

Chapter 15

Digital Texts as Sources for Novice Writers

Thomas DeVere Wolsey
Walden University, USA

Diane Lapp
San Diego State University, USA

Douglas Fisher
San Diego State University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors review literature describing how reading processes appear to work in online and other digital environments. In particular, the nature of reading, writing, and the academic utility of new literacies is explored and applied to the digital environments of secondary school students. Writing is described as an ill-defined domain and situated theoretically in classical discourse theories as well as cognitive-linguistic approaches that explain reading and writing interactions in digital environments. Specific considerations for using digital texts as sources for written work are explained, including the role of search engine optimization techniques on reading and how access to multiple varied sources changes what students can learn. Implications and suggestions for future research are provided.

INTRODUCTION

“What should I write about?” a common question. “Write about what you know,” a common response. However, in writing, identifying what one knows is not clear-cut, and understanding how one comes to such identification is often far more complex than it first appears. Successful authors have long held that a key to writing something others deem worthwhile involves reading prodigiously (Langer & Flihan, 2000). Novice writers, who read digital

content and reflect on the workings of the text as well as the content, may find insights gained from such scrutinization that support their writing improvement. There, however, is still much to learn about the nature of reading in digital environments and how doing so impacts one’s writing.

It appears that readers approach reading digital texts, especially those found online, in ways that differ from printed texts. One significant difference that may change the dynamic relationship between reading and writing is that the Internet makes knowledge just a click away, thus, increasing the possibility of reading widely and abundantly. Digital texts are available on-demand and as

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needed (cf., Stewart 1997). Availability of digital texts expands one's opportunities to explore varied points-of-view and perspectives. Access to many sources on the World Wide Web, as well as in other digital formats such as databases, provides a view of the world that is more expansive and inclusive than at any time in history (Friedman, 2000; Buchanan; 2002).

Reading and writing have always been technology-driven; one cannot write without a pencil, a keyboard, or a stylus. Similarly, one cannot read without a book, a scroll, or a screen. Technologies are tools, which are commonly thought of as computers, pencils, and the Internet; however, systems are also tools, though less tangible (Hughes, 2004). The systems of reading and writing are, thus, technologies, though one does not simply pick up a system as one would a tablet computer; nevertheless, the systems readers and writers rely upon weigh heavily on what one comprehends from reading and what one can compose. Succinctly, what a writer reads changes the nature of that writer's expertise; however, what is known about online reading (e.g. Coiro & Dobler, 2007) and its relationship to writing tasks still awaits further study. One purpose of the literature review found in this chapter is to expose areas in need of further examination (Hart, 1998). We explore the tools of reading digital texts, the limitations such texts impose on novice writers, and the possibilities for an expansive view of writing in digital environments.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND IDENTITY

Identity is a complex construction that is shaped as individuals navigate contexts of gender, race, class, and other cultural dimensions. Archer, Dewiit, Osborne, Dillon, Willis, and Wong (2010) working in the United Kingdom, reported their findings from focus group interviews drawn from schools representing a variety of contexts (e.g., urban, private religious, private elementary mainly

white). Though this work dealt with a wide array of identity constructions relative to science, these findings offer the seeds of two overarching and key concepts that are useful to the study of reading and writing relationships. They are 1) students can and will consult reading materials that support their interests, albeit outside of school, and 2) they can construct parts of their identities as to what it means to "do" science or be a scientist through what they read. As we shall see, writers seek to assert themselves as competent contributors in the world, and what they read, digitally and on paper, greatly informs their writing.

We can think of writing as an act of asserting oneself as a unique being in the world. Writers, particularly in academic settings, are not just demonstrating what they know; they are also defining themselves as cognitive beings in the world (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Yagelski, 2009) with something substantive to contribute. Even as students increasingly use digital tools, and their capacity to use them informs their identities, their ability to use them for academic writing purposes, such as reading to inform writing, may benefit from well-planned instruction.

Consistent with Erikson's characterization of identity formation, Meredith, Coyle, and Newman (2011) explored the relationships between motivation and recreational and academic reading, in both traditional and digital formats. They found that social sharing was an important predictor of reading frequency in both recreational and academic contexts (cf. Grisham & Wolsey, 2006).

The question that guides this chapter is the result of our inquiries into the nature of reading, writing, and the academic utility of new literacies. We wondered, "How do secondary students (e.g., middle and high school) read in digital environments to inform their writing? What we found leaves us with more questions than answers but also with a sense of direction.

Note: We have limited the scope of the present chapter to an examination of digital reading on writing tasks whether digital or more traditional

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