

# "The Perils and Promises of Technological Literacy: Three Case Studies"

by Alice Moorhead

*Notes on the Keynote Address and a Question and Answer Session with Dr. Cynthia L. Selfe of Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI, Keynote Speaker at COTF May 23, 2001*

According to Dr. Cynthia L. Selfe, in the next five years, we will see "an expanding definition of what skills and understandings needed in order to function effectively as 'literate' citizens in our increasingly technological communication environments and cultures." As professor of composition and communication in the Humanities Department, Selfe advocates the need to

"think about the **skills** needed for *functional technological literacy* (e.g., the ability to read, write, and navigate within electronic environments) and the more intellectual **understandings** required for *critical technological literacy* (e.g., the ability to gauge the authoritativeness of information on the WWW sites; the ability to understand the effects of electronic communication on the processes of reading, writing, communication; the ability to understand and address the increasing gap between the technological haves and have-nots and the social implications of this gap."

Following her keynote address, Dr. Selfe answered questions that conference participants raised concerning the emerging literacies and technology.

## ON THE CHALLENGES OF EMERGING LITERACIES...

**Lesson # 1:** New forms of literacy

don't simply accumulate. Rather, they have a life spans: they emerge, overlap, and compete with pre-existing forms; they accumulate, especially, perhaps, in periods of transition, but they also eventually fade away.

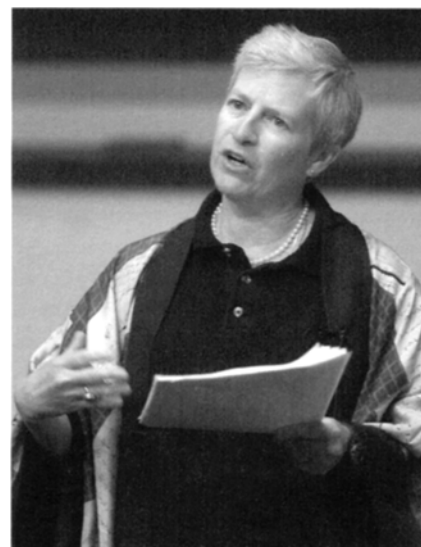
**Lesson # 2:** To help students cope with new communication contexts and important new forms of emerging literacies, English teachers and language arts teachers have to be willing to expand their understanding of reading and composing beyond conventional bounds of the alphabetic. And we have to do so quickly.

**Lesson # 3:** If our profession fails to expand the concept of literacy beyond that of the alphabetic, we may see composition studies experience declining relevance to young people, and we may also see composition theory lose touch with the reality of new media texts.

## ON INTRODUCING AND EVALUATING MULTIPLE LITERACIES...

Providing a "small, potent gesture" makes all the difference in a course or a curriculum. We do not need to abandon the courses or assignments that we use, but we can and should discover where the opportunities are for a small, potent gesture that allows students and teachers to expand and develop our full range of literacies. We can still support and value the use of close reading and effective writing while we incorporate occasions to cultivate skills in and understanding of multiple literacies into our students' learning. For example, change one assignment. Open an assignment to a range of media—use visuals, sound, animation.

To evaluate and grade student projects involving multiple literacies



does require planning. It is useful to negotiate with students at the beginning of the assignment to determine the criteria for evaluation. Such criteria can value compelling written work as well as the effective use of visual representations to promote communication: the two elements can be assessed in terms of how well these support and complement each other. There are three in particular that Selfe recommends highly:

Kress, G. (1999). 'English' at the crossroads: Rethinking Curricula of communication in the context of the turn of the visual. In G. Hawisher and C. Selfe (Eds.) *Passions, Pedagogies, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Technologies*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 66-88.

The New London Group (1996). *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures*. *Harvard Educational Review* 66(1), 60-92.

Tufte, E. (1997). *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press. ■