Janet Young

Of Cell Phones, Blogs, and Books:
Social Interaction and Our Sense of Being Literate

House of Learning

409

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Harold B Lee Library
HOUSE OF LEARNING LECTURE

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**Of Cell Phones, Blogs, and Books:
social interaction and our sense of being literate**

Professor Janet R Young
Department of Teacher Education
Thursday 16 February 2006
2:00 pm Library Auditorium
Question and Answer session to follow

"Prepare every needful thing… even… a house of learning." Doctrine and Covenants 88:119

Now, because I am a teacher at heart, we are going to begin today's lecture with a pop quiz. Now this quiz will not require you to take out a piece of paper and number from one to ten, for this quiz you can keep track of your answers on your fingers, but it will take both hands to complete the quiz. Are you ready? Here we go. If you can read the following message, before it disappears (we'll it won't disappear.) But if you can read the following message before the answer appears, put up one finger on your right hand. How did you do? If you have consulted the hard copy version of a newspaper for information today, raise a finger on your left hand. If you know the web address for the blog of someone who is not a member of your immediate family, put up a finger on your right hand. If you are more likely to search for a pen or pencil and a paper than a keyboard when you begin to write, let's say an essay, a paper, or a talk, raise a finger on your left hand. If you have none of the following electronic devices with you right now, raise a finger on your left hand. No computer, no cell phone, no electronic planner, or an iPod, or a pager. Now if you can name the numbers on a cell phone keypad that you would push to type the six vowels in alphabetical order, that would be a, e, i, o, u, and y without looking at your phone, raise a finger on your right hand. You may need to think about that one for a minute. If you have read more than one hundred pages of a novel just because you want to in the past week, raise a finger on your left hand. Now if you have more recently made an entry on your blog than in your personal hand written journal, raise a finger on your right hand. If you have checked your email more than twice today, raise a finger on your right hand. And finally, if you have sent a letter to a friend or family mail via snail mail since last Monday, put up one finger on your left hand.

Well now, that's your quiz. Score your quiz, hold your fingers there, look at your hands. Are the scores on your hands equally balanced, or does one hand have more fingers raised than the other. Which one? Are you more likely to engage in somewhat conventional literacy practices represented by fingers on your left hand or the literacy practices embedded in the virtual social worlds of the electronic communication, those represented by fingers on your right hand? Is the total number of your fingers raised closer to zero or to ten. What do you suppose these results of the pop quiz reflect about the literacy tools and practices that are part of your life?

In the next few minutes, I would like to explore the tools and relationships of our literate lives and to raise questions about the personal and social implications of our literacy. My fundamental assumption is that literacy is a way of being in the world, and an essential aspect of our human existence, particularly in this age of global electronic communication. I will talk about our sense of being literate. A term used my Shirley Brithe Heath in her 1991 introductory chapter in the handbook of reading research, "our sense of being literate, is our sense of who we are and how we fit into society." In the handbook Heath proposes one sense of being literate derives from the ability to exhibit literate behaviors and that such a sense enables individuals in industrialized nations both to feel and to create harmony within their daily worlds. Further, those who are skilled in the use of a broad range of tools can call on their literateness to help them stabilize and to control their world. Heath suggests that our sense of being literate is rooted in our view of our own capabilities, but also in our sense of connectedness to others who share similar

capabilities. It is our literacy that allows us to transcend the bounds of time and space to interact with others who are distant in place in history or in circumstance. It is our sense of being literate that situates us in our literate society. Put another way, our sense of being literate is who we take ourselves to be as literate individuals within our social worlds. We could also call it our literate identity.

Because our planet has become so much smaller through almost instantaneous global access to information and communication our social worlds may be large and varied. Individuals who possess certain skills and knowledge share the potential to connect with others in ways unimagined only a few years ago. Our social worlds and more particularly our view of our own place in those diverse social worlds are inextricably connected with the tools that we employ, the knowledge or skills that we possess, the literate activities in which we engage, and the others with whom we interact. This is especially true of literacys made possible through relatively recent technologies and advances such as cell phones or computers.

