

Expanding the Conversation: A Commentary Toward Revision of Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, and Whitin

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Abstract

As a commentary aimed toward revision of “Beliefs About Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers: Beginning the Conversation” (Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005), this paper encourages the authors to focus on the multiliteracies that technologies enable as a guiding theme rather than on technologies themselves. It also contends that revisions could be more congruent with current trends in K-12 literacy instruction, namely addressing how multiliteracies and design-based learning can connect with standards and assessment. In so doing, it suggests that the revision of this belief statement can expand the conversation from one primarily about technologies to one that focuses on the changing nature of literacy as well as the larger and long-term implications of this shift for English education.

“Student Blogging Banned by School.” “Instant Messaging Ruins Students’ Grammar.” “Student Bloggers, Podcasters Take to Cyberspace.” “Online Plagiarism Service Adopted at Local College.” “Municipal Wi-Fi System Debated, Defeated.” “\$100 Laptop Computer Being Developed for Third World Communities.” “Information Communication Technology Literacy Measured in New Online, Standardized Test.”

These paraphrases of recent technology- and education-related headlines highlight two important points that we, as literacyteacher educators, may take up as we discuss the implications of technology for our work. First, we could consider what students and teachers—as well as broader audiences such as parents, school administrators, the media, and policymakers—have to lose if the primary focus of these discussions remains on technologies and not on the literacy issues embedded in those technologies. Second, we can begin an open and honest dialogue about the stakes that we, as teacher educators and literacy researchers, have in these matters. In other words, we may ask ourselves whether we might expand this conversation about specific technologies into one about what it means to be multiliterate for today’s students and teachers.

It is with these broad ideas in mind that I turn to the work begun at the NCTE Conference on English Education (CEE) Summit and reflected in “Beliefs About Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers: Beginning the Conversation” ([Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005](#)). The authors here have articulated the challenges related to technology and literacy teaching for us and for the teachers with whom we work. Much like the work at Dartmouth and Wye, (as represented by the writing of Dixon & National Association for the Teaching of English, 1975, and Elbow, 1990, respectively), this work from the Summit initiates the first of many steps—and certainly not the final step—in a conversation that will continue as literacies and technologies converge in English teaching. I recognize that this document has become a place to begin the conversation and agree that we need to respond to these trends because, as Swenson et al. suggested,

Teachers, individually and collectively, have the capacity and the responsibility to influence the development, modification, adoption, and/or rejection of newer technologies. In order to make these critical decisions, they will need to understand not only how to use these technologies, but also the benefits and costs their adoption and integration into English language arts and literacy teaching have the potential to create for teachers, students, and the broader community. (Introduction, para. 2)

Although research in educational technology use shows that it is a teachers’ use and adaptation of technology that contributes to his or her sense of effectiveness (Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon, & Byers, 2002), we cannot assume that our profession’s newest members have the facility or interest in doing the kinds of technology work that we would hope for without some guidance, modeling, and collaboration (Russell, Bebell, O’Dwyer, & O’Conner, 2003). Furthermore, we want the conversation to be about more than adaptation and use; we want it to be about sound teaching and critical literacy practices that incorporate technology. Numerous scholar-practitioners in our field have long held this stance, many articulating their beliefs about these issues in this very journal.

Moreover, I agree that the four foci in this document (Newer Technologies v. Newer Literacies, The Influence of Newer Technologies on Theories Informing Our Thinking About Text, Language, and Literacy, Composing With Multimodal and Multimedia Technological Tools, and Political, Economic, and Socio-Cultural Influences) reflect the current and future needs that we, as teacher educators, will face as we prepare critical and creative technology-using literacy teachers. Although the authors expressed many caveats and mention that there are many more technologies to explore, the simple fact remains that literacy has been, is, and will be changed by technology (Baron, 2001). As this belief statement argues, English education, too, must acknowledge this fact.

However, as I finish my reading of this document, I am left with questions. Of course, raising issues and provoking thought is part of the purpose for an initial belief statement. Yet, there is more to my concern than that. In particular, I wonder how our belief statement reflects, or does not reflect, the reality of K-12 classrooms. In our work we have often worried about the schism between teacher education and K-12 practice, and I think that we could craft this piece as an example of how we can bridge these gaps.

Are we articulating the beliefs we really feel are critical for literacy, or are we trying to fit into an existing discourse about technologies? Moreover, are we accurately representing the discourse about technology and literacy that exists in K-12 settings, or could we make the connections clearer? I will first contextualize these questions in my own experience and then explore the implications they might have for the revision of this belief statement.

