



The New Literacies Research Lab at the University of Connecticut

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Professor Donald Leu, Jr., Ph.D. and his research team are in a race, and at the end of it lies a connected world that is more just, literate and productive.

Leu, the John and Maria Neag Endowed Chair in Literacy and Technology, is the driving force behind a team of researchers at the New Literacies Research Lab in the Neag School of Education. They conduct research on "the new literacies of the Internet," or the skills needed to read and communicate effectively in the multimedia, networked, online world of today.

The team seeks to fundamentally improve the nature of classroom reading and writing instruction by integrating the new literacies of the Internet into every classroom in our nation. Their vision places the Internet as this generation's defining technology for reading, writing and learning.

His colleagues, like Leu himself, were attracted to the Neag School of Education from universities across the nation by the innovative work made possible by the endowment.

"For a professor, my endowed chair is the gift of a lifetime," Leu says. "It frees me to do the work that I know is critical to our nation's future."

That work is done by a team of graduate students and faculty who have been awarded five major research grants, published six books, written nearly a hundred articles and leveraged more than \$8 million of research funding.

Leu believes that America is behind many other nations in preparing our students for 21st century reading skills. His team trains teachers, develops reading curriculum, educates school administrators on new literacies and works on changing the nature of reading assessments.

"Our research shows that new reading and writing skills are required on the Internet, skills that our states do not measure and our schools do not teach," Leu says. "This is especially true for those students who require our support the most -- those who have access to the Internet at home the least."

Leu also worries about the broader implications for a society that is unable to better interpret the flood of information they encounter online. The team recently found that 96 percent of 7th graders believed the information they found at a completely false Internet site, "Save the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus." Leu cites work in Finland, Mexico, Ireland, Australia, Korea, Japan and many other countries that have taken steps to ensure their students know how to read, write and communicate on the Internet and use technology.

Leu cites one study of Massachusetts students where the percentage of students who passed the state's writing assessment increased by 19 percent solely through allowing students to use word processors instead of paper and pencil. Currently, no state allows students to use a word processor on their assessment.

"In some cases, our kids have these technology skills, but in our schools we're actually asking them to go backwards!" Leu says.

Leu's colleague and fellow team member, Professor Douglas Hartman, says even the task of reading changes when students are exposed to text on the Internet.

"When you read a book, you read it and then ask questions about what you have read," Hartman says. "Online, you actually start with a question, and instead of having the content delivered to you, you control what you read yourself. There is a huge difference in how you synthesize the information."

That difference can make a large difference in using technology effectively, something Leu sees as vital to our nation's students.

"The race has just begun, but if something isn't done, we're going to lose it," Leu says. "At the rate we're going, our kids will be second-class citizens of technology."

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