In a discussion in our sense of being literate it becomes important first of all to define literacy, what do we mean when we say that one is literate. Traditionally literacy was considered to be the ability to read and write printed text. In some instances this is a useful way to talk about literacy. For our purposes today however, it is likely to narrow. There's more to being literate than simply being able to read and write. More broadly defined, literacy includes not only reading and writing but also listening and speaking, in part because oral language is so fundamental in our ability to read and write using print. In this fast page age of images, icons, logos, and videos, even this expanded definition is inadequate to describe how we require information. In a broader view, literacy includes ways of thinking and viewing. Now, viewing is sometimes referred to as visual literacy. It is the ability to make meaning using nonverbal or graphic information. From sources such as movies, videos, graphs and charts, nonverbal cues such as facial expression or body language, advertisements, and illustrations. In our discussion today I will adopt this broader definition of literacy.

Now there are four attributes of literacy that are germane to our discussion. The first is that literacy is tool mediated. That is, when we engage in literate activity we invariably employ tools or technologies to achieve our purposes. Now these tools may range from very tangible, pen and paper, keyboard and screen, or canvas and paint, to more abstract tools such as the symbols and symbol systems of language. When listening or speaking, we use the tools of oral language such as words, gestures, voice tone, and pitch. When we read and write in alphabetic language our tools of written language include letters, spaces, punctuation marks, as well as the layout of the printed page and the directional conventions of print. In English for example, we write from left to right and top to bottom on a page. By contrast, those who communicate using non-alphabetic languages such as American Sign Language or even local graphic written languages employ entirely different symbols and conventions, but these symbols are tools for literacy just the same. The tools we use in our literacy may vary because of skill, because of the skill, the situation, or our purpose. Yet our sense of our literate self, our literate identity, is closely tied to our ability to use those tools and technologies effectively.

Our sense of being literate is embodied in tools and technologies that we employ. Which brings us to the second attribute of literacy fundamental to our discussion today, literacy implies a certain level of knowledge and skill of a particular type. When we claim that someone is computer literate for example, it's likely that that person has attained a level of competence at the keyboard that enables her to successfully perform basic operations such as word processing, searching the internet, communicating electronically or creating graphics. In different times and places, differing standards of literacy apply. In the American west in the 19th century for example, anyone who could decipher a newspaper or a neighbor's correspondence aloud and could legibly record their own or others ideas on paper was considered literate. As we all know, even basic standards of literacy in our own day are much higher than that. A societies expectations then regarding acceptable levels of knowledge and skill with oral, written, or nonverbal communication emerge from the circumstances of that society. It follows that individual members sense of being literate within the community is tightly bound to the levels of knowledge or skills they possess.

A third attribute relevant to our discussion is the social nature of literacy. All aspects of literacy whether reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking, or viewing can be considered means for relating to and communicating with self or others. It is this social and communicative nature of literacy that allows us to connect across time and space with others in our social world and it is our connectedness with others that allows us to develop a sense of who we are. In a very real way then, our literate identity derives from our communications with others. Our sense of self as a literate individual emerges through interactions within our social worlds.

A fourth attribute of literacy, one closely related to the third is that our literacy is embedded in complex webs of social practices, ways of engaging with others in literate acts. Social practices of literacy include the formal as well as the unwritten and unspoken rules for engaging in certain types of literate activity. The words we use, the way that we initiate or discontinue verbal interactions, the subtle but real conventions for engaging in such interactions and even the purposes for which we employ particular types of communication are all examples of social practices of literacy. Often, these social practices of literacy are subtle cues sent and received subconsciously by those who are literate in particular ways. They serve as markers of membership in particular types of literate communities, thereby facilitating both the inclusion and exclusion of individuals in those communities. Our sense of being literate in these literate communities is tightly bound up in the social practices of literacy.

For our purposes then, literacy includes reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking, and viewing, it is social in nature, it is mediated by tools and technologies, and finally to be literate requires several levels of knowledge or skill. But it also encompasses sometimes rather elaborate systems of social practices as well. Our sense of being literate, who we take ourselves to be within social contexts, derives from our ability to act in certain literate ways. Having defined literacy, I will now put forth two general propositions for being literate. These two propositions are reciprocal in nature. Two sides

of a coin and perhaps by understanding these two ideas, we may come to think differently about our own literate lives.