Concerns Guiding My Suggestions for Revision

In my experience as a professional development coordinator for a site of the National Writing Project, technology and literacy are usually not the first concerns that a school or district has when wanting to work with us. Instead, the requests for in-service, the questions that bubble up on listservs, and the journal articles for practitioners tend to be more about the standards, testing, and accountability. Conversations about technology concern themselves with access, technical support, and time for learning new software and hardware. These are the pressing literacy and technology issues for K-12 schools.

Thus, these concerns are precisely the issues we can choose to address—coherently and persuasively—if we want to advance a discussion about developing English teachers. If this belief statement is designed to inform the preparation and professional development of English teachers, then it is crucial that we speak about the same issues—such as access and assessment—and be clear about why technology, as a conduit of literacy, matters.

Although I understand that the point of the Summit and this document was to map the new terrain in English education, and that the belief statement may not yet be the place to speak directly to a K-12 audience, I also feel that we should point the conversation in productive ways by addressing the issues concerning them most. In short, how can this statement describe our beliefs while simultaneously helping us take the next step in our work?

To put it another way, we as teacher educators and researchers will want to be clear about why technologies like podcasting and blogging matter to teaching English and relate these technologies to larger concepts of literacy learning. In the K-12 context, we can discuss how learning these technologies connect with literacy standards and benchmarks and—whether or not we agree with the politics and practices of standardized assessment—how they connect to improving students' performance in testing situations.

More important than this, however, we could make it clear why engaging in these types of literate behaviors, with these types of technologies, has become crucial in creating an informed, engaged, and multiliterate citizenship. We say we want students who can produce and consume texts in critical, creative, and ethical ways; thus, our argument could become a discussion about being literate, not about being techno-savvy.

As I review this version of the position statement, I am concerned that the authors are centrally positioning the idea of technology and not of literacy as an overarching theme. I will highlight a number of examples as I make my further suggestions for revision, but will point one out here to begin. In paragraph 1 of the Introduction, Swenson et al. contended, "Today, new technologies are changing the types of texts we and our students create and interpret even as they are influencing the social, political, and cultural contexts in which our texts are composed and shared." I agree with this statement, yet shifting the focus to the texts being consumed and produced highlights the literacy acts that are occurring, not just the technology influencing them.

We might revise this statement as follows: "Today, texts are increasingly influenced by the technologies with which they are created, and students must produce and interpret such texts with the many social, political, and cultural lenses a multiliterate person would be able to employ." Although I will elaborate more in my specific suggestions for revision, suffice it to say here that I think keeping front and center a discussion about texts and literacy—rather than one about technology—will only help our cause as we open up this conversation with our K-12 colleagues.

How We Might Expand the Conversation

This is not to say, however, that we need to (or, for that matter, even could) ignore technology altogether in this belief statement. Technology in English education is a topic of great interest to me (see, for instance, Grabill & Hicks, 2005), and I believe that our conversations about teaching reading and writing should be infused with discussions of how information communication technologies are now inherently part of that process. Instead, we could expand our part of the conversation about technologies into a more productive one about literacies—teaching *through* technology, not just *with* it—if we connect them to the concept of “design.” To oversimplify for sake of example, teaching in this manner is not so much about the point that we can make a digital story; it is more to the point that we can make a story digitally. Two theoretical frameworks guide this suggestion to move toward a discussion of design: multiliteracies and technological pedagogical content knowledge.

First, the New London Group (Cope, Kalantzis, & New London Group, 2000) argued that a new “metalanguage of Multiliteracies [needs to be] based on the concept of ‘Design’” (p. 19). They explained further by stating,

The notion of design connects powerfully to the sort of creative intelligence the best practitioners need in order to be able continually to redesign their activities in the very act of practice. It connects as well to the idea that learning and productivity are the results of designs (the structures) of complex systems of people environments, technology, beliefs, and texts. (pp. 19-20)

This approach encourages a multiliterate person to examine available designs, or “‘grammars’ of various semiotic systems” (p. 20), drawing on these designs to “make new use of old materials” (p. 22), and to create “new meaning” through redesign (p. 23). Design itself, not the tools enabling the design, takes center stage. Literacy, more so than technology, is what matters to the New London Group.

