

New technologies: new literacies

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What's all the fuss about new technologies?

English teachers, both primary and secondary, have always been very good at encouraging children to engage with, and make sense of, literary texts. From the first introduction of young children to picture story books to the bringing alive of Shakespeare plays with GCSE and 'A' level classes, working with literature has always been a strength of English specialists. And this work has almost always involved the medium of the book - an excellent, engaging (and portable) way of making texts available to learners.

So, what is all this fuss about new technologies? Does it mean that we should abandon the book as a literary and educational medium? Or does it imply that we have to think about children's reading and writing in new ways?

The book is here to stay

The answers to these two questions are "No, certainly not" and "Yes, we have no choice".

Let us look at the book first of all. People have been predicting the end of the book for a long time. The following prediction is typical.

"If by books you mean our innumerable pages of printed paper ... I will frankly admit that I do not believe at all – and the progress of modern electronics and mechanics does not allow me to believe – that Gutenberg's invention will not fall, sooner or later, into disuse."

Although this sounds very modern, it was actually written in October, 1894 by Octave Uzanne in a short piece called *The End of Books* (this is available, in the original French with English summary on the web site: <http://www.hidden-knowledge.com/titles/contesbib/lafin/lafindeslivres.html>). Unfortunately for Uzanne's credibility the electronic and mechanical inventions he saw as replacing the printed book were wax phonograph cylinders, then recently invented by Thomas Edison. Uzanne goes on to say that, using such technology, the primacy of the *writer* would be replaced by that of the *narrator*. Such a claim prefigures the 20th century work of Marshall McLuhan whose 'global village' was founded on the primacy of oral, rather than literate, culture. *"Moving from print to electronic media we have given up an eye for an ear."* (McLuhan, 1964, xii-xiii).

Such predictions do make us think very carefully about the persistence of the book as a medium of communication. It may be that the ways we use books will change, in the same way that our uses of fountain pens changed with the advent of the word processor. Lienhard (1997) makes a similar point:

“Electronic books will soon have features you never imagined in paper books. They’ll have colored pictures that move, spoken words, and background music. And that’s just the beginning.

Computer books will invite reader participation. Press a button to look up a word or read a source reference -- right on screen. Straight-through story lines will give way to mosaic elements that readers can manipulate. We’re already seeing variable story lines in the fancier computer games.

As we abandon the limitations of the paper book, the electronic book will become unrecognizably different. It’ll become so different that the paper book will have to survive, after all.” (Episode 708).

Or, as my wife says, “I’ll abandon books when they make a computer screen you can read in the bath!” It is unlikely, then, that books will ever completely disappear from social and educational use.

Technology and texts

Although books are here to stay, they will undoubtedly have to take their place alongside other kinds of texts. What technology is currently doing in important ways is extending our ideas of text. Text can no longer be defined simply as print on a page. There are new texts to read in which other means are employed to convey meaning to readers. Means such as:

- coloured text, flashing text, text which flows into different shapes, disappearing text, text in an incredible range of fonts;
- pictures, still and moving, which interact with text;
- sounds, from speech to noise, which may simply read the text aloud or may add extra meaning to it.

And, of course, the kinds of texts which can be read on a computer can also be written. The creation of texts on computers makes special demands upon writers but it also offers special opportunities. Writers can:

- use a range of special text effects to enhance their messages;
- add pictorial matter and sound to their created texts;
- experiment as much as they like with their texts before producing final drafts;
- produce texts which look as good as any that they may read (the computer is the only medium in which this can be done easily).

New technology also makes available new kinds of texts, which implies new ways of reading and new possibilities in writing.

New texts, new media

Technology, as well as making possible new forms of text, has also opened up new media of communication. For hundreds of years we relied on two major media for

communication - face-to-face speech and words written or printed on paper. At the beginning of the 21st century, an increasing amount of our communication through language is taking place via alternative media. If this is happening in the world beyond school, then these media will need to find a place inside school as well.

Some of the new media which are gaining increasing acceptance, and indeed becoming essential to modern life, are:

- electronic mail;
- video conferencing;
- CD-Rom;
- online databases;
- mobile telephones;
- instant messaging;
- online chatrooms and discussion forums;
- blogs;
- the Internet generally.

In order to use any of these, we need to become familiar with new vocabulary, develop new skills and expand our ideas about communication.

New words for old

The vocabulary with which we were brought up as teachers and communicators is gradually being supplemented and replaced by new terms. Look, for example, at the words in each of these two lists.

pencil	return key
pen	delete
rubber (eraser for Americans!)	button bar
pencil sharpener	icons
ruler	mouse
carriage return	double click
tippex	predictive text
banda	emoticons
stencil	spam

Your familiarity with the words in the right hand list is a useful test of your awareness of modern communication media. It might be a sobering thought to compare your familiarity with these words with that of the children you teach!

The need for new skills

Each of the new media demands the development of new skills. Many of us will remember the difficulties we had when, in primary school, we were introduced to the pen and expected to use one instead of our familiar pencils. Although roughly similar in shape and operation to the pencil, the pen is a different writing instrument and thus requires slightly different skills. Some of us will still have the blotted books to prove our problems in adapting to this new technology!

