

Reimagining Literacy Assessment Through a New Literacies Lens

Elena Forzani, Julie A. Corrigan, David Slomp

There was a murmur in the staff room at South Carleton High School in Ontario, Canada. Word had gotten out that students in Melanie White's and Chris Dales's grade 10 English classes were going to use Twitter for their end-of-semester assessment that included the creation of a multimedia research project and exit interview.

Melanie and Chris's colleagues were concerned about students using Twitter. Perhaps things would get out of control with students exposing themselves to undue criticism and endless conflict that too often characterizes social media discourse.

The duo (@WhiteRoomRadio and @CDales25), however, envisioned Twitter as an opportunity for authentic assessment that reflected the kinds of New Literacies contexts with which students would need to engage in both their personal and working lives. And, rather than merely designing assessments that evaluated students' New Literacies, Melanie and Chris wanted to engage in assessment practices that reflected the shifting social values that New Literacies have both enabled and demanded, a goal we explore in this column.

Thus, Melanie and Chris engaged students in using Twitter to conduct evidence-based research by building and contributing to learning networks, designing online polls, moderating Twitter chats and conversations, and designing an academic and professional online identity. Students had free rein over their topic choice, which ranged from body image to indigenous issues to gun rights to community policing and police brutality. @mennaegohary used Twitter to reach out to families affected by police brutality (see Figure 1).

Another student, Timothy Speed, researched black holes and received a response from a theoretical physicist, giving him a way in to a disciplinary community of his own interest and choice (see Figure 2). New Literacies such as Twitter make such participation highly accessible.

Melanie and Chris knew the risks in open topic choice and social media participation but sought to mitigate this risk by teaching their students about

cyber-citizenship, explaining the project to parents, and getting colleagues on their side by fielding questions and criticisms.

In a process that intentionally integrated assessment into instruction, students determined their own topics, and they debated and co-constructed the success criteria. "Students reviewed the criteria for the final product, and we determined...what quantity and quality of the learning looked like," said Melanie.

In addition to the natural feedback mechanisms inherent to Twitter, Melanie and Chris provided additional, ongoing feedback by responding to students on Twitter and in their journals or blogs. Moreover, students were given control over how they would demonstrate learning through their choice of genre, format, and platform of their final presentations. Transferring what they learned through social media to other platforms, one student designed a board game based on what she had learned about the psychological effects of social media, another wrote a news article applying what she had learned about forensics to a fictional case. She then presented how she repurposed what she had learned through Twitter to her creation of a journalistic text.

New Literacies: The Digital and the Social

This example highlights both the possibility and the necessity of assessments shaped by New Literacies. By *New Literacies*, we refer here not only to the multiple

ELENA FORZANI is an assistant professor in the Wheelock College of Education and Human Development at Boston University, MA, USA; email eforzani@bu.edu.

JULIE A. CORRIGAN is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada; email julie.corrigan@concordia.ca.

Figure 1
Student Tweet Initiating Online Research Project



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

ways of making meaning with multiple modes within sociocultural contexts (New London Group, 1996) but also to the “digital turn” (see Mills, 2010, pp. 246–247) that emerged from this “social turn” (Gee, 2000, p. 180) as new digital technologies such as the internet prompted an extraordinary shift in our literacy practices and even our values (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2019). In this column, we especially consider the New Literacies context of the internet and the multiple ways of making meaning within and across varied sociocultural contexts made possible by this important digital context (Coiro, 2020).

The Need for Reimagining Literacy Assessment

Unfortunately, traditional, print-based, assessment practices (e.g., the use of multiple choice items or separate, timed, reading and writing activities) are sometimes misaligned with the social values of New Literacies assessments. Our robust writing assessment practices, for example, have been diminished by the technocentric orientation of the measurement profession—expressed primarily in its commitment to achieving highly reliable assessments that, in turn, result in diminished construct representation (Condon, 2013; Huot, 1996; Neal, 2011; Slomp, 2019). Although reliability in itself is an important assessment quality, the means through which it has been achieved through technocentric applications in the field of literacy assessment has been to ignore the complexities—contextual, social, aesthetic, and transactional—that make measuring constructs of literate ability with any degree of consistency difficult to achieve.

