the expanded scope of new literacies without acknowledging their uses and limitations, we risk graduating a generation of students who only "appear to have knowledge," when what we desire—indeed, what the world needs—are students who have the wisdom to discern the appropriate medium based on the purpose and audience.

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