Chapter 16

Online Content Construction:
Empowering Students as Readers and Writers of Online Information

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ABSTRACT

It is increasingly clear that this generation of adolescents is almost always connected to online information (Horrigan, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2010). Indeed, the Internet has quickly become this generation's defining technology for literacy, in part due to facilitating access to an unlimited amount of online information and media (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Yet it is a paradox that history's first generation of "always connected" individuals (Pew Research Center, 2010) is not taught how to effectively and authentically use the digital texts and tools that permeate society. As society has incorporated dynamic and new media in everyday life, educators are required to expand traditional understandings of text and literacy that have replaced many of the ways that we communicate, create, and socialize (Sutherland-Smith, 2002; Alvermann, 2002). Put simply, there is a need to value and construct different kinds of texts, learning, and interactions within the classroom (Beach & Myers, 2001). To achieve this goal, this chapter presents a synthesis of theoretical perspectives and research into a new instructional model known as Online Content Construction (OCC). OCC is defined as the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary as students construct, redesign, or reinvent online texts by actively encoding and decoding meaning through the use of digital texts and tools.

INTRODUCTION

A 21st century educational system must educate all students in the effective and authentic use of the digital texts and tools that permeate society. In the past, our educational system emphasized the use of traditional tools such as textbooks, chalkboards, overhead projectors, and composition books. Now, however, society has incorporated dynamic and new media in everyday life. Educators are required to expand traditional understandings of text and literacy as technology-driven tools and systems have replaced many of the ways that we communicate, create, and socialize (Sutherland-Smith, 2002; Alvermann, 2002). More importantly, there is a need to value and construct different kinds of texts, learning, and interactions within the classroom (Beach & Myers, 2001). To achieve this goal, a synthesis of theoretical perspectives and research into a new instructional model known as

Online Content Construction (OCC) is necessary. OCC is defined as the skills, strategies and dispositions necessary as students construct, redesign, or reinvent online texts by actively encoding and decoding meaning through the use of digital texts and tools.

In this chapter, I will examine the changes that are occurring to expository or argumentative writing as a result of technology, and indicate the instructional model of OCC as one possible way to reflect these changes in instruction. I will then further define OCC and the theoretical perspectives used to this new work. These perspectives include research from multimodal design, new literacies, and cognitive apprenticeship. Following this examination of OCC, I will then detail the instructional model that was tested in two research studies that provides opportunities for students and teachers to construct online content in all disciplines. Finally, I will discuss implications of conducting work such as this in the traditional classroom.

WHAT IS ONLINE CONTENT CONSTRUCTION?

The writing process (Murray, 1972, 1999; Hairston, 1982) has been defined as including prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. As the writing process moves from print to pixel many of these skills are employed as students construct online content. As student writing moves from page to screen the key difference between the traditional writing process and OCC is that teachers and students need to consider other elements that are particular to working with online informational text (e.g., semiotics, visual literacy, multimodal design). This framing of OCC moves the field of literacy research, and writing instruction further by providing opportunities to discuss and include this work in teaching and learning activities in the classroom, while remaining flexible as changes in technology warrant.

Authentically and effectively integrating the Internet and other communication technologies (ICTs) into the classroom is a social imperative given the ability to empower students in the reader/writer nature inherent in the online informational space. In computer science, read/write is defined as media that is capable of being displayed (read) and modified (write). In a literacy context, the reader/writer nature of online information could be viewed as a means to allow individuals to quickly and efficiently comprehend and construct online information. An easy way to understand this is the work associated with listening to, sharing, and revising audio files. Consider the use of records and LPs, and then cassette tapes, and finally now MP3 files and streaming online information. With records, it was very difficult to create, and remix music given these tools. Cassette tapes made it a little easier to create and share audio information, as long as the little plastic tab was not broken off. With MP3 and other audio file formats, it is very easy to create, remix, or mash-up and finally share audio content. This increasing ease in the creation, remixing, and sharing of audio information I believe extends to involve all forms of online, multimodal content. It is the duty of educators to empower their students in ways that they can have a voice and create content for the reader/writer Internet. There are two challenges associated with this. The first is a keen understanding of the literacies necessary (e.g., critical literacy, new literacy, multiliteracies) to thoughtfully comprehend and construct online content. The second aspect that needs to be understood by teachers and students is the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to skillfully encode and decode meaning online. For these two reasons OCC has been developed and tested for use in the classroom.

As students write and compose online content, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions change as a result of the affordances of the online space (Leu et al., 2005; Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, & Whitin, 2006). This process grows more complex as students must consider the effect of multimodal

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