In this same vein, we may also rethink our approach to literacy teaching. This belief statement implies that we want teachers to develop what Mishra and Koehler (2004) have described as “technological pedagogical content knowledge” (TPCK). TPCK has many components. According to Mishra and Koehler, it requires

an understanding of the representation of concepts using technologies; pedagogical techniques that utilize technologies in constructive ways to teach content; knowledge of what makes concepts difficult or easy to learn and how technology can help redress some of the problems students face; knowledge of students’ prior knowledge and theories of epistemology; and how technologies can be utilized to build on existing knowledge and to develop new or strengthen old epistemologies. (p. 14)

These abilities extend a definition of simply using technology in one’s teaching to a broader concept that describes the way one positions himself or herself as a teacher, as a producer and consumer of texts, and as an agent in the construction of knowledge. The process of making what Swenson et al. called “critical decisions” and having the “responsibility to influence” technology development and implementation becomes key to preparing teachers for their work (Introduction, para. 2). The dispositions evident in TPCK connect to these critical and influential roles that Swenson et al. described for teachers.

In order to operationalize TPCK, Mishra and Koehler, like the New London Group, invoked principles of design. They contended that “because design-based activities provide a rich context for learning and lend themselves to sustained inquiry and revision, we thought they were well suited to help teachers develop the deep understanding needed to apply knowledge in the complex domains of real world practice” (p. 19). This type of deep understanding and application to real world practice—the ability to think about and use technology in critical, creative, and responsible ways—will then develop and enhance TPCK. As our belief statement shows, these are goals we, too, have for the teachers with whom we work and, moreover, for their students.

With both the New London Group and Mishra and Koehler, the focus on design inherently leads to an emphasis on literacies first, technologies second. By thinking about designing rich, contextual, and pedagogically sound literacy practices for teachers, we will, inherently, have to use technologies. For instance, it is one thing to bring an iPod into one’s classroom and show students how to record their voices. It is another to share those recordings with an outside audience and still another to mix them together to create a podcast that can be fed through RSS into cyberspace. Thus, in talking about literacies and how they work, we can not ignore a discussion of technology in our belief statement. However, as the title of this document currently reads, I think that our beliefs are about technologies, not literacies. If we believe our job is to prepare literacy teachers and that design-based, multiliteracy learning offers an opportunity to do so in robust ways, then our focus for revision could be to centralize the idea of literacy/multiliteracies, not technology.

Given my interest in focusing on multiliteracies and design rather than technologies, and in the spirit of moving this document forward toward publication in *English Education*, I would like to outline a few responses that I have to this initial text and some ideas for us as we begin to revise it.¹ Four particular concerns will guide my suggestions for revision:

1. Our revision could focus, centrally and specifically, on literacy/multiliteracies, not technologies.
2. When we revise in this manner, we can focus on how literacies are being affected by the new semiotic systems that technologies enable.
3. If we can make the second point clearer, then we can make a strong connection between this theory of multiliteracies and current practices evident in K-12 curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
4. Finally, we can make a clear and compelling case for the design-based types of teacher preparation and professional development that must accompany a multiliteracies, design-based approach.

With these suggestions in mind, I will then move toward a conclusion I hope is generative and—in the spirit of the initial document—will continue and expand the conversation teaching literacy through technology.

Revision Recommendation 1: Revise the statement with a central and specific focus on literacy/multiliteracies.

We may first consider revising the statement with a clear focus on literacy and, in turn, multiliteracies, not technologies. As the history of technology integration in education shows us, it is not about the technology itself, but how it is applied to teaching and learning (see, for an example of integration techniques, Roblyer, Edwards, & Havriluk, 1997). In fact, in this version of the statement, the authors came close when they suggested,

Focusing on teaching new technologies rather than English language arts/literacy learning is shortsighted, since many newer technologies have relatively short lifespans. On the other hand, many new literacies and modes of inquiry require direct instruction on the use of hardware, peripherals, software, and interfaces. (Swenson et al., 2005, Focus 1: Newer Technologies v. Newer Literacies, para 1.)

