What Does it Mean to be Transliterate in the 21st Century?

By Dr Carol A. Gordon

> *Books are to be called for and supplied on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but in the highest sense an exercise, a gymnast's struggle: that the reader is to do something for him or herself, must be on the alert, must construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay-the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start, the framework.*
>
> - Walt Whitman

The emergence of new media and technologies presents the challenge of defining literacy. Early civilisations painted, scratched, and carved their way through stone and clay, expanding the vocabulary of written communication from pictures to symbols for words. The earliest alphabet emerged from the eastern Mediterranean shores around 1500 B.C. Gleick (2011, p. 32) argues that it is the alphabet that revolutionised thinking: "There is a progression from pictographic, *writing the picture*; to ideographic, *writing the idea*; and then logographic, *writing the word*. An alphabet provided a symbol for each sound and a vocabulary for abstract thought. The conflict that arose between the new written language and the old language of the oral tradition is epitomised in the transcription of Homer's epic poems as his poetry was transformed from the spoken word to a new medium that fixed every word on papyrus.

As soon as one could set words, down, examine them, look at them anew the next day, and consider their meaning, one became a philosopher . . . Knowledge could begin to pull itself up by the bootstraps. (Gleick, 2011, p. 36)

The vocabulary of abstract thought was born.

The digital revolution, like its print predecessor, is also changing how we read.

When Gutenberg's printing press introduced print media as a vehicle for sharing information, ideas, and stories, the printed page replaced remnants of the oral tradition – town criers who delivered news to their villages and storytellers who educated and entertained members of their communities. With this revolutionary event people began to read silently but conventions of reading, as we know them today, evolved slowly. It was common, for example, for readers to read aloud from a book and to move their lips when they read silently. The digital revolution, like its print predecessor, is also changing how we read. Reading printed text is characterised by a vertical pattern: we read from top to the bottom before turning a page. On the other hand, when reading from a screen readers use a horizontal pattern characterised by skimming and scanning across web pages, often never reading the bottom of the page before clicking (Rowlands, et al., 2008). In fact, readers often print from their screens when they want to read with focus and deep concentration. The printed word encourages interaction with text as readers gather and share printed information by taking notes, highlighting, annotating and clipping text. However, when readers print from their screens they tend to 'squirrel' their printouts, seldom referring to them (Rowlands, et al., 2008).

Engaged reading is motivated, strategic, knowledge driven, and socially interactive . . .

While skimming, scanning, and squirreling are strategies that help online readers cope with information overload, they do not develop habits of sustained and deep reading that are critical to developing comprehension (Guthrie, et al.. 2006). Ironically, reading print seems to be more interactive while reading digitally seems to be superficial and shallow. The engagement model posits that reading comprehension is the result of an extended amount

of reading (Guthrie et al, 2006). Engaged reading is motivated, strategic, knowledge driven, and socially interactive (Guthrie et al, 2006). It is clear from this research that sustained and deep reading is needed to develop comprehension and reading response.

Research in supporting emerging literacy and the development of comprehension posits that young readers need to become aware of their comprehension. When comprehension breaks down, many students skip sections or words that are confusing and pick the text up again where they can understand it. The problem is they have lost valuable information and opportunity to improve their own reading (Goudvis & Harvey, 2007). Strategic reading, or the application of strategies that repair comprehension at the point of need, are critical for readers of all ages. In fact, these strategies were identified through the study of what good readers do when their comprehension breaks down. They include:

- Activating prior knowledge;
- Making connections such as text-to-text, text-to-world, and text-to-self;
- Questioning;
- Visualising;
- Inferring;
- Determining importance;
- Synthesising.

A transliteracy approach looks at the technological, social and cultural dimensions of literacy and online reading.

In the digital environment we do not have strategies specific to the support of digital literacy, nor is there empirical evidence that what we know about developing comprehension in print is relevant to digital reading. Determining strategies specific to supporting digital literacy is difficult because literacy in digital environments is multimodal. It includes digital literacy, visual literacy, spatial literacy, print literacy, information literacy, media literacy, and cultural literacy. A transliteracy approach looks at the technological, social and cultural dimensions of literacy and online reading. "Transliteracy is the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks" (Liu, 2005). It studies and plans for innovations in online reading from the perspectives of the computer sciences, social sciences, humanities (including the history of the book field), and new media art. Participants in this project include faculty from seven University of California campuses and several other universities. An example of a transliteracy initiative is the design of a technology to improve the community experience of reading while accommodating different experiences of texts according to age, literacy level, nationality or background, professional or personal interests. Technological development is integrated with humanistic and social-science research (empirical, historical, interpretive, critical, aesthetic). The initiative uses cross-disciplinary expertise to approach online reading from multiple angles simultaneously, rather than just as an engineering or social problem, as a problem of interpretation. The goal is avoid producing a quick-fix for online reading, but to create a demonstration technology founded upon a deep reflection on the issues.

