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Introduction to Part I: Theoretical Bases for Communicative and Visual Arts Teaching

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Introduction to Part I: Theoretical Bases for Communicative and Visual Arts Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

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In recent years the term “literacy” has undergone a notable transformation. In its original sense the term signified the ability to read and write—in other words, the cognitive skills associated with the use of written language. Nowadays, however, one frequently comes across references to “visual literacy,” “computer literacy,” “television literacy,” and the like. This extension of the literacy concept beyond the domain of verbal language is the result of a parallel change in conceptions of the proper scope of education. As the applications of image-based media in both homes and workplaces continue to expand, there is a growing realization that our educational system needs to do more in the way of preparing young people to deal effectively with nonverbal modes of communication—not at the expense of verbal language learning, but as a necessary complement to it. It is this broadening of educational focus that is reflected in the concept of multiple literacies.

The 10 chapters in this part of the handbook offer a theoretical basis for thinking about the integration of the multiple-literacies concept into the educational curriculum. In these chapters, as well as in the broader public discourse on these matters, the term literacy is used in two relatively distinct senses: on the one hand, it may be viewed positively, as an instrument for achieving intellectual growth. On the other hand, however, literacy is sometimes seen in a more negative light, as a means of defense against the potentially damaging influences of mass media. Although both of these aspects of literacy are important, the primary focus here is on the positive side of the phenomenon. In other words, literacy is treated mainly as a foundation for creative engagement with one’s social and physical environment.

In Chapter 1, “Literacy for the Information Age,” Renee Hobbs gives a more detailed account of the issues introduced above. Hobbs begins by pointing out that educators have traditionally taught *with* television and other media, as audio-visual aids, but not *about* these media. She then argues that the increasing importance of media messages in the lives of young people calls for a redefinition of the term “literacy,”

encompassing all forms of messages and including critical evaluation in addition to the skills of production and comprehension. Hobbs connects this expanded definition to five ideas which she considers essential components of any program in media literacy: all messages are the result of selection and choice among a variety of options; all messages are reflections of a particular view of social reality; the meanings of messages arise in the act of interpretation by individual receivers; the interpretation of messages is enhanced by an understanding of their economic, political, social, and aesthetic purposes; effective communication depends on an appreciation of the unique characteristics of each medium, format, and genre. According to Hobbs, this way of looking at literacy has significant implications for a wide variety of issues facing educators today, and she concludes by discussing several of these issues, including the relationship between schools and communities, multicultural education; ESL/bilingual education, the integration among various subject areas, and the development of new tools of assessment.

David Reinking, Linda Labbo and Michael McKenna reiterate the growing necessity for an expanded view of literacy. Their chapter “Navigating the Changing Landscape of Literacy: Current Theory and Research in Computer-Based Reading and Writing,” confronts the narrow perceptions which underlie a stagnant concept of literacy, focusing on the computer as a powerful impetus for growth. Their review of the computer’s profound influence on modern life serves as a compelling suggestion that literacy researchers begin to anticipate the inevitable rise of computer-based innovations, such as electronic text. They argue that the dominant role that electronic text will play in the near future requires that literacy researchers abandon their bias toward the printed text ... and that refusing to acknowledge it dooms them to obsolescence.

The paradigm shift that must precede optimal integration of computers into literacy programs necessitates the development of comprehensive pedagogical theories. The authors identify new research avenues, emphasizing the need for a broad base of theoretical perspectives. A critical element of

the requisite research on the sociocultural and instructional implications of electronic text is an inquiry into the qualities which are unique to electronic text. These distinguishing characteristics are: the interactivity and malleability of electronic texts, their organic inclusion of multimedia, or audiovisual effects, their flexible parameters of freedom and control, the richly varied textual structures they enable, and the new pragmatics and sociopolitical dimensions they contribute to the established literacy tradition.

In addition to the differences between electronic and printed texts, careful consideration of the generalizations that have emerged from classroom-based research will inform pedagogical theories about the computer's role in literacy development. Interestingly, these findings, which will inspire and guide future inquiry, are not always consistent with the assumptions on which much of the instructional use of computers is currently based.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the contemporary and past issues and trends in research on computer-based instruction. The authors note the promising shift from a constrained perspective on the computer's role within our established agenda to a fuller understanding of how it may substantially alter our notions of "reader," "writer," and "text."