Such complexities are at the heart of a New Literacies lens. Consequently, the traditional or “basic” literacies we often assess in large-scale assessments are pale versions of the rich and varied literacies that exist outside of testing environments. And because, within any system of education (from the classroom, to the school, and to the state), our large-scale assessments are the most concrete

Figure 2
Students Connecting With Experts Through Twitter



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

manifestations of what we value, the literacies we measure become the literacies that are valued, taught, and assessed in classrooms. As a result, the literacies of school are too often isolated from the literacies of everyday life.

Using New Literacies Social Values to Inform Our Assessment Practices

The affordances of digital technologies, like those found on the internet, both enable and demand new literacy practices, prompting new social values that, in turn, inform our literacy practices. These social values associated with New Literacies can inform the design of both classroom-based and large-scale assessments, and thus the design of our instruction. Using a New Literacies perspective as we design our assessments requires us to consider how such assessments can create opportunities for students to draw on reading, writing, social, and technological practices valuable for life in a digital society (OECD, 2011).

Here, we consider four social values that should shape how we reimagine our assessment practices from

a New Literacies lens. For each, we consider how the value informs both *how* and *what* we assess. We also draw on Melanie and Chris's Twitter assessment project to provide examples of what this might look like in the classroom as we design New Literacies assessments that also offer opportunities for students to learn.

Participatory Cultures

The internet and other new technologies both enable and demand greater participation and collaboration compared with traditional contexts (Jenkins, 2008) as well as a breakdown of hierarchical approaches to teaching and learning (Leu et al., 2019). Technologies such as email, chat, wikis, and social media platforms allow individuals to interact and contribute within a social community (Hutchison, Woodward, & Colwell, 2016).

This shift requires that we reconsider *how* we assess. Rather than imposing assessments on students, we can invite them into the assessment process, giving them agency to co-construct knowledge and co-design their learning. For example, Melanie and Chris invited students to choose their topics and, after studying social and multimedia texts, the class set the evaluation criteria by debating what makes these texts effective.

This shift also requires that we adapt *what* we assess to include new social practices, such as strategies for participating in social communities and collaborating on ideas. Timothy Speed used hashtagging to get others to notice and respond to his posts. Doing so garnered him a response from theoretical physicist (@LKrauss1). Participatory culture, and the tools that enable it, allowed Timothy to be part of this scientific community. Including such practices in our assessments gives students important learning opportunities and also prompts us to teach these practices prior to assessment.

Criticality

This greater participatory culture demands greater criticality. When online, readers encounter multiple texts of varied quality and with conflicting perspectives, requiring evaluation both more frequently and more vigilantly compared with reading offline (Cho, 2014; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Teaching students to grapple with the varied and nuanced information found on the open internet gives them the opportunity to develop a critical habit of mind (Forzani, 2020). Melanie and Chris shifted *how* they assessed by purposely engaging students in the largely uncensored space of Twitter rather than shying away from uncontrolled contexts and controversial issues, as a

Figure 3
Communicating Critical Reading Through Twitter



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

traditional assessment lens may have led them to do. To provide support to students in navigating this environment, they taught students to evaluate information and to engage critically with socially and politically charged issues such as systemic racism. Grade 10 student Femi Alada read and responded to an article from *The Walrus* and questioned why so many students of color were streamed into less challenging academic paths (see Figure 3). Melanie and Chris shifted *what* they assessed by then evaluating students' ability to navigate multiple perspectives critically.

