

Chapter 96

Unbounded Reading: Why Online Learning for K–12 Students Should Be a Literacy Issue

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ABSTRACT

Students' reading abilities and achievements are the focus of numerous national and international reports. At the same time, research on K-12 distance education offers a very limited description of the types of reading that students are asked to do or the students' abilities to accomplish this reading effectively. This chapter overviews the limited research about reading in online courses. The author then examines the potential of reading in online courses through bounded and unbounded contexts. The chapter concludes with instructional opportunities for teachers of online courses when designing reading assignments.

INTRODUCTION

Students' abilities to read and write have been the topic of public attention for decades. Citizens were concerned when it was determined that many World War I soldiers were illiterate, sparking increased attention to literacy in schools (Israel & Monaghan, 2007). By the 1950s, *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955) set off a public outcry over students' reading abilities and resulted in a much greater emphasis on phonics instruction in the schools. The past two decades have seen a variety of reports sounding the alarm over young students' and adolescents' lack of readiness for 21st century literate practices (Biancorsa & Snow, 2004) leading to increased attention to disciplinary literacy and practices posited to support 21st century skills (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of State School Officers, 2012).

At the same time renewed attention is being focused on the struggles of K-12 readers, technology is progressing at a rapid rate (Coiro, Knowbel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2009). Learners are described as viewing and interacting with text at twitch-speed (Ivanova & Smrikarov, 2009). New technologies offer increasing options in the formats of learning, including blended and online delivery. In spite of the increased attention to learning through these methods, how and what students read in online delivery is

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noticeably absent from the research. If the society at large and the educational community specifically, is concerned about the current literacy skills of students, then it seems beneficial to consider what the role of reading is in instruction delivered online.

This chapter reviews the extant literature on reading in online environments and explores several questions. Are different processes involved when reading a physical book as opposed to reading from a screen? What is the status of reading research related to technology-mediated reading, particularly as it relates to online and blended learning? Based on the information about reading in online environments and the research regarding bounded (traditional text-bound reading) and unbounded (search and selection of text/pages through Internet sites) reading, what are the implications for instruction?

BACKGROUND

What is the role of reading in online courses? Many tasks presented in online courses regardless of level require the student to read, from reading lecture notes and assigned textbook readings to reading peer posts in discussion groups and reviewing teacher feedback on assignments (Kerr, 2010; Thomas, 2008). Program descriptions, as well as anecdotal records, suggest that university and college online courses require more reading and writing than traditional face-to-face courses (Land, 2011; Snyder, 2012; University of Alabama, n.d.). However, little research is available to document the comparison of reading in face to face courses to reading in online courses at either the K-12 or college and university level.

The absence of research about the amount of reading and types of reading assigned in online courses may be in part because of a lack of explicit focus on reading throughout the online literature. For example, in the third edition of *The Handbook of Distance Education*, (Moore, 2013), not a single chapter is devoted to reading. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) stated purpose is to “provide states, districts online programs, and other organizations with a set of quality guidelines” (p. 4) for online teaching and program development. Finding anything mentioned about reading requires some inferencing skills. In iNACOL’s National Standards for Quality Online Courses (iNACOL, 2011a) mention is made that materials should be written at a reading level appropriate for the learners. The National Standards for Quality Online Teaching (iNACOL, 2011b) similarly glosses over reading. Out of 11 standards, none specifically mention reading or literacy. Only one of the subcomponents of the final standard references literacy, stating that an online teacher should know and understand “critical digital literacies and 21st century skills” (p. 16). This is particularly striking in the literature for K-12 distance education since educators have been writing about the crises in students’ literacy skills and the outcome of such literacy deficits (Biancorsa & Snow, 2004). Further, the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of State School Officers, 2012) offer arguably more demanding literacy skills than many previous standards, positing that if students are to be college and career ready, they must be able to demonstrate deep levels of content-specific literacy and analysis skills through reading and writing achievement. The lack of students’ literacy skills as demonstrated in national and international assessments (Kelly, Nord, Jenkins, Chan, & Kastberg, 2013), as well as the heightened requirements for literate practices in order to meet standards, underscore the importance of understanding as much as possible about reading in all environments, including blended and online learning environments.

Specific to K-12 online learning, reading is typically viewed as (a) a sub-component of learner characteristics or (b) a part of instructional design. As a learner characteristic, learners are assessed to

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