As Swenson et al. acknowledged, there are many technologies for teachers and students to learn. I agree, and I feel that the authors' attempted to keep a balance between literacies and technologies in this document, yet tended to lean toward technologies. This is problematic for two reasons. First, despite the thorough list of technologies the authors have included, there are a few that have been overlooked—video blogging (or vlogging, popularized by the new video iPods), social bookmarking (with tools like [Furl](#) or [del.icio.us](#)), social networking sites (like [Xanga](#), [My Space](#), and [Facebook](#)), voice over Internet protocols like [Skype](#) and [Gizmo](#), and collaborative online writing environments (such as [Writerly](#)). Also, we ignore a discussion of Web 2.0 as a technology. The point, however, is not what we have overlooked, but that the list will continue to expand, even as we revise the belief statement. (**Editor's note:** URLs for all Web sites are located in the [Resources](#) section at the end of this paper.)

Second, as much as I like having a clear and concise list, this could, potentially, end up as a checklist in a rubric for technology competencies for teachers. As much as we want to be explicit in our understanding of new technologies, we also know how a list like this could be construed as a set of competencies teachers should have. For instance, standards we have already, like “the teacher will send an email with an attachment”—without a discussion of how and why that email is sent—seem irrelevant in a discussion about literacy. Instead, our focus could be on literacy, our changing definitions of literacy/multiliteracies, and then ways to teach literacy through technology, not just with it.

Revision Recommendation 2: Focus on the multiliteracies required by new semiotic systems and, in turn, the literate practices that technology enables.

Since we are focusing on literacies, let us make clear the role of technology in the literacy process. The authors, again, came close when they argued,

While technology applications have the potential to reinforce reductive literacy strategies, as in skill-and-drill phonics software, they also have potential to support richer and more holistic views of reading by helping readers to envision and partake in the world of the text, by encouraging students to make intertextual, intratextual, and extratextual connections, and by offering sophisticated means of textual analysis and critique. (Swenson et al., 2005, Focus 2: The Influence of Newer Technologies on Theories Informing Our Thinking About Text, Language, and Literacy, Annotation, para. 5)

How are we going to make points like this clear and, quite frankly, less overwhelming to K-12 teachers? One way may be to think more carefully about how we describe multimodal texts and to turn to Kress and VanLeeuwen (2001) to articulate exactly what we mean by “mode” and “medium.” They define mode and medium as follows:

- “Modes are the semiotic resources which allow for the simultaneous realization of discourses and types of (inter)action” (p. 21). Modes can be realized in “a range of media” (p. 22).

- “Media are the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used.” Over time, “production media may become design modes” (p. 22).

This difference between mode and medium is a slight but crucial distinction that is worth clarifying, despite the overlapping concepts they share. Film, communication, and media studies have shown that we can talk about modes and media in sophisticated ways. We now can bring that same type of discussion to K-12 English and expand the conversation from one about technology—in a generic sense—into one about how to teach the many modes that curriculum standards and assessments call for (e.g., narrative, persuasive, informational) through various forms of media (e.g., movie, podcast, blog, research paper). Then it becomes a discussion about sophisticated literacy instruction, not just technology use.

Revision Recommendation 3: Use this document to bridge the gap between K-12 practice and multiliteracies theory.

For this recommendation, I will build on the previous point and elaborate on how we might make this connection. I start with an example from my own practice of leading professional development. At a session earlier this year, I was in the middle of talking about technology and the teaching of writing and someone asked about wikis. Since we were in a technology enabled classroom with an Internet-connected computer and an LCD built into the ceiling (which is, unfortunately, not common practice in many schools I am in on a regular basis), I thought I would show them Wikipedia as an example of how writers can collaborate and produce a document for a public audience. Much to my chagrin, after I typed in the URL, I received a stern warning from Bess, the Internet guard dog, that the site I was attempting to visit was deemed inappropriate for school audiences. Suffice it to say that we were able to have a good discussion about authority, collaborative authorship, and Internet filters, but not about the nuts and bolts of how Wikipedia works.

How can this belief statement be used to bridge the gap between K-12 practice and technology theory (noting again that this may not be the best place to fully make such a claim, only to start it)? First, I acknowledge that the authors have identified the problem when they stated,

Although we will touch on them, we can't do justice to such grave problems as the continuing digital and didactic divides that follow race and class lines, or the ability of the ruthless to use newer technologies to exploit others, particularly children and the elderly. (Introduction, para. 3)

However, I feel that this is, indeed, the problem. Many teachers and students do not have access to these types of technologies described in this document, let alone the understanding of semiotic systems—modes and media—to interpret and critique them, precisely because of the institutional barriers they face. We need to be keenly aware of this because K-12 teachers often lack access, time, and space for understanding a number of overlapping concerns. Issues of fair use, critical approaches to creating and reading online texts and engaging in collaborative, global composing are not even close to being part of that K-12 literacy conversation, at least not at any systemic level. One reason why, I assume, is because of access issues.