The first proposition is this; the literate activity in which we engage shapes who we are as literate individuals. Now you have no doubt heard the adage 'you are what you eat,' and most certainly you are familiar with the proverb 'as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.' Well I propose that a similar relationship exists in our literate lives. What we do, shapes who we are. Now this relationship may seem self evident, if we think of literate activity as encompassing not only our abilities, our literacy knowledge or skills but also the tools we use, the practices we employ, and the people with whom we interact, the proposition becomes more complex and I think more interesting. As Heath suggested, these interconnected aspects of our literate activity form the seabed for our sense of self as a literate individual.

Let us look at the relationship between our literate identity and the literate tools we use. Consider for example the process of writing. When you compose a letter, an essay, a narrative, or any other written product, the tools that you employ are very likely to influence the way you think during the process. If you compose at the keyboard, you may pour out your thoughts in a flow of text in a stream of consciousness manner. Now if the written product is intended for a formal audience, you will likely return to the idea that you have recorded, cut paste, organize, edit, correct, extend, and refine until a satisfactory written product is created. Well, the tools you use during this composing process, the computer for example, the keyboard, the screen, and in particularly the computer shape not only the format of the product you are writing, but also the way you think the way you work. The motion of the fingers, your gaze as you write and the speed at which you can commit your thoughts to print are all impacted by the technology you use. Now, most would agree that a word processor, which is a tool of literacy, certainly facilitates this type of writing and in a very real sense shapes the way an author thinks during the writing process. To write in this same manner, but to do so with a pencil and paper or even a manual typewriter would be much more difficult, cause the fingers fly faster across the keys than the pen does across the page.

Now by contrast, you may compose as I do at the keyboard in a far more jerky manner, typing a phrase or a sentence, backing up, writing and revising your ideas again and again editing as you go. Sometimes this means taking three steps forward and two back, but in the end a high quality written text may results. A word processor is equally important in shaping the authors thinking in this authoring style. In either case, the writing process certainly might be accomplished by more conventional means and of course was for centuries prior to the development of word processors, but the nature the task including the way we think when we write is essentially changed when texts are composed electronically. In turn, our view of our literacy is shaped by the tools we employ. It's not simply the physical tools we use such as keyboard, computer, pencils and paper that shape our ways of being literate. The vocabulary, abbreviations, grammar, or other linguistic symbol systems we employ also shape the meanings we make and the ways we engage in literate activity and therefore ultimately shape our literate identity. In any form of literacy, there are symbols that stand for something else. And there is some

level of shared understanding of these symbols among those considered literate within that given community.

English words for example carry meanings that are generally understood by those who speak the language. Now those meaning may evolve over time, nonetheless the words we use serve as tools for communicating ideas. Now in tonal languages such as Thai, it's not only the words that convey idea, but also the inflection of the speaker's voice or the written symbols used to indicate inflection in print that carries meaning. So the conventions or rules that govern the symbolic representation of ideas play a significant role in determining what it means to be literate in a particular society and our sense of our own capability regarding those expectations is fundamental to our literate identity. Therefore, that relationship between technology and literate activity and the knowledge of skill is not difficult to see.

Now calling a person literate implies that that individual possesses an acceptable level of understanding of the technology at hand. Historically, in our own country as well as in industrialized nations, the defining technology of literacy was simply the printed word, therefore literacy learning consisted of learning of how to read and write texts of various kinds, as well as developing the ability to engage in spoken conversation as a good listener and speaker. But the demands of literacy have clearly evolved to something much broader than that today and this evolution impacts all of us, albeit in different ways. As an educator it means that I must think far beyond literacy of the past as I prepare teachers to teach children who will in turn need to be knowledgeable and skilled in the use of technologies yet to be developed. The challenges that educators have faced in the past in educating students to be literate pale in comparison to those we currently face. The challenges of the future promise to be greater still.

