Approaching the unavoidable: Literacy instruction and the Internet

Jacquelynn A. Malloy
Linda B. Gambrell

This column addresses the rapid pace of technological change and the implications for our classrooms. Jackie Malloy is currently working with the Internet Reading Research Group (Clemson University, South Carolina) and the New Literacies Research Team (University of Connecticut, Storrs) on a three-year U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences grant to explore the nature and promise of using the Internet to enhance reading comprehension and engagement with middle-grade students at risk to dropout. The work that they and other researchers produce will have an impact on how we prepare our elementary students for the literacies they will need in later grades and in life. (Linda B. Gambrell)

> All education springs from some image of the future. (Toffler, 1974, p. 3)

"How do you spell *volcano*, Mom?" Connor asked, squinting at the computer screen. I looked over from the kitchen sink, my hands deep into the pots and pans I was scrubbing. "*V-o-l-c-a-n-o*, sweetie," I replied. "No silent *e* on that one." Connor, a third grader who struggles with reading and spelling, eagerly typed in the letters as I spoke them and waited for the search engine to do its job. It has always been difficult to get Connor interested in listening to books and even harder to interest him in reading them. Reading does not come as easily to him as it did with my first two children, but the quest for knowledge of things that are of great interest to him is unabated. The Internet is his salvation, and if he should have to read and spell in order to retrieve the information about volcanoes or tarantulas or Star Wars characters he craves, then he gladly does so.

Although Connor is a struggling reader, this story exemplifies a growing literacy that engages readers of all ages and abilities—the Internet. It is far from new; words like *Googling* and *IMing* (instant messaging) have become almost commonplace and highlight the effect that using the Internet is having on popular culture. It is important for teachers of elementary students to realize that leisure-time use of the Internet is no longer the sole realm of teenagers and adults; many elementary students are already adept at searching and surfing, using reading and spelling in ways not explicitly taught. Reading online is not only something that many students do in their leisure time but is also a skill they will need to develop as they learn to research and create in their middle school years and beyond. Searching and comprehending online text is an unavoidable literacy and an approachable one. These skills can help to prepare students as they strive to become fully literate adults in a technological age. It is our job as teachers to understand and appreciate the unavoidable and prepare for it.

To get a sense of the future of technology, you have only to look back about 10 years. The Internet was still new, and e-mail was only beginning to be used as a common form of communication. In today's classrooms, the use of e-mail and the Internet is widespread, and new technologies are emerging at breakneck speed. It is therefore not difficult to imagine that the next 5 to 10 years will bring even more changes. The "new literacies" will soon be replaced by even newer ones. As new technologies

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creep ever closer to the primary classroom, the wise teacher must find ways to use these tools to enhance instruction in ways that engage students and prepare them for what is yet to be.

How does reading online differ from reading print?

In looking at the differences between reading hypertext and print, consider first our purposes for reading. Although we can use either the Internet or printed text to discover things that interest, inform, and entertain us, the Internet has a greater number of pages and variety of text than hard copy could provide. The Internet offers information from abundant sources and areas of the world, and the quality of information can vary greatly from page to page.

This consideration leads to another important difference with reading online: When searching the Internet, the pages that I might view and read would likely be different from the pages you would find—even when searching for the same piece of information. For example, imagine that we are both looking for information on a particular reading instructional strategy. We might start with the same search engine, but enter different keywords for the search (e.g., mental imagery versus visual imagery), and follow different links when the results were listed. My text selection would likely be very different from yours and be directed by what piques my interest, how well I comprehend the short blurbs with each entry, how strategic I am in using keywords for my search, and how well I combine scanning and careful reading to home in on the information sought. Suppose we both succeed in finding information on the teaching strategy, but mine includes lesson plans and yours ends in a teaching video. If we had used a traditional text, we would also have scanned in some places and carefully read in others, but we'd have been more limited in what we could find in the time spent. Whereas the lesson plans might have been available in the traditional form, the video would certainly not have been.

