CHAPTER 2

Modified, Multiplied, and (Re-)mixed: Social Media and Digital Literacies

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Introduction

The way educators talk about “literacy” has changed. More and more often, we pluralize it or preface it with adjectives—or both. Actually, this is not entirely new. Literacy started to multiply decades ago, giving rise, for example, to visual literacy, media literacy, and, more lately, information literacy. Paul Gilster, who popularized the term “digital literacy,” called it into service as a book title as far back as 1997 (Gilster, 1997). It is a process that led logically to the New London Group’s (2000) promotion of “multiliteracies.” And it is a process that has recently gained speed and urgency, thanks to the proliferation of digital tools and platforms like blogs, wikis, social sharing and social networking sites—in short, social media built “on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0” and promoting “the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

Yet it is no easy matter to deal with the explosion of contemporary modes of literacy driven by social media. In the new millennium, literacy is simultaneously more important and more complex than ever before. Long gone are the days when basic functional literacy was sufficient for everyday life. In networked, postindustrial societies, holding down a job, staying connected with friends, and keeping up with the latest information demands competence in a wide swathe of literacies, active as well as passive. And participation is not optional: Those who
lack appropriate literacies barely exist in digital culture and are doomed
to hover on the fringes of digital societies and digital economies.

But surely there is little danger of that happening to today’s students?
Surely the younger generation is dragging the rest of us, kicking and
screaming, into the technological millennium? So the myth that has
grown up around the “digital generation” would have us believe. Like
many myths, it is built around a kernel of truth: Young people have
a strong impetus to connect and socialize with their peers online, as
adults increasingly bar them from traditional play spaces and hangouts
like parks and malls (boyd, 2008; Watkins, 2009); they have plenty
of time to develop expertise through tinkering with technology; and
they do not have a pre-digital mind-set about how technology can or
should be used. Unsurprisingly, researchers find that youth are heavy
users of participatory digital technologies and that some young peo-
ple have built up considerable know-how in this area (Ito et al., 2010).
Early indications from an ongoing CIBER project suggest that young
net users are increasingly “crowdsourcing” their knowledge (Krotoski,
2010), effectively drawing it from their online social networks, while
new research by Accenture (2010) demonstrates that many young peo-
ple are making extensive use of digital technologies, or expect to do so,
in the workplace.

For all that, in the public imagination the “digital generation” has
been unhelpfully mythologized in at least three ways. First, a growing
body of research shows that factors like gender, race, language, geo-
graphic location, socioeconomic status, and education level complicate
easy assumptions about young people’s access to and use of technology
e.g., Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2008; Hargittai,
2010). The “digital generation,” in other words, is far less homogenous
than the term implies e.g., Hague & Williamson, 2009; Livingstone,
2009). Second, just because kids are using technology for social and
entertainment purposes, it does not mean they are acquiring the critical
literacies necessary to use it for educational or professional purposes, or
that they fully understand its affordances and pitfalls (The Committee
of Inquiry into the Changing Learner Experience, 2009; Hague &
Williamson, 2009). In short, many kids are “tech-comfy” but, with
limited exceptions—notably a substantial minority who “geek out” (Ito
et al., 2010) in remix culture, and whom we will come to later—they are
not “tech-savvy” (Dudeney, 2009; Pegrum, 2009). Third, many adults
are far more technologically accomplished than many kids and, indeed,
remix culture, which is often seen as the hallmark of the younger gen-
eration, may be better viewed as a loose partnership between older and