The implications of an expanded definition of literacy are also addressed explicitly by Roger Desmond, in his chapter, "TV Viewing, Reading and Media Literacy." Desmond observes that the application of the literacy label to pictorial media has led to objections by writers who argue that video and print are not only logical opposites but also antagonistic to each other. Much of Desmond's chapter is devoted to a careful examination of one facet of this relationship, namely, the possibility that TV viewing has a negative impact on students' reading ability. In reviewing the research evidence on this topic, Desmond finds that there is indeed a recurring negative association between reading skills and viewing, but that the reasons for this association are not clear, since there is only mixed support for the most obvious explanation, that of simple displacement of one activity by the other. The likelihood that television is harmful to reading and school performance may be one reason for the fact that many media-literacy programs tend to emphasize the defensive side of the literacy concept. In noting this tendency, Desmond discusses the need to supplement it with an exploration of the ways in which media literacy can improve a viewer's capacity to use media as sources of information and insight. More specifically, he lists two components of this latter form of visual literacy: first, a viewer's ability to optimize the mental effort invested in the interpretation of any particular type of program; second, the ability to relate previous media experience and real-world knowledge to newly encountered content.

Susan Neuman also considers television's potential contribution to literacy development in her chapter, "Television as a Learning Environment: A Theory of Synergy." She demonstrates the qualitative differences among the various media, arguing that each of these distinct variations stimulates different cognitive processes. Accordingly, in order to develop the broadest range of processing skills, we must explore the ways

in which the media can complement each other. Her "Theory of Synergy" derives from and complements this notion. The theory suggests that the effects of combining media will exceed the sum of their individual merits; that is, coordinating media will amplify the cognitive benefits offered by each individually.

Neuman goes on to outline several variables which affect the phenomenon of media synergy: environmental influence, accord between learner interests and literacy-related media, and the skills necessary for effective media use. Having acknowledged the necessity of future exploration of these factors, she proceeds to discuss the implications of the theory with respect to television. She focuses on the roles of parents and educators in integrating this medium into literacy development programs. The examples cited here clearly illustrate the possibilities offered by the most readily accessible media options.

The theme of using television for purposeful instruction is also taken up by Michael Willmorth in his chapter, "Television and Language Learning." While Neuman and Desmond were concerned about students' skills in dealing with written language, Willmorth's focus is primarily on speech. As in the case of reading ability, there is some evidence suggesting a negative relationship between TV viewing and the development of spoken language. However, as Willmorth demonstrates, the interpretation of these findings is open to question, and the more commonly accepted view in this area of scholarship has tended to be that television experience makes little or no difference to a child's developing mastery of speech. This view is derived from the belief that the acquisition of spoken-language skills depends on the active give-and-take of interpersonal interaction, something that television cannot supply. Willmorth challenges this view in two ways: first, he points out that children's TV viewing often does entail interpersonal interaction, not with the set but with parents, siblings, or other covievers; second, he argues that, at least as far as vocabulary building is concerned, there are both theoretical and empirical reasons for assuming that active interaction may not be as crucial to language learning as previously supposed. With these considerations in mind, Willmorth goes on to discuss the application of television in the language classroom, with special emphasis on the use of TV materials that were not originally designed for instructional purposes. The discussion brings to a close this section's examination of the connection between media literacy and language.

In the next chapter attention shifts to visual matters. Under the rubric, "Visual Communication Skills and Media Literacy," Michael Griffin and Dona Schwartz develop a set of prescriptions for the types of visual knowledge that young people need in order to become competent participants in an increasingly visual culture. More than anything else, the authors argue that young people need to learn the distinction between pictures and reality. That is, they need to learn that photographic images are not simply direct records of the world around us. This learning entails an appreciation of the implications of framing and of other ways in which picture makers select what the viewer will see. It also entails the capacity to think about images in terms of their creators' intentions, as well as the conventions through which those

intentions are expressed. Educators concerned about such matters have often advocated training young people in media production as a method for encouraging their acquisition of these forms of knowledge. Both Schwartz and Griffin have conducted research on the consequences of this sort of visual training, and they report that it can indeed have the desired effect, although in its initial stages it often seems to result primarily in the unreflective copying of mass media conventions. With the aim of contextualizing the knowledge that comes from production experience, the authors suggest that students should also be taught the theory and social history of visual practices.

