

**Research Bank**

Journal article

**CUOL : See you online**

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## **CUOL – ‘See You Online’ Teaching Strategies for Digital Literacy Practices in the English Curriculum**

Literacy educator **Kathy Mills** observes that creating multimodal and digital texts is an essential part of the national English curriculum. Here, she presents five practical and engaging ways to transform conventional writing tasks in a digital world.

When I was conducting research in a Year 4 classroom (students aged eight to ten), I watched as a teacher helped her students to understand the difference between fact and opinion. The teacher asked, ‘What do you think of spinach? Am I asking for fact or opinion?’ A boy called out: ‘What do you think of video games?’

The teacher didn’t seem to hear him, accepting other responses from students whose hands were raised. I observed that his feet were up on the desk, his posture declaring resistance to the lesson. He turned to me and asked pointedly: ‘Miss, what do you think of video games?’ I whispered, so as not to interrupt the lesson:

‘I think they’re cool. I play some of them. What do you think of video games?’

‘I think they’re great.’

‘What do you play?’

One of the games he cited was Moshi Monsters <[www.moshimonsters.com](http://www.moshimonsters.com)>, a safe, fun, educational site designed for primary school-age children to complete puzzles, own monsters, design virtual environments and participate in social networking in a moderated environment. Clearly, the literacy skills and resources that students bring to school differ markedly from those of students in the past, as they participate in screen-based digital cultures that are distant from the classroom in time and space. How can teachers integrate essential writing tasks with the digital spaces that many students today inhabit?

This is particularly important for teachers in Australia, because the national English curriculum requires that students from the foundation years to the end of secondary schooling ‘Use a range of software ... to create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts.’<sup>1</sup> This article provides five teaching tips to guide innovative and research-based digital practices in the writing classroom, which are aligned with the ‘Literacy’ strand of the national English curriculum (and the subcategory ‘Creating texts’). A useful pedagogical sequence for teaching digital text creation is discussed to enable teachers to embed multimodal textual practices within the English curriculum.

### 1. KIR: Keep it real!

A significant feature of online literacies is that they are situated, authentic forms of communication for real-world audiences and purposes. For example, participating in virtual communities, online chat and blogging are authentic writing practices. Completing fill-in-the-blank spelling or vocabulary worksheets can reinforce basic skills, but frequently such activities lead students to acquire routines and de-contextualised knowledge that they are unable to apply in real-world, digital contexts. The human mind is not simply a processor of de-contextualised facts.<sup>2</sup> Instead, knowledge is largely situated in sociocultural settings, contextualised in specific domains and practices.<sup>3</sup> It cannot be assumed that students will be able to transfer basic skills, like adding suffixes and prefixes to root words, to authentic writing tasks. By writing for real purposes in online settings, literacy skills take on new meaning and relevance.

In addition, the broadened range of purposes for writing online has generated a host of new text types with different generic structures and textual features. New discourses have arisen that are exclusive to the digital landscape, such as online chat and micro-blogging (blogs limited to 140 characters). The related convergence of linguistic and iconic codes has prompted textual theorists to examine these shifts in meaning-making. Students need to become familiar with the new purposes and generic features of these reconfigured, screen-based genres, which are sometimes more dynamic, multi- authored and interactive than page-bound texts.<sup>4</sup> See Figure 1.0 for a novel digital activity that involves communicating for real-world purposes in a new genre.

**Figure 1.1 Example of Digital Scrapbook Page**

#### Digital scrapbooking (Years P–7)

Combining photos, captions, music and graphics, digital scrapbooks are generally used to share special events with family and friends, and can include either small or and can include either small or large amounts of text. Locate a free online digital scrapbooking facility, such as <http://freedigitalscrapbooking.com/> or [www.smilebox.com](http://www.smilebox.com). With these simple platforms, students at all primary school levels are able to send digital scrapbooks to peers, a sister school or family members to recount a school event. First, choose a themed template or design, then upload your photos and add photo captions (Years P–2) or paragraphs of text (Years 3–7). Select copyright-free music files from the selection provided, and play the scrapbook back to watch, edit and send. The visual, audio and written elements should complement each other. Remind students to include:

- Recipient’s name and email address
- Greeting text
- Captions or extended text to match photos
- Personal message
- Closing text
- Sender’s email address

Edit the scrapbooks with your students before sending them electronically.



## 2. RYS: Read your screen

Multimodality is a central feature of screen-based textual practices in the digital communications environment. It expresses the complexity and interrelationship of more than one mode of meaning, combining linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural or spatial modes.<sup>5</sup> The Australian English curriculum requires that even the youngest students ‘listen to, read, view, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex and sophisticated spoken, written and multimodal texts’.<sup>6</sup>

Linguistic design refers to written words. Visual meanings or modes include images, page layouts, screen formats, colours, perspectives and backgrounding. Audio elements refer to music, dialogue, silence or sound effects. Gestural design involves body language, gestures and movements, while spatial design includes environmental, geographical and architectural meanings (for example, the location of objects in a room).

