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Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World

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Donna Alvermann (Editor)

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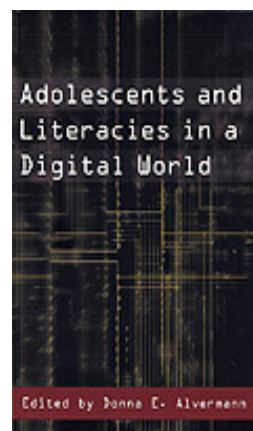
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For some time, researchers, classroom teachers, and curriculum designers have been aware of the increasing importance of reading in electronic formats. However, the focus of their concern has frequently been rooted in the technical considerations of commonly used tools such as presentations, e-mail, discussion boards, and search engines. While understandable, this singular concentration has left discussions of the sociocultural issues revolving around digital literacy largely untouched. In *Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World*, Donna Alvermann assembles twelve chapters that collectively seek to address how societal norms concerning socioeconomic values and teacher-student relationships influence adolescents' use of, or lack thereof, electronic literacy tools. In addition, the text provides recommendations on how teachers can use digital technologies to enrich students' skills as critical readers.

The first and most obvious observation about the volume is that, generally speaking, most chapters spend the first few pages reiterating the importance of technology in social and academic realms. Although such review is necessary in order to present a background to the book's theme, it soon becomes repetitive.

In large part, however, the book provides a thorough discussion on a number of issues concerning electronic literacy, the first of which concerns the relationship between print and digital reading. In the first chapter, for instance, Bruce tempers the widely-held belief that newly-developed electronic sources of literacy will immediately change the way we read by pointing out that there is great cultural resistance to giving up traditional print media, in spite of the high rates at which adolescents use electronic resources. This resistance to change is evidenced by booming sales in books and magazines, suggesting that the truly literate person in the future will be comfortable in both print and electronic environments.

In Chapter Three, King and O'Brien go on to assert that part of the reason that print materials continue to be popular concerns teacher fear about losing control of what and how students read, largely because they themselves consider electronic media to be non-academic and entertainment-based. They, along with Hinchman and Lalik in Chapter Six, suggest that teachers not only need to learn about the technical aspects of digital media, but also the purposes for which students use them. However, in Chapter Seven, the reader sees that for many teachers, the role of technology in the curriculum is not an easy issue to resolve, as evidenced by a case study of pre-service teachers who enjoy using technology in their personal lives for purchasing goods, entertainment, and personal communication, but feel opposed to using these resources in the classroom, thus showing that such tools are thought of largely in commercial ways. Lankshear and Knobel's chapter, "Do We Have Your Attention? New Literacies, Digital Literacies, and the Education of Adolescents," draws on the world of advertising to show that the commercial element is strongly present in digital technologies, but not in any traditional sense, for the plethora of audiovisual resources available, the availability of user autonomy, and the sheer amount of materials available have led to a massive proliferation in the ways that advertisers seek to take hold of adolescents' attention. While such a proliferation may not appear to be directly linked to how teachers present reading materials to their students, it does suggest that effective ways of sparking students' interest in reading could change, as well as their use of specific reading strategies such as skimming and scanning. If teachers are not aware of such developments, then they may not be aware of effective ways to motivate students and impart comprehension strategies to them.

Several chapters prescribe practical steps teachers can take to implement electronic media into their classrooms. In Chapter 11, for example, Knobel and Lankshear write about the use of zines, which are individualized, inexpensive, not-for-profit publications often produced by youth for specific purposes, although the content is usually alternative and counter cultural (sexuality, politics, and race). Drawing on the work of de Certeau, they claim that zines encourage young readers to be active analyzers of media, for the genre is largely based on dissatisfaction with the status quo. Moreover, they demonstrate that zines are empowering because they give people the possibility of creating their own subjective identities instead of being defined by others. Due to the often controversial and polemical nature of zines, Knobel and Lankshear doubt that they will become part of everyday classroom life; however, they hint that by integrating them into the classroom, albeit very carefully, teachers will get what they most frequently hope for: critical readers.

While most of the authors display enthusiasm for digital technologies, several simultaneously caution us that they are contributing to the widening class gap the world over, but especially in the United States. In Chapter Four, Gee describes the age group known as *Millennials*, adolescents up to 18 years of age, who are accustomed to living in a post-Baby Boomer, post-Gen-X world, and accept racial equality and diversity, yet have far more resources than poor children and little interaction with them. However, due to its global nature, digital literacy supports the illusion that young people are part of a less socially-stratified world; in reality, they are coming into contact with people from very similar walks of life, even if they live in a different city or country. In Chapter Eight, "Shape-shifting portfolios: Millennial youth, literacies, and the game of life," Young,

Dillon, and Moje support this notion of the gap between those with and those without access to technology by presenting contrasting case studies of students who have access to computers and those who do not.

While *Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World* addresses complex issues such as social class and student-teacher relationships, it does so in a relatively clear manner, so much so that educated individuals generally unfamiliar with digital literacy tools and sociological theories will find little difficulty in comprehending its points. There are, nevertheless, a few sections that need clarification, such as in Chapter Eight, in which the authors claim that the subject of one case study, Mario, could identify as 'Mexicano,' instead of 'Mexican': "Although Mario *could* call himself Mexicano, he identifies himself as Mexican" (p. 123). Unless one is knowledgeable of Mexican and Mexican-American culture, this distinction is unclear and should be explained.

Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of this book is the lack of discussion of ESL learners, who make up a large portion of US adolescents. While Chapters Four and Eight do briefly discuss the challenges ESL learners face, there is little specific mention of their engagement with technology as second language learners. It is indeed surprising that no more than perhaps half a dozen pages deal with this segment of school-aged children, although many of the authors' theoretical perspectives and pedagogical recommendations could apply to both native and non-native speakers of English.

Nevertheless, the text should be read by those who feel uncomfortable with the role of technology in middle, secondary and tertiary classrooms, for it provides theoretical perspectives with which teachers and administrators can make decisions about when and how to implement electronic resources into the curriculum. In addition, it provides a description of how teachers can use several different technologies in order to promote interaction and critical thinking, thus making it useful on a practical level.

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