We, as teacher educators, can bridge the gap in this conversation, thinking about new literacies as they relate to expanding our current notions of literacy. We could show, more clearly, how technology should not be an add-on, but already has and will continue to become an intricately intertwined component of literacy learning. This document could make a call for these types of conversations and offer teacher educators, teachers, administrators, policymakers, media, and others a common ground as we begin to discuss questions about access to technology and why that matters to literacy. For instance, could we take up the question of how one-to-one access to a wi-fi enabled laptop may now be a basic right of learning how to be literate? If so, should a discussion about unfiltered Internet access be a component of this? To discuss these issues in the context of access to technology is one way to go about doing this. However, if we do not raise these questions in the context of how a student becomes a reader and writer, we miss the opportunity to show clearly and coherently why technology matters to literacy instruction.

Revision Recommendation 4: Create a vision for design-based teacher preparation and professional development.

At the end of the document, we need to be conclusive. We have the opportunity to show—much in the same manner the CEE Commission on Inservice Education’s (1994) “Inservice Education: Ten Principles” does—concise implications for teachers’ professional development related to technology and multiliteracies. As CEE, this is our task. Moreover, NCTE already has a statement on multimodal literacies (2005), so we could talk less about the literacies and technologies themselves and refocus our work on two key constituencies the authors have already identified—preservice and in-service teachers.

First, for preservice teachers, the authors have already suggested that “well-prepared teachers, with a deep and broad understanding of language, linguistics, literature, rhetoric, writing, speaking, and listening, can complement those talents by studying additional semiotic systems that don’t rely solely on alphabetic texts” (Swenson et al., 2005, Focus 4: Political, Economic, and Socio-Cultural Influences, Annotation, para. 5).

By being clear—from the multiliteracies perspective—that this is not just about technology, we can highlight the ways in which teachers learn how to teach students to read and write, speak and listen, view and visually represent through technology. We can also show how design-based learning, as the New London Group and Misha and Koehler suggested, offers opportunities for that type of preparation and, consequently, for transformation of K-12 classroom practice.

Second, for in-service teachers, the authors have created a solid list of suggestions for ongoing professional development of teachers and teacher educators, including “institutional and instructional support systems,” such as one-to-one access to computers (Swenson et al., 2005, Focus 4: Political, Economic, and Socio-Cultural Influences, What Does This Mean for Teaching? para. 4). We also can clarify by stating that “ongoing” professional development does not include surveillance and governance related to how we “use technology”—scare quotes intended.

Technology, and teaching through it, is ever changing. Thus, our discussion can show how teachers and teacher educators will continue to participate in the design-based decisions that will lead to technological pedagogical content knowledge and how this allows them to become, in their own manner, in their own contexts, multiliterate.

Continuing the Conversation

My hope is that these suggestions for revision will be taken in the spirit of the original call for commentaries, that they will “inform the revision of this tentative beliefs statement about technology and the preparation of English teachers.” One of the main threats to teacher education is that we keep talking about “technology and...” fill in the blank: writing, reading, teaching, learning, assessing, etc. If we refocus this position paper on the idea of literacy, we can articulate how technology plays a central role in literacy development. Perhaps the suggestions for revision I have offered here can help us do this.

One final note: If we use the concepts of “multiliteracies” and “technological pedagogical content knowledge” to talk about literacy—and its related technologies—we can then talk in more nuanced and substantive ways than if we stick to technology alone. By expanding the conversation from one about technology to one about literacy in which technology plays a role, we may create an argument that K-12 institutions will be willing and able to take hold of in their own work.

Clearly, some teachers—like those who are blogging and podcasting with their students (see [Room 208](#) as an example), or those who are engaged in creating documentary films with their students (see the [Educational Video Center](#) as an example)—are already making this shift, and our support could only enhance what they are already doing. Let us begin talking about teaching literacy through technology, and use the opportunity to revise this belief statement as a way to expand that conversation.

Endnote

¹When I refer to “us” or “we” from this point on in the document, I will be moving from the broad “we” in teacher education and into addressing the members of the “What do we know and believe about multimodal literacies and digital technologies in English education?” thematic strand group of the CEE Summit that will be revising this belief statement.

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Resources

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