Multimodal design differs from independent modes because it dynamically interconnects a number of semiotic elements to convey meaning.<sup>7</sup> For example, designing a web page involves decisions about content, screen layout, colours and images, as well as the right words and quantity of information to attract visitors to the site. The multimodality of language in society today requires that text users shift meanings flexibly between sign systems, combining and switching between modes.<sup>8</sup> See Figure 2.0 for examples of a multimodal textual practice.

### Figure 2.0

#### Global positioning (Years 3–7)

Use a free virtual map program such as Google Earth to view satellite imagery, maps, terrain, three-dimensional buildings, or even galaxies in the sky. Students of any age can explore geographical content related to content areas about places. In this activity, ask students to work in pairs to share local places of personal significance. They take turns entering the names of familiar sites, including their own addresses, to view places they know from an aerial perspective. Insert the satellite images or maps into word-processed documents that include information texts about landmarks in the local area. Discuss how the chosen satellite images help to create a clearer meaning of the written text.

## 3. GMTA: Great minds think alike

A special feature of online writing is its participatory nature. For example, when students contribute to a discussion thread in a virtual world such as Club Penguin <[www.clubpenguin.com](http://www.clubpenguin.com)> or Whyville <[www.whyville.net/smmk/nice](http://www.whyville.net/smmk/nice)>, they engage in an interactive and participatory process of negotiation that requires collective contributions. Online text users switch between reading and writing, involving rapid interactions between authors and receivers (such as with online chat). The discussion thread that is produced is fluid and open to modification – distributed to others for comment while under construction. This contrasts with books, which are closed, static and bound. Recent research provides new ways of thinking about how video games are both text and action, and how they can contribute to the formal curriculum.<sup>9</sup> See Figure 3.0 for an example of an activity that constitutes both textual practice and action in a networked environment.

**Figure 3.0****Multiplayer games for kids (Years 3–7)**

Get students to use a free, moderated, multi-user game, such as Moshi Monsters or Club Penguin, so that they can social network in a safe online environment. For example, in Club Penguin you can invite other registered class members (penguins) to have an exclusive forum in your ‘igloo’ on an educational topic. The teacher begins the discussion and prompts the students to continue the thread. Monitor the frequency of responses from each student and ask those who are reluctant to contribute to share their opinion. In Moshi Monsters, students can use the pin board forum to communicate to other children via message posts.

Encourage students to read and correct their spelling before sending each line of text. When a typing error is sent, a common practice is to send the corrected form of the word flagged with an asterisk. Set clear expectations with students about purpose of the online discussion, and the degree of formality required.

**4. DBEYR: Don't believe everything you read**

Children today sometimes have access to digital texts from powerful, uncensored, adult sites that purport to offer authentic information. This has prompted educators to teach critical literacy skills in secure, web-based contexts. Students can be taught to independently evaluate and challenge the reliability of information, and identify who benefits from websites. With the enormous growth in the volume of textual materials, students need to develop abilities to critically select, interpret and synthesise relevant information.

Critical theorists have long emphasised the need for the critical reading of texts and their associated social practices, including the selection and use of texts in schools.<sup>10</sup> However, there is now a heightened educational concern associated with the internet. Learners need to critically analyse the underlying social, cultural, ideological, political and value-laden assumptions of texts.<sup>11</sup> For example, they can consider how certain colours and images used on websites are designed to profit directly or indirectly from boys (for example, with primary colours) or girls (pastels) as target consumers. In this way, students will critically analyse the underlying interests of the authors and producers, who drive the consumption of children's everyday online texts.

More importantly, students can be encouraged to consider multiple readings of texts and alternate points of view rather than unlocking or reproducing the ‘correct’ meaning.<sup>12</sup> Print and digital texts represent particular points of view that silence other voices, but they are open to be challenged.<sup>13</sup> Without such critical literacies, comprehension becomes mere cultural reproduction, bringing readers' values into alignment with the dominant culture. See Figure 4.0 for an example of critical textual practice applied to identifying and evaluating digitally modified images in the

**Figure 4.0: Photos that lie (Years 6–10)**

The aim of this activity is for upper primary students to understand that media images are digitally manipulated and modified to exaggerate, idealise and transform what is real. View footage of digital image manipulation at work (for example, Dove's ‘Evolution’ campaign). This will encourage students to critically evaluate images of flawless models that do not depict reality. Demonstrate how to upload and digitally modify an ID photo using imaging software such as Adobe Photoshop or Picasa 3 by Google. Crop the image, use red-eye reduction, modify the colors, and use different functions to beautify or distort the image (for example, paste sections of skin colour over blemishes, whiten teeth and eyes, or add garish effects). Students can upload their own photos and modify them subtly or in exaggerated ways. Discuss the need to evaluate images critically, rather than accepting images as the truth.

media.