Endowing students with literacy knowledge and skills that they will need in a world yet to be imagined is demanding work indeed. While challenges may seem somewhat different in your circumstances, ongoing changes on what it means to be literate in our society will almost certainly require frequent upgrades in your literacy related skills. Therefore, the pursuit of life long learning and service, one of the aims of the BYU education, will most assuredly require such upgrades.

Now just as the face of what it means to be literate has changed over time, it also varies from one society to another. This is so because standards of what constitutes acceptable levels of literacy are socially agreed upon, determined by those who are in possession of the knowledge and skills associated with the given technology. While these standards may be explicit, they are always imbedded in everyday activities of groups of people.

Now there are different sorts of literacy, and each type is associated with the body of knowledge and requires particular sets of skills for participation in that literacy. We can talk of print literacy in alphabetical languages which requires knowledge of letters as we have talked about as well. We can talk about cultural literacy. In cultural literacy we talk about someone who is aware or uh knowledgeable of authors, a body of literature,

and historical figures in a given culture. More recently, we find ourselves talking of critical literacy. In critical literacy, we are referring to the ability to read beyond the surface of level of given text and a willingness to examine the issues of power and influence, tasks that within the words and actions of others. And we all know that sometimes we speak of people that are computer literate and the list could go on.

Just because we are literate in one context does not mean we will be literate in another. And in one type of literacy, we may implore different media that in another. Our literate knowledge and skills do not stand alone. As we can see the tools of technology we chose to use require certain types of knowledge. But by the same token the tools have influenced not only on the process of communication, but more importantly they determine the individuals with whom we will communicate, the social worlds where we are considered literate.

Now if you could quickly and easily read the messages I have presented, the message that I have presented in today's pop quiz, how many of you could by the way? Ah ah, not very many. If the message was difficult to read as it was for many of us, it was probably because of your unfamiliarity with the abbreviations and symbols used in the text. You were unfamiliar with the lingo, probably because you don't use that lingo. In most cases, what may seem to be strange strings of letters, actually serve as an efficient mean of means of communicating ideas. The important point is that the telegraphic text of instant and text messaging is understandable to those who have become skilled at using the specialized vocabulary through reading and writing those kinds of texts. Unless we think that that is a new phenomenon however, we should remember that specialized vocabulary has long been a facilitating and exclusionary part of being literate. Disciplines specific jargon, or intertextual nuances are commonly used for professional literature and movie scripts alike. Have you ever walked out of movie where nuances were there that you didn't understand and you felt certainly that you were left out of the loop? We could argue that the specialized tools and vocabulary make conversations or talks about the discipline more efficient as a linguistic tool but it also sorts those who belong from those who do not belong to the literate community of that literacy.

So those of us who may lack the background knowledge may fail to see the humor in a movie, when subtle references to other stories or prior events are essential to the plot. This results in the nagging sense that we are somehow excluded from the group that gets it. In each case, the sense of being outside the social world of those who communicate with others in certain symbolic ways arises from our inability to implore the knowledge or tools appropriately.

This brings us to the social practices associated with literacy. A social theory of learning according to Wenger suggests that learning is not an isolated enterprise, rather it takes place in communities, and these communities are social groups with members usually engaged in joint enterprise, members who share a common repertoire of resources for negotiating meaning. Members of communities actively participate in practices related to their goal. Now a practice according to Skrimner and Coal is a set of interrelated tasks that shares common tools knowledge and skills. So practices are

developed by the community and directed toward the goals that have been defined as worth pursuing. Now as with other aspects of literacy we've discussed, the way we see ourselves as literate individuals is intertwined with the practices with which we engage. For example, you may call yourself an avid reader, a letter writer, a journal keeper, a children's author, or a journalist, and I identifying with such groups would reveal much about you literate identity. Yet in each case it is not sufficient to declare yourself to be a member of a group of literate individuals. To truly belong, you would also be able to act. Sometimes in pretty subtle ways, like that sort of a literate person. Knowing how or when a text message or how long to wait before responding to a text message, what to include in a lively and engaging blog, or how to comment on a stranger's blog. All of these require a certain level of awareness of the unwritten rules or social standards associated with each type of literate activity. For every literate activity, there are certain ways of enacting the roles in that community. We become skilled at engaging appropriately in each of these worlds often over an extending period of time. We do this by actively engaging in the literate activity within that community.