The introduction of communication media much less similar to those we were brought up to use than was the pen to the pencil can create even more of a skill problem. A simple example of this is the computer mouse. When computers first became common, many adults struggled as they began to learn to manipulate the mouse. It felt like trying to do several impossible tasks at once and there was a constant fear of 'breaking it'. Children were and are much less inhibited in their use of this tool and absorbed the skills naturally in the course of their computer work. The same is true with more recent communication technologies. Many adults struggle to read, much less compose, text messages on a mobile phone. When I am texting, for example, I still cannot quite bring myself to forget punctuation entirely, so it takes me twice as long to text a simple message as I keep having to switch between upper and lower case letters, and I struggle to find the comma! Young people do not bother with any of this and a text message such as 'c u 2nite don't 4get da booz' would be perfectly easy for them to write and read.

New forms lead to new possibilities

A slightly unexpected result of the development of new media is the way in which these make communication itself rather different. Some examples of this are:

- Word-processed and desktop published documents enable their author(s) to make much more elaborate choices about content and form, and to experiment extensively with these before finally settling on their end-product. Texts produced on a computer thus become provisional, a fact which obliges writers to take more active control over their production.
- Electronic mail is a much faster means of communication than other written forms. Its speed enables rapid responses between communicators and, because of this, it becomes almost like speaking to someone face-to-face. Writing electronic mail thus begins to resemble speech and the media represents a kind of "half-way house" between speech and writing.
- An elaborate etiquette has developed surrounding the use of various communication forms. Haste (2005), for example, found that, although the vast majority of teenagers reported that they switched their mobile phones to silent mode (but not off) while in the cinema, they saw nothing wrong with interrupting a conversation with their friends to answer a phone call or respond to a text. Also, many more felt a mobile phone or text was an appropriate means of initiating a relationship than felt they could use it to end a relationship. Social customs for this new communication medium are in the process of emerging.
- Lewis and Fabos (2005) report how the teenagers they studied would regularly conduct Instant Messaging conversations with over 4 friends simultaneously. As they say, "This is no easy feat. One look at Abby's videotaped IM exchanges with 10 buddies illustrates how complicated it can be to carry on multiple exchanges at once." (p. 485). Holding different, but overlapping, conversations with 10 people at the same time would be extremely difficult to manage face to face, but somehow the asynchronous nature of the Instant Messaging environment made this possible for Abby.

So what does all this mean for the teacher of English?

There are two clear implications for teachers, particularly English teachers, in the widespread acceptance and use of new technology for communication.

1. Teachers with a special interest in language and communication will readily see that, as communication itself changes, so their provision for and teaching of it in their classrooms needs to develop to match these changes. Learners, even of primary age, will increasingly arrive in school with extensive experience of these new forms of communication. Virtually all will have access to such media as video and television, and an increasing number will be familiar with computers, mobile phones and the Internet. The information superhighway cannot stop at the door of the classroom. Teachers need to find ways of incorporating new media into their classroom work.
2. The new media make possible a range of exciting activities with language and literature. They can actually enhance classroom English work rather than threaten it. However, this is far more likely to happen if teachers adopt imaginative and fresh approaches to their teaching rather than expect technology merely to duplicate traditional approaches.

What might some of these imaginative approaches look like?

Some ideas for working with texts and computers

- Developing a class or school magazine in multimedia and hypertext format. This would incorporate writing in a variety of styles, scanned and digitised pictures and photographs, recorded and sampled sound. These materials would need to be organised so readers could find their own ways around the magazine. The production would need to be planned and executed in collaborative working groups, perhaps with some children in the role of art editor and team, copy editors, and design consultants.
- Writing and designing dynamic poetry on a computer. In dynamic poetry, instead of remaining static on the page, words can move, flash, change colour etc. to provide further enhancements to the poem's meaning. The poetry may also be illustrated by moving or still pictures and a dramatic reading of it may be recorded and added to the computer presentation.
- Learner-designed "treasure hunts" using information sources such as CD-Roms or the Internet. These could stem from learners' use of these resources as part of their own information-retrieval activities, such as project work.
- Using online collections of words and phrases (known as 'corpora') to explore word usage with learners. The best known of such collections is the British National Corpus and searches of this can be freely carried out at: <http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html>. Sealey and Thompson (2004) report on their use of such corpora to explore language with primary children,

- Involve learners in researching, scripting, recording and distributing their own podcasts on topics they have investigated in or out of class. Podcasts are audio programmes which are prepared in a form (an MP3 file) suitable for playback on a personal media player or computer.

Conclusion

New technologies are changing the nature of text and therefore changing the nature of literacy. As we experience new literacies in our everyday lives, we need to find ways of adapting to these and using them to best effect. As teachers, we also owe it to our learners' futures to prepare them for the new literacies of today and tomorrow.

In this short article I have had time only to scratch the surface of the issues surrounding the impact of new technologies on literacy and its teaching. In future articles in this series, I will look at particular technologies in greater depth and explore their teaching possibilities. In the meantime, readers might like to test their own knowledge in this area by trying the technoliteracy quiz which appears an Appendix to this article. I will give the answers in the next issue of the journal but you might be interested in knowing that, of the 30 possible marks in this test, my 9 year old son scored 22! There's a challenge!

References

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