

Writing between the Lines— and Everywhere Else

A report from the National Council of Teachers of English

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Literacy education and literacy practices are in the midst of a profound change. This view found in several recent studies is reinforced by a recent poll of English language arts teachers conducted by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and by survey data collected from teen writers and their parents in a large-scale study sponsored by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Taken together, these studies paint a vivid picture of literacy practices that are changing so rapidly that educators, students, and parents are unsure about how school literacy learning experiences and out-of-school literacy practices connect. What everyone seems to agree upon, however, is that the ability to communicate clearly and understand complex messages is more important than ever to students' future success.

A majority of more than 900 educator-respondents to the NCTE poll indicate that the key to advancing 21st century literacies in academic settings is making time for teacher learning, planning, and collaboration across the subject matter areas. In addition, they recognize that out-of-school literacy practices are as critical to students' development as what occurs in the classroom.

How Is Literacy for the 21st Century Different?

Nearly two-thirds of the poll respondents indicated that their teaching methods had undergone marked changes reflecting new concepts of literacy. The most important 21st century literacy skills identified by poll respondents focus on decision making, interpretation, and analysis. Specifically, the top three abilities required for student success highlighted by NCTE poll respondents are:

1. The ability to seek information and make critical judgments about the veracity of sources (95 percent of respondents rated this ability very important).
2. The ability to read and interpret many different kinds of texts, both in print and online (94 percent rated very important).
3. The ability to innovate and apply knowledge creatively (91 percent rated very important).

Fostering abilities like these, grounded in the application of knowledge to create, interpret, or appreciate differences, requires sophisticated work by literacy educators. Teaching approaches that fail to take into account differences among students or to engage them in real-world challenges tend to fall short of the mark. Thus, in evaluating what it takes to teach 21st century literacies, NCTE poll respondents tended to look beyond technology applications and see that success is found in better connecting classroom work to real-world situations that students will encounter across a lifetime.

NCTE National Council of
Teachers of English

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Nonlinear Learning

Most NCTE poll respondents (62 percent) rejected the idea that basic language, reading, and writing skills must be mastered *before* critical 21st century literacy abilities can be cultivated. The majority view is that decision-making and analytic ability have to be fostered concurrently with core skill development. Consistent with this view, the teaching/learning methods most strongly identified with building 21st century literacies were (1) learning through cross-disciplinary projects/project-based learning; (2) inquiry-based learning; and (3) incorporating student choices as a significant part of instruction. Those approaches that were not closely identified with 21st century literacy development were (1) preparing students for success on high-stakes tests; (2) helping students retain information so that they can deliver it on demand; and (3) direct instruction methods.

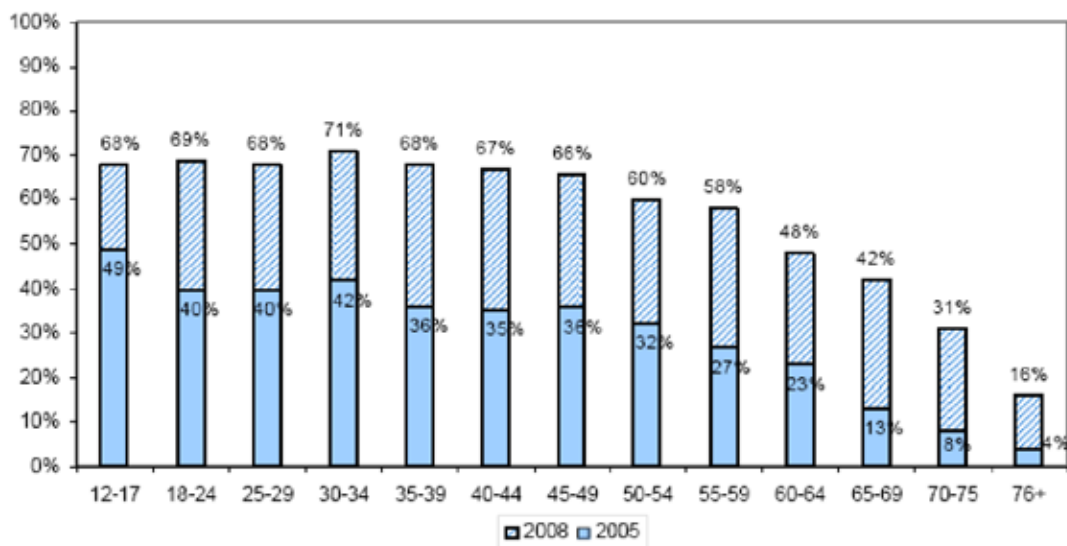
In-School/Out-of-School Literacy Learning

In general, the NCTE data suggests that newer, self-directed forms of literacy practice rarely occur in school environments and traditional, more formal forms of writing predominate in school but are much less frequently practiced by students outside of school. In fact, 57 percent of respondents felt that the development of 21st century

literacies occurs most frequently outside of school environments rather than in school. Among the literacy-building activities that occur primarily in a school setting are reading nonfiction, conducting research using print texts, writing expository or narrative texts, and writing a letter, journal, or diary (on paper). One half of poll respondents said that their average student spends at least an hour a week in school settings writing expository or narrative texts, and 28 percent said that students spend at least an hour a week at home *and* in school writing these texts. By contrast, only 3 percent of poll respondents said students spend at least an hour a week in school writing in an online social network environment, while 52 percent said that their students spend at least an hour a week outside of school writing in such environments.

