Dr. William Kist is associate professor at Kent State University. He researches new literacies and teaches undergraduate English education majors as well as doctoral students. He is the author of *The Socially Networked Classroom: Teaching in the New Media Age* (2010) and *New Literacies In Action: Teaching And Learning In Multiple Media* (2005). For this issue of *Reading Today*, Barbara Marinak talks with Dr. Kist about his views on the intersection of adolescents, RTI, and the new literacies.

What are the passions that have informed your teaching and research?

I came to literacy education from an arts background. I am a musician, a filmmaker, and an actor, and have worked in video production, so I can offer multiple perspectives to my students and the teachers I work with. I am also a former classroom teacher. I brought my passion for the arts into my classroom by using video, having the kids make movies, view art and listen to music. I had no idea that my passion for encouraging multiple representations would become the focus of my work as a professor and researcher.

I must also add that it was not an overriding interest in technology and the latest gadget that fueled my passion for the new literacies. In fact, I did not own a computer until 1996. I was a late adopter. What I saw was the power of giving kids choices in the way they represented their world. That’s the most exciting aspect of new literacies for me. It’s all about giving kids choices. I see that some kids may learn better, for example, by using a hand held device.

This variety of options can make teachers nervous. They are dealing with great diversity in their classrooms and have many curricular demands. But I believe providing students with choices in how they represent their learning can be managed in the classroom. It is not as complicated as teachers may fear.

Given your work in the arts, what is your definition of literacy?

I go back to Elliot Eisner for my definition of literacy. Eisner defined literacy in an interesting way in a 1997 *Phi Delta Kappan* article. His definition goes like this: “In order to be read, a poem, an equation, a painting, a dance, a novel, or a contract each requires a distinctive form of literacy, when literacy means, as I intend it to mean, a way of conveying meaning through and recovering meaning from the form of representation in which it appears” (Eisner, 1997, p. 353).

How would you describe the literacy world of today’s adolescents?

I don’t think there has been a more exciting time to be working in literacy with adolescents. Adolescents have so many ways of expressing themselves and reading about their world. It is amazing to be a teacher in these times. Some people are concerned that kids are reading less today than years ago. But I would argue that kids are actually reading and writing more than ever before by virtue of the texting and social networking they are doing. I think this is backed up by the work done by the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

Are we celebrating and honoring this type of literacy?

No, we are not. We are resistant to it. I like the word “celebrate.” We are not seeing the immense amount reading and writing that is going on right under our noses. We are concerned about a lack of Standard English in electronic
communication. This type of reading and communication does not count for teachers and policymakers. We do not value it. I think we are missing out.

Do you believe adolescents are making the connection between their social networking and more traditional literacy demands?
Yes and no. There is data from a Scholastic study to suggest they are making the connection. For example, 25% of kids ages six to 17 have read a book on a digital device. Moreover, 28% of kids ages nine to 17 think looking through postings or comments on social networking sites counts as reading; only 15% of parents agree.

So kids do seem to see social networking as reading and writing. I think what they may be missing are conversations in schools about how social networking is different from other important forms of print such as a cover letter, resume, or formal essay. They see their social networking as something they do for fun. Some do not see it as a part of their literacy lives.

I would argue that it is a very valuable part of one’s literacy life. It does not compromise the curriculum or take very long to have an ongoing conversation with students about all aspects of their literacy lives.

What concerns do you have about literacy instruction in middle school and high school?
I see too much of having the entire class read the same book at the same time, then asking fact level questions as assessment followed by writing a five-paragraph essay. This kind of teaching leads to a nation of kids using SparkNotes rather than connecting meaningfully with texts.

Given this concern, what is your rationale for creating a new literacy classroom?
First, it is often said that kids are going to need digital communication skills to function in the job market. I think that is absolutely true. It is hard to imagine a profession where you do not need to read and write on screen. However, we want to go beyond the job need as a rationale for doing this. It is a quality of life issue.

Similarly, in their literacy worlds, if all students are doing is texting their BFFs, they are missing the power of other forms of digital communication. We are responsible for making sure kids experience a rich palate and I think this concept relates to how we define “differentiation.”

I make the case that differentiation means expanding beyond paper based communication in a reading and writing workshop. For example, does screen-based reading count as reading during SSR? I hope so! For me, a classroom that truly embraces new literacies is one in which kids get to have literacy choices, making them aware of the many ways they can read, write, and represent their learning.

What do you see as the specific needs of struggling adolescent readers?
I think there are reading skills needed by all students. But how we teach them is the question. Let me give you an example from my work in schools. A teacher I know in Montreal employed new literacies with a group of struggling readers—mostly boys. He had been a wedding videographer, and he brought a large amount of raw wedding footage into his class and challenged the group to put it together into a meaningful narrative form. He found that the students were completely absorbed in the task.

Clearly the group practiced important literacy skills during this task of negotiation and construction. It is not that sequencing and inferencing aren’t still relevant. They are! It’s just that we need to view them more broadly.

As RTI unfolds in secondary classrooms across the country, what should leaders and teachers think and talk about?
I wish they would see new literacies as offering wonderful ways to differentiate instruction and intervene on behalf of kids. New literacies can enrich the literacy lives of struggling readers. And, for teachers concerned about assessment accountability,
all products created using new literacies can be scored using powerful rubrics.

Interestingly, the creation of such rubrics may entail collaborating with arts teachers regarding how to best assess students’ work. I would argue that such collaboration begins to counter the marginalization of arts teachers that we see in many schools.

If a secondary teacher or a reading specialist wants to move toward a new literacy classroom, what three action steps would you recommend?

- Play with the technology yourself. Get familiar with Twitter, blogging, setting up a wiki, making a podcast. Don’t be afraid of the tools and don’t be afraid to make mistakes.
- Immerse yourself in the professional literature that exists about how to differentiate your classroom using new literacies, including rubric design.
- Take a look at the Common Core State Standards and familiarize yourself with the new core and online standardized assessments. You will see that as you begin integrating new literacies you are not doing something that isn’t supported by the curriculum.

Note: Dr. Kist will Skype into the Mount Teacher Institute being held at Mount St. Mary’s University on June 26, 2012. The title of his session is “My Journey to ‘The Socially Networked Classroom.” For more information, go to http://www.msmary.edu/academics/mt_summer/lifelong_learning/teacher_institute%202011/, or go to www.msmary.edu and enter “teacher institute” into the website search.

References


Dr. Barbara Marinak is associate professor of education at Mount Saint Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. She is also the co-chair of the RTI Task Force of IRA, marinak@msmary.edu.