Some strategies still apply

The strategies for searching in conventional expository text continue to have online applications. We approach traditional text by looking at all options first, such as titles, pictures and diagrams, and sidebars. We can view these same items on a webpage, but clicking on the titles, diagrams, and sidebars leads to many other links, and this can be a risky business. Sometimes it is difficult to find your way back to the original page. However, students can be taught to "bookmark" important pages online, in the way they place slips of paper in a book to keep their place.

Just as we teach students to question the author when reading print, students need to be taught to evaluate the information they find on the Internet. We can control the quality of materials in our classrooms, but we face greater challenges online. For example, sites that have a *.gov* or *.edu* suffix have a different perspective than those with a *.org* or *.com* suffix. Official websites merit a certain element of credibility when compared to unofficial webpages. Website suffixes are clues that can help students to evaluate who is maintaining the content and for what purposes. A tech-savvy middle school teacher I know routinely creates a website on the Internet and asks her students to view it. The website she creates is usually called something like Water is Dry and includes very official and scientific-looking articles that purport to explain how water is actually dry, although we perceive it as being wet. This she does in an attempt to demonstrate that anyone can post *anything* on the Internet—it need not be true. Her second purpose in exposing students to this temporary website is to highlight that *anyone* can post anything on the Internet—even students just like them!

It is important to emphasize security when going online to interact with other Internet users. Students need to be aware of the anonymity that is inherent in using the Internet and be given explicit instruction in protecting their identities. On the other hand, the Internet is a place where students can be freed by their anonymity. For example, when IMing, chatting, or blogging online, those with whom you interact don't need to know if you are male or female, popular or marginalized. Shy students may feel safe expressing opinions on the Internet that they would never express in person. The possibilities for using connected technology in the classroom are awesome and humbling, and they require thoughtful attention at every grade.

Implications for the classroom

Teachers can ground their knowledge of Internet literacies by reading journal articles such as Coiro's *Exploring Literacy on the Internet* (2003), which provides essential background on reading comprehension in the digital world. The author explains the nature of the texts we use for instruction, the capabilities and motivations of students as readers of text, and the social contexts of these activities. Coiro's treatment of this topic provides an excellent theoretical framework for understanding classroom instruction in a digital format.

An article by Leu, Castek, Henry, Coiro, and McMullan (2004) offers inspiration and guidance in using the Internet as a resource for connecting students to children's literature. The article is chock-full of available resources (e.g., websites and print books) that can prepare teachers as they guide students to respond to literature and embrace diversity. Ideas for locating leveled books on a variety of topics and genres are highlighted, as are instructional techniques for enhancing comprehension and engagement in story experiences.

Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies (Karchmer, Mallette, Kara-Soteriou, & Leu, 2005) contains chapter after chapter of classroom-tested ideas from award-winning teachers. Not only are student-centered projects described, but also advice and encouragement for teacher development and continued exploration are provided.

These resources, and others that are becoming available, can assist teachers as they endeavor to incorporate authentic and engaging reading and writing activities for students—activities that can be explored and enjoyed together. Our students may already surpass some of us in their facility with the Internet and its uses. There is much we can learn from them as we teach them the strategies and skills needed to navigate the digital world safely and meaningfully. As Toffler (1974) noted, if our image of the future is grossly inaccurate, our educational system will betray our youth. As educators, we need to commit to preparing students for their technological journey to the future. It is a journey toward literacies that grow and change more quickly than we can keep up with them. But by learning together, teachers and students can become fully literate in every sense of the word.

Malloy is a doctoral student at Clemson University (G04-A Tillman Hall, Clemson, SC 29631, USA). E-mail jmalloy@clemson.edu. Gambrell is editor of the Issues and Trends in Literacy Department. She teaches at Clemson University.

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The department editor welcomes reader comments. **E-mail lgamb@Clemson.edu or write to Linda B. Gambrell, School of Education, PO Box 340702, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634-0702, USA.**

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