CMS.998/CMS.600: New Media Literacies
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Lecture Notes

Session 6, 2/26/07

- Conference this weekend: "Beyond Broadcast"
    - From participatory culture/media to participatory democracy
    - Henry Jenkins gave a keynote address
    - Working groups
        - Virtual worlds – that group talked a lot about Second Life
        - Some of the working groups added a lot to the wiki, available at beyondbroadcast.net. The Free Culture and Activism group, for example, put a lot on the wiki

- Readings
    - Graff, Gee

- Graff
    - He's a historian at Ohio State, so keep in mind that his approach is a historical one
    - Chronological treatments of literacy over time
    - Problematizing historical treatments of literacy
    - He points out many concepts of literacy fail to understand its complexity, and their definitions are often self-contradictory or even nonexistent
    - He points out the problem in treating literacy as the cure for society's ills
    - Studies of literacy historically – he points out the flaws in these studies
    - Historical definitions of literacy – he points out the flaws here as well

- James Paul Gee
    - Sociolinguist, literacy scholar, cognitive scientist
    - Principal argument: "talk of 'literacy crises' is… an evasion of more significant social problems" and "any view of literacy is inherently political."
    - Gee on literacy data
        - Popular measures of literacy skills today often fail to account for other factors, such as schooling, class and socioeconomic status, home-based preparation, and practices of literacy, etc.
        - We can't look at literacy practices as generalized – we have to look at them as school-based or not school-based
        - He says that schools have historically failed with non-elite populations and therefore replicated the social hierarchy.
    - Gee on literacy myths
        - "If language is what makes us human, literacy is what makes us civilized"

- This myth that literacy can work wonders in the world is only useful outside of the context in which literacy is used.
  - That's why you can test well on the verbal SAT, but not be able to write a poem. There are different types of literacies

- Gee on Plato
  - Plato says that meaning is not necessarily stable or static, but rather comes through a process of communication and dialogue, and in that sense Plato was very useful
  - By Plato's definition literacy can not empower, it can only reinforce
- Gee on literacy and cognition
  - He emphasizes that there are different kinds of literacy
- Gee on Freire
  - Literacy in school is not enough: we also have to measure what comes with it
- Gee on the NLS
  - Literacy means nothing unless it has something to do with the ability to read something (for some reason, purpose, in some place, with some context)
  - Literacy isn't just about the ability to get meaning, it's about the ability to get *this* meaning.

- What's important about all this. What we're doing today.
  - Until relatively recently, literacy wasn't seen as something that could offer a group power, it was only seen as a measure of who had power.
  - It was seen as an elite practice
  - Before new media studies there wasn't a sense of the multiplicity of literacy
  - Literacy is not about studying static texts. It's about studying what people *do* with such texts. That is a social-science based question, not a humanities-based one.

- Class discussion
  - Tracking in American schools
  - Why do some people succeed even though they didn't have the advantages of an educated family?
  - Tracking is hugely determinative, and students tracked at lower levels tend to begin to fulfill the negative stereotypes and lowered expectations that correspond to those tracks
  - Where do literacy studies belong? In an English department? An education department? A history department? All of these backgrounds would change the way you study it.
  - Key points in the history of literacy in the west
    - Catholic schooling
    - Protestants who focused more on the Bible itself

- - - Is it reasonable to be afraid of how people will interpret a text? So many different interpretations are available
  - Literacy and notions of citizenship
    - How can new media literacy be used to encourage more participatory democracy?
  - How did standardized testing develop? People felt they needed to test whether a school was "good," and so massive testing seemed like the easiest way to go about doing that
  - How are textbooks developed and how are they chosen?
    - It's a very political issue
  - Is there a certain fundamentalism (similar to religious fundamentalism, even) inherent in the ideas behind standardized testing? Standardized texts expect children to read a text and then state the single correct interpretation of what it means. They are literalist and involve a belief that divergent interpretations are wrong.
  - When you interpret a text, you can look at it as analytically and critically as you want, but you're still putting the power with the text.
    - All the criticisms of what video games do to children place a great deal of power in the video games, as things that convert children into mindless creatures, as media with the power to make your brain numb. Instead, we should empower the children.
    - There's very little consideration going on regarding what people are actually doing with media, only fears of what media is doing to people
    - These views of texts are really radical. Ruminate on it.
  - Visual literacy, interactive literacy
  - What's the difference between skill and literacy?
    - Technique?
    - Meaning?
    - Agency/choice and use?
  - What do we do with all of this history of literacy that we've examined? What type of analysis are we privileging?

- For next class: read "Why Johnny can't write"