The visual aspects of media literacy are examined further in the next two chapters of Part I. Both chapters explore the broader cognitive ramifications of learning about visual media. In his discussion of "Visual Intelligence and Analogical Thinking," the author takes as his starting point the fact that visual imagery has historically played an important role in the advancement of science and technology. This fact suggests that there may be significant cognitive commonalities between scientific and artistic creativity. One kind of intellectual process that these two areas appear to share is analogical thinking: the ability to notice underlying similarities between objects or events that are superficially different from each other, and to use those similarities productively as vehicles for deeper understanding and more effective communication. After illustrating how this intellectual process works in scientific discovery and technical communication, the author gives a detailed description of the ways in which analogical connections operate in visual representations. These considerations lead to the conclusion that skill in dealing with visual media may productively be thought of as part of a more encompassing artistic/scientific intelligence.

A similar view of visual literacy motivates Georgette Page's chapter, "Visual Intelligence and Spatial Aptitudes." The latter term refers to a person's ability to form accurate mental models of two- and three-dimensional spatial relationships, and to envision how those relationships would appear from varying points of view. Fluency in this mode of thought is considered a crucial requirement of such occupations as architecture, whose domains of activity or reference are physical structures. Spatial aptitude may also be a prerequisite for some of the cognitive processes that a viewer must be able to perform in the course of interpreting the content of visual media. It is this possibility that Page is particularly concerned with in this chapter. Page has done a substantial amount of research on children's responses to visual media, and this chapter presents data from three of her studies. The aim of these studies was to investigate the relationship between children's spatial skills and their ability to comprehend the composition and the editing in various video clips. In all three studies, this relationship turned out to be positive: children who performed better on tests of spatial aptitude also had higher comprehension scores. Page compares these results with the findings of other researchers, and she concludes that

while her studies treated spatial aptitude as the causal variable, its relationship to visual literacy may well be one of mutual reinforcement.

With the foregoing discussions of television and other visual media as a backdrop, the next chapter takes a look at the future. In the years ahead, literacy educators will face a rapidly changing media environment. The aim of John Carey's chapter, "Exploring Future Media," is to provide an overview of some of the challenges the environment will pose. After giving a detailed description of major technological developments that are expected to drive the evolution of new media forms, Carey offers a speculative account of potential implications of future media. Among other things, he predicts that new technologies may create greater opportunities for decentralized production and distribution of media materials; that a proliferation of available sources of media content may be accompanied by a narrower targeting of that content to specific audiences; that enhanced image quality and the integration of video and computers may lead to innovations in the "language" of visual media; and that novel forms of advertising may increasingly blur the distinction between commercial messages and program content. Adapting to such developments will be a demanding task, not only for students but also for their teachers.

The need for teachers to be open to new sources of knowledge, both inside and outside of the classroom, is a major concern of the chapter, "Balancing Act: Using Drama to Even the Exchange of Information in the Classroom." The author, Jennifer Lynn Massen, has extensive experience as a drama teacher, and she supports her argument with a wealth of examples drawn from this experience and from additional research. Using drama teaching as a paradigm for education in the communicative arts, Massen discusses a variety of ways in which drama in the classroom can be used to promote a reciprocal flow of information between students and teachers. To begin with, she points out that original productions can act as vehicles for introducing information from students' own lives and experiences into classes and youth groups. She argues further that the capacity to empathize with another person's point of view is central to good acting, and that drama is therefore a way of encouraging both teachers and students to acquire an understanding of multiple truths and perspectives. Another point Massen makes is that the inherently collaborative nature of theater promotes a healthy interdependence among participants—an outcome that is especially likely in contemporary youth drama groups, which typically eschew traditional distinctions between stars and supporting parts. Finally, Massen notes that the experience of producing drama gives the participants the satisfaction of genuine achievement. All these points could be adapted to the more general requirements of teaching about other communicative arts and media. Massen's discussion thus brings a reminder that a vital ingredient in the success of new literacy programs will be the interpersonal environment in which those programs are implemented.