

Chapter 82

Texts and Tasks: Why Reading Matters in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

The subject of students' reading abilities and achievement are the focus national and international comparisons. Such a broad audience makes reading content, activities, and assessments the subject of great scrutiny. At the same time, we know little about reading within the quickly expanding market of K-12 distance education. Research 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 describes the types of reading students do in online K-12 courses, followed by a review of the limited research about reading in online courses. The chapter concludes with instructional implications for teachers of online courses and possibilities for future research.

INTRODUCTION

In the 2015 first edition of *Exploring the Effectiveness of Online Education in K-12 Environments* (Heafner, Hartshorne, & Petty, 2015), I argued that online learning should include a focus on literacy (Massey, 2015). The argument was based on two premises. First, many online courses deliver content by asking students to read a variety of texts, including assigned textbooks and articles, instructions for completing the course, assignment guidelines, and discussion posts. Second, online courses are well-positioned to move students beyond the reading of bounded text, which is traditional printed or online text that exists as a single piece and can be read from beginning to end, to the reading of unbounded text, which involves search and selection of text and pages through Internet websites.

In the years since the original chapter, little additional research has been added to the description and analysis of reading in online courses. At the same time, enrollments in online courses for K-12 students have expanded markedly. The increased popularity has not always resulted in increased, or even equal, achievement between online students' and their brick-and-mortar counterparts, with the online students

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frequently lagging behind. This chapter continues the call for more attention to the text that students read and the reading tasks that students complete in online courses. This chapter will review sample online courses for a variety of grade levels, summarize existing research about reading in online courses, and highlight the standards that address reading in online courses.

Foundational to any discussion of reading is the definition of what it means to read. In this chapter, reading is defined as identifying words and comprehending, or understanding, the combined meaning of the words. Additionally, more emphasis is given to comprehension because technology can mediate the challenges of identifying the words through translation programs or text-to-speech programs, elevating the importance of comprehension within the definition of reading. Comprehension is “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 11). The process of reading comprehension includes three main elements: “The reader who is doing the comprehending,” “the text that is to be comprehended,” and “the activity in which comprehension is a part” (p. 11). Further, the reader, the text, and the activity are all part of a social context. This social context includes teachers and peers. The focus of this chapter will be the roles of the text and the activity (task) within online courses at the K–12 level.

Finally, reading fits within a broader framework of literacy. Other scholars have introduced the notion of being literate in specific disciplines such as technological literacy (Bybee, 2000) or mathematical literacy (Haara, Bolstad, & Jenssen, 2017). In this chapter, literacy is defined as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Distilled even further, literacy is being able to communicate and understand others’ communication. This definition allows for the possibility of making meaning from images and symbols without text, as well as communicating through images and symbols.

BACKGROUND

In order to establish reading in online courses as an issue that deserves attention, it is useful to provide a rationale for the scope of online learning. This section considers the pattern of growth in online courses, teachers of online courses, and how students in K–12 online courses perform compared to face-to-face students.

Online Course Enrollment Patterns

Currently, all 50 states and the District of Columbia offer online learning options for K–12 students (Evergreen Education Group, 2015). Online options include fully online public schools, charter schools, private schools, and nonprofit institutions. Courses may be for credit, to extend face-to-face learning, or for credit recovery. Delivery of these courses varies from fully online to hybrid courses that are both online and face-to-face (Archambault, 2014).

Increased access to online programs has resulted in a growing number of K–12 students taking online courses. During the 2002–2003 school year, K–12 students took just 317,000 online courses (Herold, 2017). Picciano and Seaman (2009) estimated that slightly over one million students enrolled in some kind of online education during the 2007–2008 school year. This was an increase of 47% compared to 2005–2006 enrollments. Much of this growth appears to be in supplemental courses rather than in fully online schools (what Lueken, Ritter, & Beck, 2015 termed “cyber schools”). By the 2014–2015 school

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