



# OFFICE HOURS



By Michael Stephens

WE SPEND A LOT OF TIME TALKING about new and emerging literacies in our field. Conceptualizing how information is created, shared, and understood becomes especially intriguing when we add a new language to the mix, a language that many citizens globally understand. Consider this: 92 percent of all people online use emoji as a means to convey information and emotion. A recent piece in *Wired* by Clive Thompson, “The Emoji Is the Birth of a New Type of Language (👉 No Joke),” exploring this phenomenon got me thinking about what it might mean for communication, sharing, and interaction with others and with libraries.

Thompson shares some striking research insights by way of linguist Tyler Schnoebelen, chief data scientist for Idibon: people often use the skull emoji when they talk about their problems with their phones, Instagram posts include emoji nearly 50 percent of the time, and emoji have quelled the use of “netspeak.” Remember netspeak? I used to teach that lingo in public Internet classes in the 1990s. Today, LOL has yielded to any number of smiling ideograms as a means to convey laughter or happiness.

Recently, Facebook expanded the like button to include a series of emoji partly in response to confusion about what “liking” something actually means. Emoji give nuance and provide nonverbal clues to our communications. Added to a shared Facebook article about some heinous event, the angry face carries a lot more emotional weight than the thumbs up. Scanning Facebook feeds, we can easily tap into the collective feelings about particular events and news.

## Telling a story



Emoji have been around for a number of years, but as smartphone use has increased, so has the popularity of these

small images that convey so much. Thompson notes that emoji add “an emotional tenor to hard copy.” Often used hearts, gesture symbols, and others extend the message of our social communications, either private or public. Decoding a string of emoji can be engaging, playful, and poignant. The National Young Writers Festival in Australia added an emoji storytelling category, known as the “Emoji-pocalypse,” to the event last year. Search the web for “emoji masterpieces” to see more innovative stories and representations of great literature and popular culture.

I’d also guess that many couples, fam-

only happens when it’s raining” look like?

Imagine if users could add emoji to the catalog, expressing their feelings about a book or movie with a range of emotion ideograms. Or having people rate their experience at a library program by sending attendees a link to the program after they attended, with emoji to represent their reactions. Talk about making feedback more fun!

I saw this live at Grand Valley State University’s (GVSU) new library last year. On my way out of the Allendale, MI, building after a talk, a large touch screen beckoned and asked me to rate my experience from angry to “meh” to

## If digital literacy is the ability to find, use, and create information, we can’t limit those exchanges to text

ilies, and groups of friends have developed their own use of emoji as signifiers that conveys loads of personal significance in just a few characters. The characters one uses the most tell a bit of their life story. What does it say about me that my most used emoji are the red heart, the two dog characters, a glass of red wine, and an airplane? Perhaps it’s good I don’t use the skull that often.

## Library emoji



Sadly, there is not an emoji that represents a library. Perhaps in future versions of the Unicode, a representative building, the library symbol, and other graphical characters for our services will appear. For now, it’s good to see programs such as “Create Your Own Emoji” at the District of Columbia Public Library and numerous other emoji-themed events for young people. The creative storytelling angle seems to cry out for more program opportunities. What would it look like to turn the plot of your favorite novel into a string of characters? Could others guess? Song lyrics, too—what would “thunder

eyes filled with love. Like Schnoebelen’s analysis, it must be fascinating to see the ebb and flow of emotions related to the library visits at GVSU.

## Evolution of language



Of course, the written word is not going away. Thompson notes that “text is our most powerful go-to communication tool.” But if we define digital literacy as the ability of people to find, use, and create information, we certainly can’t limit those creations and exchanges to text. Isn’t it fascinating to consider where this might take us? Student work could someday evolve to be more visual and image-based, a blend of text, ideograms, and pictures (think Twitter’s new gif keyboard), and other media. User feedback could come from this new language, too—complete with the emotional component that comes with sharing a 👍 or a ❤️.

*Michael Stephens (mstephens7@mac.com) is Assistant Professor at the School of Information, San José State University, CA*