

It's literacy - but not as we know it

by
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In the 21st century, the rapid changes in the way that we communicate are having a huge impact on the skills needed to be a literate member of society. Nowadays, many of us read more screen based texts than paper based. We can access up to the minute news, weather, travel information, even celebrity gossip, at the click of a button. A mere ten years ago, that was certainly not a common activity for most of us.

This article that you are reading is essentially a linear text, in that you are reading top to bottom and left to right. If you think about reading a non-linear text, such as a website, it's a very different process.

Think about how you access the information in a non-fiction book. You know that on the front cover you'll find the title, which will tell you what the book is about, and the author's name, who you might recognise as being an expert in their field. On the back cover there will be some information about the content and perhaps some quotes taken from reviews of the book. On the imprint page you can find out when the book was published and therefore how up to date it is.

You know that you don't have to read every page – you can use the contents page and the index to find specific sections. Once you've identified the relevant section, you can scan the text to find particular information. The glossary will explain unfamiliar words. You might use visual elements e.g. photos, diagrams, charts, to support and extend your understanding of the information given. You can flick backwards and forwards through the pages to check your understanding.

Now, translate that information retrieval process into an electronic text. Rather than page turning in one book, you are offered links to other pages and sites. Author information and verification of sources may be absent. Page layout is very different with headings often running down the side of the screen and information placed centrally using a combination of text and visuals. Skimming and scanning skills are vital as you look for key words and phrases to check whether the page is useful or relevant. Reading is no longer a predominantly linear activity but a radial one. Think of the information on the screen as a wheel - you can start to access it at any spoke.

Today's children experience screen based texts at an increasingly early age. Many have access to computer games, internet texts, mobile phone communication, television and video at home. Our challenge, as teachers, is to not only equip children with the skills to read both paper and screen based texts but also to enable them to identify which skills are most appropriate for a particular activity.

The PNS has set a target that by 2006, 1 in 5 texts that children read in school will be multimedia texts. This presents teachers with a challenge – finding texts with appropriate content to support their teaching. However, you can spend hours trawling the net only to discover that the reading level is wrong. Or you can buy resources from software providers who are aware that there is a market for electronic texts for children but are not familiar with the pedagogical needs.

Early electronic texts available to schools were basically big books on screen. They were linear texts that provided little opportunity for interaction. Increasingly, educational publishers, often in conjunction with software providers, are producing top quality interactive texts.

- Texts that contain accurate, relevant and appropriate information that has been written by well established authors.
- Texts that offer opportunities to access multimedia presentations, hyperlinks, hotspots, highlighting and annotating tools.
- Texts that enrich reading by engaging, interesting and extending the reader.

As with paper based texts, shared reading is the ideal teaching strategy for demonstrating and modelling the skills needed to access interactive texts. With the increase in the number of interactive whiteboards and data projectors in schools, the whole class is able to see, read and be involved with the text.

Skimming and scanning are essential skills when reading electronic texts. Skimming involves ‘bouncing’ the eyes across a text, much as a well thrown pebble will bounce across the surface of a lake, in order to get an idea of what the text is about. Focus children’s attention on headings, captions and links to other sections or pages when teaching this skill.

Scanning consists of looking for key words and phrases. It is useful to discuss with children the techniques that you, and they, find particularly effective when scanning e.g. looking for capital letters in proper nouns, particular spelling patterns, visualising the shape of words, punctuation marks and symbols. With an interactive text, the identified key words and phrases can usually be highlighted, giving the activity more visual impact.

The highlighting tool is also useful when teaching comprehension skills. If the children are making literal responses to the text, it will be possible to highlight words on the screen. They are reading ‘on the lines’; reading what the author actually wrote.

Deductive responses usually involve putting pieces of information together in order to come up with an answer. They are reading ‘between the lines’. Inferential responses bring children’s own experiences into play. They are reading ‘beyond the lines’; thinking about what the author meant.

Extracting information through highlighting moves neatly into note making and representing information in various formats. Many interactive texts have a notebook facility on which you, through shared writing, can demonstrate and model note making techniques. Multimedia texts that include audio or visual recordings can also be used to support the children’s own note making – asking them to listen and watch carefully and to note down key information that they see and hear. The highlighter tool and other visual elements such as coloured sections of text are also useful for analysing or revealing the structure of texts.

As many interactive texts make full use of visual elements such as video, animations, photos, illustrations and graphics, they are an ideal medium for developing children’s visual literacy. Encourage them to make inferences and deductions from visuals and to justify their responses. It is useful to discuss why the information is being given in

a visual format rather than as text. Are the children able to work out that it is often more effective to present information visually as if it were written down it would take many, many words? One of the benefits of visuals is that the information is accessible to all: very young children; less able readers; children whose first language is not English. Visual literacy should not however, be viewed as a soft option – some visuals can be very challenging to read and understand.

Due to the interactive nature of most electronic texts, the key thinking skills of enquiry, problem solving, information processing, reasoning and evaluation can all be tapped into and developed. This also gives many and varied opportunities for speaking and listening activities: small group and paired discussion and debate; think-pair-share; role play; hot seating; paired improvisation; flashbacks and flash forwards.

As far as the teacher is concerned, electronic texts are generally simple to operate. Single and double clicks, drag and drop and basic word processing are the main skills required. These texts can be a flexible and time saving resource, particularly when accompanied by comprehensive and supportive teacher's notes. You should expect these to contain lesson plans that include coverage of the NLS teaching objectives, learning intentions, opportunities for assessment, ICT skills addressed and suggestions for independent follow up work.

Generally speaking, using electronic texts seems to motivate children, particularly boys. Research, quoted by the Teacher Training Association in their publication *Using ICT Effectively in the Literacy Hour*, has found that children concentrate longer in front of a screen than they do with a book, perhaps because information is presented in fairly short 'chunks' and as visuals. However, the fact that electronic texts are motivational is not enough. They must be very focused, enhance teaching and raise standards if they are to play an effective part in educating today's children.

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