Multiplicity

New Literacies are multiple and constantly changing, requiring students not only to learn new tools but also how to develop new practices as such tools emerge (Leu et al., 2019). This means that we must let go of some of our control in *how* we approach assessment. Flexibility allows for new learning experiences or skills to emerge as students define, with support, what they wish to accomplish during assessment experiences. Melanie's and Chris's students participated in podcasts, which were not planned from the outset but which led to important learning experiences during the assessment. Assessing with multiplicity in mind means that we must shift *what* we assess to include students' ability to engage with multiple

practices, platforms, and modes in constantly changing contexts.

Reading/Writing Integration

The internet arguably enables and requires a tighter integration of reading and writing practices (Hawisher & Filkins, 2015). Computers, including phones and tablets without keyboards, were designed for active inputs from the user. Reading on the internet using such devices necessarily incorporates keyboard, touchscreen, or voice inputs as we move iteratively between reading and communicating. In the process, readers construct meaning using a range of multimodal texts (Kress, 2003). This may suggest greater agency and criticality for students as they create, rather than merely consume, information. On the internet, students have many opportunities to voice opinions and participate in real-world issues in impactful ways (Hutchison et al., 2016). This suggests greater responsibility for creating information thoughtfully, because people around the world might have access to the information, which can be shared and reshared, with real consequences. The aforementioned Tweets about black holes were liked, reshared, and commented upon dozens of times, for example.

When Melanie and Chris embraced the authentic New Literacies space of Twitter, they necessarily shifted *how* they assessed to encompass both reading and writing because Twitter requires the integrated use of both. Melanie and Chris shifted what they assessed by evaluating students' ability to craft Tweets responsive to a broader community of Tweeters in particular topic areas, hashtagging others whose Tweets they had read. Such tightly integrated reading and writing become part of the same construct in New Literacies assessment, where both must be assessed together.

Grappling With Complexity

Each of these four factors suggest greater complexity—there are now more texts, more kinds of texts, more tools, more creators, and a greater range of quality (Coiro, 2020)—that can be both supportive and challenging for students. This technological proliferation demands that we reimagine our classrooms, including shifting the ways in which we design assessment spaces, interpret results, and use those results to inform instruction. Assessing from a New Literacies lens prompts us to go beyond simply teaching students how to use digital tools and practices to support traditional

literacy aims. Rather, it challenges us to significantly reimagine how we design our assessments as learning opportunities that align with the social values inherent in a New Literacies lens.

When we assess from a New Literacies lens, we purposefully ask students to engage collaboratively and critically with important issues rather than avoiding them because they are controversial. We design performance-based assessments that allow students to use multimodal tools and forms of text to read and write iteratively, as in authentic contexts. While some may voice concern that this approach undermines traditional expectations for reliability, thereby weakening validity interpretations (e.g., through construct-irrelevant variance), we argue that because this approach is more aligned with a construct of New Literacies, it allows for more valid interpretations of literacy practices valued in our society (cf. Messick, 1994).

Reimagining literacy assessment and instruction in our classrooms requires courage. Through their decision and commitment to designing an assessment that incorporated Twitter, Melanie and Chris took significant risks by implementing an assessment that was outside the realm of traditional assessment practices. They confronted their own worries, their colleagues' concerns, and parents' skepticism. The risk was worth taking because it made it possible for them to reconnect the literacies of their classroom with real-world literacies, enabling their students to experience all the attendant benefits that accompany that shift. These assessments gave students the opportunity to engage in literate practices for authentic audiences, to discover the power of language to make connections, to generate knowledge, and to have an impact—no matter how small—on the world; to experience audience, discourse communities, and cyber-citizenship in a supportive environment; to explore the etiquette of Twitter, of online dialogue, and of entering into community with people who are often distant and ethereal; to appreciate the generosity of experts; and, to venture beyond one's own social media bubble to gain new insights.

In short, assessments informed by new literacies make possible classroom-based and large-scale assessments that support and encourage the rich literacy experiences that enable students to thrive in this digital age and in their lives beyond the classroom.

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DAVID SLOMP is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, AB, Canada; email david.slomp@uleth.ca.

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