Now the social practices of any given community can be quite complex. In a study reported by Lewis and Fabos in Reading Research Quarterly in 2005, they describe the online interactions of seven adolescents who use instant messaging on a daily basis. These teens routinely sustain simultaneous conversations with as many as ten different buddies at a time and they would adeptly shift from one conversation to another, often interacting in different ways with each buddy. They were avid users of instant messaging who were quite aware of the social devices they and others employed and their ways of getting along in these online relationships.

One fourteen year old girl admitted that she sometimes posed as someone else by imitating that persons tone and language expression in her own conversations. Now, she did this in order to listen in to her friends talk without the others knowing she was online. Or at least on one occasion, to converse with a boy from her school she was interested in without disclosing her real identity. Another indicated she altered her spelling and grammar as well as the topics of her writing depending on her audience. It was common practice for the participants to have several screen names and to use each quite purposefully. Louis and Fabos reported that these teens forged their social identities at least in part through their online participation in an intricate web of social practices quite particular to the world of instant messaging.

Now in each of the preceding examples and tools, we have seen that, excuse me. In preceding examples, tools and technology, knowledge and skills, people and social practices have interacted in ways. Yet, it is important to note that when individuals engage in literate activity employing these tools and practices and so forth, they themselves may also be shaped in significant ways. So, my second proposition is a reciprocal to the first. Who we are as literate individuals shapes the literate activity in which we engage.

Now Wenger illustrates the reciprocal nature of these two propositions that I have reported here, when they use the metaphor of the mountain and the river. While the

contour of the mountain clearly guides and directs the course of the river that flow through its valleys it is also true that the rushing waters of the river carve and shape the river bed and ultimately sculpt the face of the mountain itself. Quote, "they shape each other but they have their own shape. They are reflections of each other, but they have their own existence in there own realms. They fit around each other but they remain distinct from each other. They can not be transformed into each other, yet they transform each other. The river only carves and the mountain only guides yet in their interaction the carving becomes the guiding and the guiding becomes the carving." End quote, and that is Wenger. And I think that is such an important metaphor in what I'm trying to communicate today. In similar ways, our literate activity shapes who we are as literate individuals. But who we are as literate individuals allows us to shape the world, the landscape of our social worlds.

Let us examine this second proposition then, a little further. If as we proposed earlier, literate activity encompasses those four areas that I have discussed it seems reasonable that these would be shaped then by our literate identities, or by the literate identities of the individual who employ individuals who employ the literacy. So by returning the example used previously, we can find support for our second proposition. We considered the ways in which the literacy tools we employed shaped our literate identity; well the converse is also true. Each tool has been imagined by someone who's self, sense of self as literate extended beyond what already was, just as the river carves its own course through the mountains. Innovative individuals have shaped the landscape of our literate world through ongoing technological advances and all of us have experienced change in our literate lives as well.

The specialized vocabulary, another example I cited previously, of text and instant messaging described earlier um is another example. Whether motivated by convenience, cleverness, or thrift, individuals have developed these symbols over time and the resulting telegraphic language is well suited to a medium where a message may contain only a limited number of characters. You know the extent of this symbolic language is almost staggering. A Google search using just a few search terms yielded dozens of websites containing extensive long lists of abbreviations and symbols that were developed by those who used text and instant messaging.

And even the conventions of standard written English have evolved over time, and they continue to do so. As new words, which are you remember a fundamental tool of literacy, as new words are coined and widely used, broadly accepted the language shifts and changes. New words or phrases become established or conventional and old ones fall from use. Words may take on new meanings through ways of using them. Now the word text is an example. Text is no longer just a noun. You realize of course that text is a legitimate verb. We all text from time to time. Google is another. A term that less than a decade ago was just a made up word that was fun to say has now become an integral part of our lives. I can't go through a day without Google, can you?