### 5. CR8 something new

Online writing involves generative or creative textual practices, rather than simply reproducing sign-making conventions. For example, even when students remix images and web content on their own web pages, they transform and re-contextualise existing meanings and textual designs to create something new. Creative practice differs in degrees and types of transformed meanings for different students and texts, ranging from close reproduction to substantial change.<sup>14</sup> Creative practice involves using original combinations of existing resources for meaning making. See Figure 5.0 for a digital activity that provides the opportunity for students to engage in creative practice. Research has demonstrated how multimodal text production, such as online comic creation, allows students to transmediate or shift semiotic content across modes to generate new meanings.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 5.0: Online comic creator (Years 3–5)**

Comic building online utilises the features of conventional, hand-drawn comics. Digital tools enable the user to combine graphics, speech bubbles and text to create professional and creative comic strips to entertain an audience. Ask students to use a comic creation website, such as <[www.makebeliefscomix.com](http://www.makebeliefscomix.com)>, to design a witty comic strip. The comics should communicate an educational message to younger students. Show the students examples of comics that have an unexpected climax. Demonstrate how to insert characters, thought bubbles, speech balloons and text, and how to modify the size and orientation using the site’s facilities.

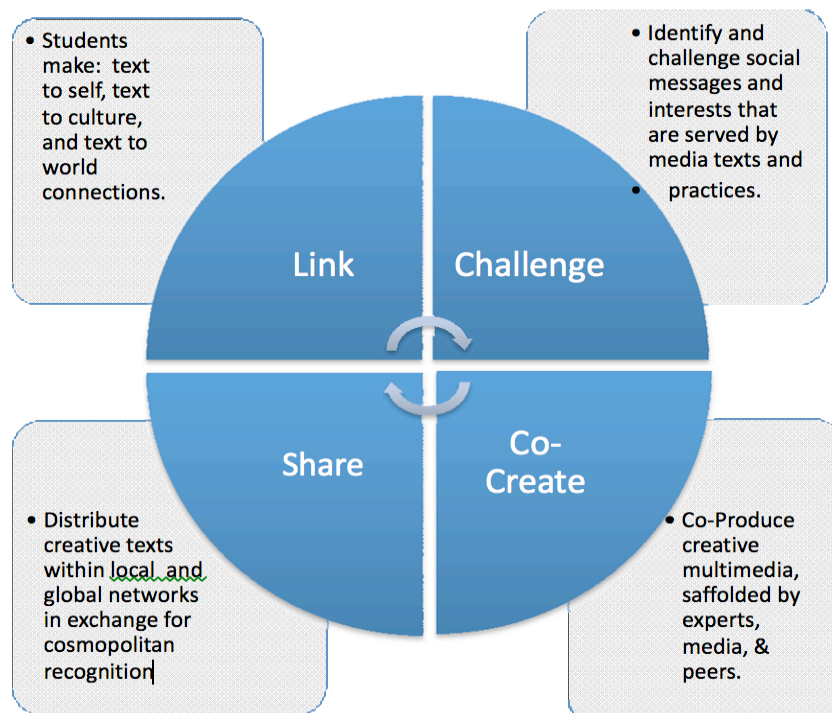


### How to MIH – make it happen

How can teachers transform their pedagogies so that new digital literacy practices become more than an ‘add-on’ to the core curriculum? We have previously generated a research-based model for teaching digital text creation called iPed – short for i-Pedagogy.<sup>16</sup> We tested it in classrooms to help children become collaborative producers, rather than simply consumers, of digital media (see next page, Figure 6.0).

The pedagogy begins by providing opportunities for learners to make connections between their experiences and the world. ‘Link’ is the first principle of iPed. In Link, teachers guide students to make three kinds of connections between media texts: text-to-self, text-to-culture and text-to-world. This practice centres on culturally inclusive uses of media. Teachers can select multimedia, such as web-based information texts, to use in their shared, modelled and guided reading or writing lessons that address topics that relate to the students’ cultural experiences. For example, in a unit about biographies, teachers incorporated web-based texts about Indigenous heroes to relate to the cultural background of our Aboriginal students.





