Empowering Learners in the Reader/Writer Nature of the Digital Informational Space

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Manny Maldonado is repeating 10th grade in a high-need school district. Manny failed the majority of his academic classes, and his test scores indicate that he is reading and writing at a fourth-grade level. Manny sits in class editing and revising art and sketches in his notebook. His lone disciplinary problem included a suspension because he added a couple keywords to the school's Facebook page for major corporations, and the school was quickly spammed with ads for the companies. For this act, Manny was labeled a "hacker" by the school and suspended. Manny indicated that he was just playing with an idea he found online and was doing it "for the lulz." Lulz is informal Internet jargon for fun, laughter, or amusement, usually at another's expense.

Online, Manny is an extremely different, literate individual. Manny is addicted to manga and spends most of his time in discussion forums reading and translating Japanese characters and graphics. Manny is also a gaming and Minecraft aficionado. He spends the majority of his time interacting with other gamers by sharing videos and interacting with more than 200 subscribers on his YouTube channel. When Manny wants to communicate with friends online, he obfuscates his communications using leet (1337) speak. Leet speak is an alternative alphabet used primarily on the Internet. This use of language signifies membership in groups not recognized in school spaces. Manny also uses Snapchat to quickly send silly photos to friends because he wants to make sure they'll pay attention, but also that the silly photos won't live on forever on the Internet. For the most part, Manny is a typical adolescent engaging in literate practices in spaces online, offline, and in between.

Empowering Learners as Readers and Writers of Online Text

As we consider the online and offline literacy practices that our students will need as future events warrant, the one constant is change (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). To prepare for this change, we need a broadened, expanded view of "text" to include visual, digital, and other multimodal formats (New London Group, 2000; Alvermann, 2002). We also must recognize text that is not only deictic (Leu, 2000), but ambiguous in nature (Belshaw, 2012). This framing of text provides an opportunity to examine text that is not only contextual, but also provides a certain amount of vagueness and flexibility or inexactness as future literacies and technologies warrant (Brooks, 2004). This consideration of practices also requires a continual re-defining, and re-examination of our notions of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions utilized as we read and write (Sernak, 2008). More to the point, we need to consider opportunities to move learners from consumers to producers of digital content (Alexander, 2008; Anstey & Bull, 2006).

During the upcoming volume year, I will explore these interactions and identify opportunities to empower learners in the reader/writer nature of the Internet. In the second column, I will detail a conversation with colleagues to examine challenges and opportunities that exist when engaging in scholarly activities in online open educational settings. In the third column, I will discuss the affordances associated with motivation when working with digital badges in assessment. The final column will discuss the challenges and opportunities involved in creating and curating our digital identities and online footprint. As we begin, we must not forget the power involved in literacy.

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Critical Literacy and Multiliteracies

In 1970, Paulo Friere envisioned schools as critical spaces where students could be empowered to interrogate and question social circumstances through the use of discourse about issues of high interest and relevance to their lives (Dewey, 1910; Marzano, 2003). In this model, educators work with students to synthesize and critique power systems and dissect truths while facilitating classroom discourse. Friere suggested that "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Friere, 1970, p. 72). During the same time period, through a confluence of events, the early stages of what would soon become the Internet took root.

The Internet is the dominant text of this generation (Livingstone, 2004; Rowlands et al., 2008), and through intentional use it may provide opportunities for the pedagogy espoused by Friere. Multiliteracies includes elements of critical literacy to engage students in "reading the word and reading the world" (Friere & Macedo, 1987) through the integration of digital texts and tools (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Guided by multimodal design (Kalantzis and Cope, 2000), multiliteracies transforms not only the way that we make meaning, but also provides opportunities to reconstruct and renegotiate identities and text (Rowsell & Walsh, 2011).

Consumers, Curators, and Constructors

Through intentional instructional decisions, educators are provided opportunities to empower students as they encode and decode meaning utilizing the reader/writer nature of the online informational space. To make this point a bit more clearly, consider the use of tape cassettes and the ability to re-record over them with whatever content you selected. We could go to the local music mart, buy tape cassettes from the bargain bin, and record the content of your choice. Skillful users of the Internet can also use the medium to re-record, recreate, or remix their own content. In many ways the Internet as a text shares many of these same affordances as the reader/writer tape cassette.

Effectively, I believe we need to move learners from the role of content consumers, to content curators, to content constructors. Content curation in this context refers to a meaning making activity in which students collect, aggregate, and condense information from online sources through the use of tools such as Pinterest or Learnist. This process of curation allows students to build and demonstrate knowledge or expertise in an area.

Instructional models need to be developed that support educators and students as they view the use of the Internet and other communication technologies as a literacy. There are multiple theoretical perspectives and models that investigate the use of the Internet to support lifelong reflective learning, while empowering students through inquiry in online learning environments. The multiplicity and potential conflation of these different literacies was discussed in an earlier piece of this column (Jacobs, 2013).

Read/Write Internet

One instructional model that has been developed to address these interconnections between multiliteracies, multimodal design, and the web literacies is the Online Research and Media Skills (ORMS) model (McVerry, 2013; O'Byrne & McVerry, in press). The ORMS model focuses on three cornerstones (online reading comprehension, online content construction, and online collaborative inquiry). The materials for this curriculum are openly available online at the following open educational resource: https://sites.google.com/site/ormsmodel/.

- Online Collaborative Inquiry—A group of local or global learners who search, sift, and synthesize online information to collaborate and co-construct a text (O'Byrne & McVerry, in press).

- Online Reading Comprehension—The skills, strategies, practices, and dispositions students need to locate, evaluate, and synthesize information during problem-based inquiry tasks (Leu et al., 2009).

- Online Content Construction—A process by which students construct, redesign, or remix texts by actively encoding and decoding meaning through the use of ever-shifting multimodal tools (O'Byrne, 2013).

One additional set of skills that the ORMS model tries to build is detailed in the Mozilla Web Literacy Map (https://wiki.mozilla.org/Webmaker/WebLiteracyMap). This map provides a schematic of the skills and competencies necessary to more effectively read, write, and participate on the Internet. Many of the skills that are included in digital literacies, New Literacies, or multimodalities are included

in the Web Literacy Map. Some distinctions include a focus on infrastructure, coding, privacy, and identity. Many of these skills are easily visible in the anime, gaming, and remix/mashup culture that Manny is a part of.

Conclusion

As we consider some the literacy practices that define the spaces in which students like Manny exist, we need to maintain a subtle balance of making sure that classroom learning is more meaningful, while not "schoolifying" these practices. As we reconstruct and renegotiate our notions of text, teaching, and learning, we also need to consider the knowledge and skills that will be required to be "web literate" in the future. During this investigation, there will be many questions about access, assessment, and authorship. To that end, the next three columns will focus on informing those aspects as they relate to the challenge of moving learners from readers, or consumers to writers, or producers in the digital informational space.

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