Constant change is quite evident in the technologies of literacy and the knowledge, and the skills required to use those technologies have shifted and changed as

well. Both have been shaped by dreams and visions of individuals who sense of self as literate transcends the way things are. And who have imagined the literate selves as they might become with the help of new or more advanced technology.

Now in perhaps less intentional ways social competencies associated with new literacy have evolved, influenced by those who engage in those practices. For example, there are excepted or proper ways to interact with someone somewhat conventional literate worlds such as using traditional greetings and closing in a business letter, or returning books to the library on time and undamaged. In enumerable little ways we signal our membership as literate individuals in various social settings. And those ways of being literate in turn define what it means to be literate in traditional ways. But this is true in more contemporary types of communication as well. Who has defined when and where the use of cell phones is acceptable and polite. How many unanswered text messages merit the erasure of a phone number from a person's contact list? Or, how to maintain a safe level of amenity when engaging with stranger's blog conversation. These have become the norm, not from someone outside the society, but from those who use those tools.

Now those may seem quite trivial, but I would like to share an example that I think is far more profound. During the recent conformation hearings for Judge Sam Alito, there was a day when some fairly living exchanges occurred between a few members of the senate judiciary committee and Judge Alito, you might remember that. As you know, the hearings were broadcast live everyday and political correspondence provided analysis and commentary at each of the recesses and the hearings. Only hours after one particularly heated exchange between Senator Kennedy and judge Alito, there was a discussion between two news broadcasters about public reaction to the confrontational strains. One of the analysts presented his view of the prevailing response of the nation, arguing that if you believe the blogs, public opinion is clearly, and then he presented his opinion about the national response to the Kennedy/Alito relationship. Now the significance of this incident is not the particular claim made by the news broadcaster instead it is the process that led him to make the claim that I wish to examine.

First, the confirmation hearings were easily available fro people across the nation, and second, individuals who had strong opinions about what they had seen expressed their ideas, and third political analysts probably with these additional, the assistance of staff members engaged in some sort of sampling and then reported public opinion on the exchange. Now whether or not their report was accurate was not the point, what I do want to point out that the potential for wide and rapid dissemination of information and the shaping for public opinion by citizens who might be quite culturally diverse can occur. More importantly, this everyday incident reminds us that individuals who possess the knowledge and skills and tools can shape the landscape of their social world.

Now, we've talked about the reciprocal relationship between these two propositions and I want you to notice that neither of these propositions are passive in nature. The verbs are active. This brings us to the point that I want to make with this lecture. Because we shape and because we are shaped by our literate identity, we have a

choice. Choice seems to be an important aspect in all this. We choose how we will engage, the technology we will use, the practices we will use, and the people with whom we interact. We choose who we will be. Perhaps an incident I observed almost a year ago here on campus will help frame a discussion of the ideas that I presented today.

This story illustrates a potential downside to the technological possibilities so readily available to us. As I crossed the new quad just outside the Harold B. Lee Library one afternoon last spring, I heard a young woman's voice some distance behind me. She had evidently recognized an old friend across the quad and so she called his name, at first with only moderate volume in her voice. He apparently did not hear her and continued to walk fairly briskly away from the new Joseph Smith memorial building. Thin white cords stretched from his ears to his chest forming the familiar Y shaped traces of an iPod in use. As she hurried toward him, the young woman called his name several more times, a bit louder each time and he did not appear to hear any of these attempts either. As he entered the library without looking back, she paused only a few yards from the door and then turned away with a shrug. Now I recognize the interpretation that I'm about to share the interpretation I am about to share of that brief scene is just that, my interpretation. And other explanations could be just as plausible. But let us suppose for a moment that this is an old friend and the young man that I observed might have welcomed a conversation with this young woman. Because he was tuned into some other world, he did not hear his friend's voice because he did not, an opportunity to connect with her was lost.

Now even if my interpretation of this small incident is wrong, the story illustrates a phenomenon that seems increasingly prevalent. We live in an era of connectivity, cell phones, blogs, emails, internet, television, movies, cds, iPods, have all created opportunities for us to connect electronically to almost anyone anywhere at any given time. Paradoxically, in this world of connectedness we may also become increasingly isolated from one another. When it is so easy to interact with those not present, we can readily insulate ourselves from the worlds that surround us, even to the point of becoming oblivious to those in our immediate context who might potentially touch our lives for good. Choices to maintain nearly constant contact with selected circles of friends, may limit who we um, who we interact with. This sets up a pull and a tug. The pull and tug of literacy related choices are evident in our everyday, both intended and unintended consequences of our ways of being literate are ever present.