The second phase of iPed is ‘Challenge’ – a practice stemming from critical literacy that is applied to multimedia-based texts in a digital age. Challenge involves teaching students how to judge the authenticity and authority of web sources. This requires identifying the intended consumers, as well as assumptions about gender, age, social class, ethnicity, belief systems, silences and whose interests are served by the text. It also prompts reflection on the cultural assumptions that are reproduced in students’ own digital text creations. For an example activity, see Figure 4.0.

‘Co-create’ is the third phase of iPed, which involves co-producing media, such as blogs, web pages, newsletters, digital scrapbooks, online comics and podcasts (video files uploaded to the web), for real audiences within and beyond the school. This pedagogy emphasises guided social participation or joint construction of texts among co-creators, whose digital text production is scaffolded by peers, experts, technologies, screen displays, help sheets and other learning tools. The teacher alternates short periods of expert instruction that demonstrate how to construct the written and digital features of texts. Time is provided for students to apply the instruction in pairs or individually using the technologies (such as digital cameras and computers). For example, teachers can model and explain the textual features of persuasive texts, and demonstrate how to construct a persuasive argument within an accessible blogging site for students (such as Education Queensland’s The Learning Place, <http://education.qld.gov.au/learningplace/>). There is a gradual reduction in the degree of scaffolding as students become proficient at creating digital texts independently.

The final pedagogy in iPed is ‘Share’ – presenting texts to local and global audiences. While teachers can make formal, comparative judgements about students’ textual products, learning can also be judged informally by

participation in digital practices within local and global communities. Share is about exchanging students’ proficiencies with digital media design for cosmopolitan recognition and status. For example, we formally presented Year 4 students’ media products to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous local community, including students, parents and the school principal. Students can display their work on the public school intranet, where teachers and students can gain credibility for their work.

### **CUOL: See you online!**

Literacy teachers and researchers now recognise that rapid technological change has created divergences between screen-based modes of textual production and writing with a pencil and paper. Teachers globally need to augment exclusively print-based approaches to writing with online practices to prepare students for the workplace. In the context of the Australian English curriculum, teaching students to create digital texts using varied software is no longer an optional extra, but a requirement. We cannot assume that all students are competent in digital text production because they play video games on their Xbox or Nintendo for pleasure.

The writing classroom must include a wide range of multimodal textual practices, including those associated with digital communications environments that are required for meaningful participation in a changing society. The pedagogical sequence of iPed – Link, Challenge, Create and Share – can guide the meaningful integration of media and technology that is part of everyday life into the English curriculum.

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### **Endnotes**

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- <sup>1</sup>See Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, <<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Curriculum/ContentDescription/ACELY1728>>, accessed 9 April 2013.
- <sup>2</sup>Barbara Rogoff, *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990.
- <sup>3</sup>James Wertsch, *Culture, Communication, and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.
- <sup>4</sup>Kathy Mills & Vinesh Chandra, ‘Microblogging as a Literacy Practice for Educational Communities’, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 55, no.1, 2011, pp. 35–45.
- <sup>5</sup>The New London Group, ‘A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures’, in Bill Cope & Mary Kalantzis (eds), *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, Macmillan, South Yarra, VIC, 2000, pp. 9–38.
- <sup>6</sup>See Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, <<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Aims>>, accessed 9 April 2013.
- <sup>7</sup>Carey Jewitt & Gunther Kress, ‘Language and Literacy Teaching’, In C. Jewitt & G. Kress (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, Routledge, London, 2010.
- <sup>8</sup>Gunther Kress, ‘Multimodality’, in Cope & Kalantzis (eds), op. cit., pp. 182–202.
- <sup>9</sup>Catherine Beavis, Joanne O’Mara & Lisa McNeice (eds), *Digital Games: Literacy in Action*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2009.
- <sup>10</sup>Allan Luke, Barbara Comber & Helen Grant, ‘Critical Literacies and Cultural Studies’, in Michele Anstey & Geoff Bull (eds), *The Literacy Lexicon*, 2nd edn, Pearson, Frenchs Forest, NSW, 2002, pp. 15–35.
- <sup>11</sup>Allan Luke & Peter Freebody, ‘Shaping the Social Practices of Reading’, In Sandy Muspratt, Allan Luke & Peter Freebody (eds), *Constructing Critical Literacies: Teaching and Learning Textual Practice*, Allen & Unwin,



Sydney, 1997, pp. 185–225.

<sup>12</sup>Mary Kalantzis & Bill Cope, *Learning by Design*, Victorian Schools Innovation Commission and Common Ground, Melbourne, VIC, 2005.

<sup>13</sup>Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup>Kalantzis & Cope, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup>Kathy Mills & Amanda Levido, ‘iPed: Pedagogy for Digital Text Production’, *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2011, pp. 80-91.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.*