Technology Access and Literacy Learning

For the most part, teachers in this poll did not see student technology access as a major barrier to learning. Eighty-three percent said that their students had Internet access at home, and 86 percent said that most of their students have daily access to an Internet connection at school that can be used for literacy learning purposes. A recent study (*Generations Online in 2009*) from the Pew Internet and American Life Project confirms the rapid growth in broadband Internet access:



Percentage of all Americans with broadband at home by age (Teens, 12-17, Nov. 2007-Feb. 2008, margin of error = ±3%. Adults, December 2008, margins of error differ by subgroup. See methodology.)

Still, 84 percent of NCTE poll respondents agreed that while their students had excellent command of technology for entertainment purposes, they need to know more about the use of technology for the purposes of creating and understanding texts.

What Teenagers Call Writing

A 2008 study titled *Writing, Technology and Teens* from the National Commission on Writing and the Pew Internet and American Life Project confirms that 86 percent of teenagers believe that writing well is important to success in life. The data shows that while most write online frequently and for varied purposes, they do not consider their emails, text messages, and blog posts as “real” writing. In fact, 73 percent said that their online writing made no difference to their school writing. Among other findings from that study:

- Teens report that they write more frequently in school than outside of school; while they write almost daily in school, 82 percent said that their typical school writing assignment is short—a paragraph to a page.
- 77 percent of teens felt that their writing had improved in the past year; 53 percent said that the writing instruction they had received in school was a major factor in changing their writing, but only 25 percent thought that their out-of-school writing was a major factor.
- Conversely, while only 17 percent of teens enjoyed school writing a great deal, 49 percent said that they enjoyed non-school writing a great deal.
- In follow-up focus groups, teens reported that what motivates them to write in school are relevant, interesting, self-selected topics, coupled with feedback from adults who paid attention and challenged them.

So, the study suggests that while students may enjoy writing outside of school more than writing for school purposes, they see little relationship between out-of-school and more formal school writing, and clearly still see academic writing as “counting” more than writing for pleasure or other self-determined purposes.

What Parents Believe about Writing

The same *Writing, Technology and Teens* study indicates that parents notice the importance of digital writing more than their children do, and they share the belief that writing is more important to future success than ever (83 percent of parents reported that there is a greater need to write well today than there was 20 years ago). Additionally, 48 percent of parents believe that their own children write more than they did at the same age (only 31 percent said that their children write less, and 20 percent believe that their children write about as much as they did).

As the table below indicates, parents tend to believe that writing with computers has a more positive impact than students believe it does:

The Impact of Technology on Writing		
Do you think using computers makes students more likely to...?		
	Parents (responding about their children)	Teens (responding about students in general)
Positive Attributes	Agree	Agree
Write better because they can revise and edit easily	69%	59%
Present ideas clearly	54	44
Be creative	50	44
Communicate well	43	36
Negative Attributes		
Take short cuts and not put effort into writing	45	49
Use poor spelling and grammar	40	42
Write too fast and be careless	40	41
Have a short attention span	22	28

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Teen/Parent Survey on Writing, September–November 2007. Margin of error is ±5%.

In-School and Out-of-School Literacies: NCTE's Role in Bringing Them Together

Over the past year, the National Council of Teachers of English has undertaken three initiatives to define 21st century literacies, to develop guidelines for curriculum and assessment in light of this definition, and to provide systematic, school-embedded professional development to help teachers foster these literacies. These are critical first steps in building a bridge between the writing and reading that counts in school and the literacy practices required for success in life beyond school walls.

Through careful study of how literacy teaching and learning—and literacy practices themselves—are changing, NCTE has developed a definition of 21st century literacies (<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/21stcentdefinition>) stating that 21st century readers and writers need to:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments

To assist educators in providing learning experiences that will prepare all students for the literacy demands of the 21st century, NCTE developed a 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment Framework (<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/21stcentframework>). It features questions that challenge educators to make curricular choices and develop or select assessments that take into account the multiple ways in which students will need to communicate, analyze, solve problems, and manage information across their lifetime. NCTE has also built an intensive, school-embedded, year-long professional development program, Pathways for 21st Century Literacies (<http://www.ncte.org/pathways/21stcentury>), to help teachers tap research, lesson plans, and collaborative planning approaches grounded in 21st century learning principles.

The National Day on Writing and the National Gallery of Writing

At the same time as it works to advance practices among literacy educators, the Council is mindful that teachers can

only be successful in fostering 21st century learning if the public at large begins to notice and appreciate the nuanced literacy practices that are evolving before our eyes.

Writing is a daily practice for millions of Americans, but few notice how integral writing has become to daily life. In fact, good writing may be the quintessential 21st century skill. To draw attention to the remarkable variety of writing people engage in and to help make writers from all walks of life aware of their craft, NCTE is working to establish **October 20, 2009**, as the **National Day on Writing**. On this day, events will occur across the nation to celebrate composition in all of its forms and to draw attention to who writes, why we write, and how we might all write a little better.

Over the next 15 months, NCTE will be inviting diverse participants from across the spectrum of our society—students, teachers, parents, grandparents, service and industrial workers, managers, business owners, legislators, retirees, and many more—to submit a piece of writing to the **National Gallery of Writing**. The National Gallery will be a digital archive of samples that exhibit how and why Americans are writing every day, accessible to all through a free, searchable website. The National Gallery will also include many useful links to help writers improve their craft and connect with their intended audience.

Perhaps students are right and there is little correlation between writing that one does for academic purposes and everyday literacy practices outside of school. But if that is true, we are missing an opportunity. By bringing together a portrait of the kinds of writing that matter to everyday citizens with tips and insights on how to write well, at least we should better understand the gap between formal and informal writing. And at best, we can begin to make real progress toward changing the school writing experience to better prepare students for a future that is sure to include ever-more complex tools and purposes for writing.

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