Consider first the almost limitless possibilities and personal benefits from being literate in this information age. The wisdom of the ages or the weather report for any city that you could name are available within seconds. Family history has never been easier. With 24 hour news broadcasts, we can tune in and witness disasters even as they unfold. We have access to elected representatives and we can readily obtain information about the workings of our government. We have calling cards, email messages, and technologies that make friends and families seem very nearby. In turn, in sum these we can employ the literacy, knowledge, and skills we have in very appropriate ways.

Now in the field of education, there are all sorts of advantages to technology. Technology has altered the literate identities of teachers and students, sculpted the world

of schooling, created virtual classrooms, and made possible lively dialogues among individuals in geographically and socio-economically diverse contexts. We have it seemingly limitless uh access to information online.

Only a few decades ago integrating media into teaching meant using a film strip, a cassette tape recorder, or on very rare special occasions a reel to reel projector to show a movie. Technology available in education today can transform a desktop into a laboratory or transport students to distant galaxies. In education we can indeed see the carving and the guiding of river and mountain all around us. There is nothing more rewarding than the exuberance of the young child aglow with the realization that he really is a reader. Both the child and the classroom are enriched when this happens. In many school contexts, choices about literate activity are made with measured thought and careful planning. And the consequences of these choices in turn are noteworthy.

We can only estimate the impact, the long term impact of a six grade class's letter writing campaign, particularly if it results in a classroom visit from a city councilman for a Q&A session about the children's concern about the city's skateboard ordinances. The positive returns for such literate activity, most certainly would be significant for both the children and the community. Yet, such benefits do not come without cost. Clearly there are unintended consequences of our literate activity and they are no less common than the benefits. We are constantly reminded of the dangers of the internet, predators, pornography. Unscrupulous individuals are easily encountered threw electronic media, perhaps because the identity is hidden behind the scene. The internet creates a space where the exchange of ideas is almost instantaneous and broadly accessible to a large number of people simultaneously. Now that doesn't mean that there's anything naturally malevolent about the media, but it is imperative that we choose wisely in order to avoid the unintended consequences for our choices.

Now it's not my purpose here to innumerate entirely the positive and the negative consequences of being literate, but I do wish to cause us to stop and reflect. Are the social practices related to literacy in which we engage helping us to feel and create harmony in our daily lives? Does our literacy nurture us, liberate us, open windows to the world, give us power to nurture others and contribute in many meaningful ways? In short, are the literate individuals we choose to be, fulfilling the purposes for which we are placed here? Is it possible to be fully present in our physically immediate world and be globally connected at the same time? Will your literacy connect you with others in ways that lift and build and allow you to succor the weak, lift up the hands that hang down and strengthen the feeble needs?

The printed word and the tools and technologies available in today's informational age are broad and varied and changing at a dizzying pace. We can interact with scholars and statesmen, prophets, monarchs, entertainers, heroes, or common man. We can touch both our ancestors and future generations, but more extraordinarily we can instantly interface with individuals almost anywhere on the earth and we can preserve images and words for rapid dissemination across the planet.

Now for some of us, this may not seem remarkable at all, but rather much like the way things have always been. For others of us, these changes are marked and it may even seem impossible to keep up. The metaphor of the mountain and the river reminds us that we need not passively meander through the landscape of our literate lives. Our sense of being literate in diverse social worlds, actively shapes, and is shaped by the choices that we make. The literate individuals we choose to be possess power to transform the tools and technologies we employ and the knowledge and skill we endeavor to obtain. But most of all, the people who's lives we touch. Mountain streams will flow, cliffs and valleys will guide, yet even the hardest rocks are not impervious to the steady trickle of a small brook. There have always been consequences for literate actions, but in this electronic age, they are even more profound. We must choose well.