Will reading, as we know it, disappear?

What are the consequences of a multimodal, transliteracy approach to comprehending text and extracting meaning from it? Perhaps the most disturbing question we can ask as teacher librarians is how transliteracies change the way our students experience informational and narrative text (which may or may not be verbal). Will reading, as we know it, disappear? Will traditional literacy be subsumed by digital media, or will new skills and strategies emerge to cope with non-print environments? Will traditional literacy associated with reading the silent pages of print media be sandwiched between the oral tradition that was its predecessor and an emerging digital tradition that relies on images and sounds, as well as verbal text?

Examining the oral tradition is helpful to understanding concepts foundational to traditional literacy in print formats. It may also be helpful in understanding the multimodal literacies suggested by digital

environments, particularly as it relates to the kind of literacy required for reading literature and developing aesthetic understanding. The stories of African, African American, and several Caribbean cultures celebrate Anansi, a trickster god who often goes against other animal-god characters. He gathered the stories from his father, the sky-god and spread them around the world. The world's wisdom accompanied these stories, but Anansi dropped the jar in which wisdom was stored, spreading it thinly across the world. A similar tale is found in the Uncle Remus stories in the southern U.S., featuring Br'er Rabbit, and adapted in Disney's movie, *Song of the South*. The familiar stories of tar baby and Br'er Rabbit are woven in to the fabric of American folklore. Elements of the African Anansi tale were combined by African-American storytellers with Native American tales, such as the Cherokee story of the 'Tar Wolf' which had a similar theme, but often had a trickster rabbit as a protagonist. The tales of Anansi, Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby represent a coming together of African, Caribbean, and North American folk traditions that originated in African stories carried across the sea to Jamaica and the U.S. by captured slaves. These stories are thought to be the ways the slaves told about outsmarting their owners.

Anansi is a cultural hero who acts on behalf of his father, the sky god. He brings rains to stop fires. In some stories Anansi is credited with creating the sun, stars, and moon, as well as teaching mankind the techniques of agriculture. From these stories and stories like them emerged archetypal patterns and themes such as the concept of 'hero' as the embodiment of a culture's values and the struggle of the hero, who represents good, versus evil, or the anti-hero. The hero saves the day. If s/he can't, supernatural forces do! Teacher librarians use text-to-text connections to help students engage with these archetypal patterns on their level of reading ability and reading interest. The message is the same, whether the text is about Superman, Harry Potter, or Odysseus (fig. 1). However, print media makes a distinction in the sophistication and aesthetic or artistic quality of text through language.

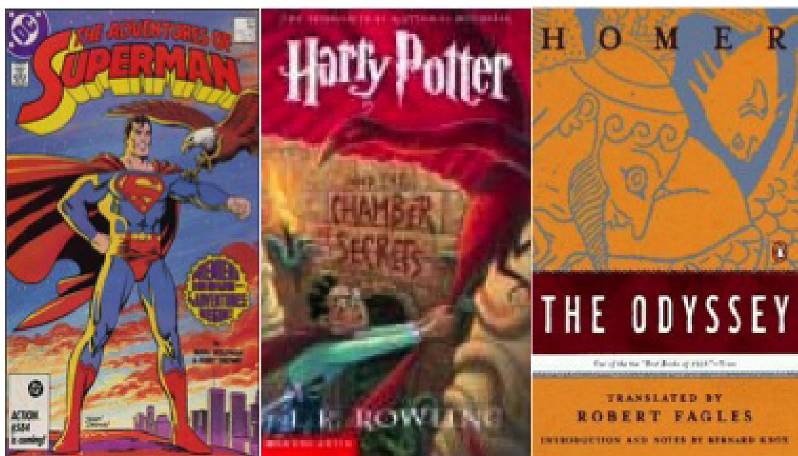

Figure 1: Making Archetypal Connections: Text-to-Text

Literary language uses patterns of sound, imagery, symbolism, metaphor, and myth.

Literature can be defined through mythological and archetypal characters, situations, and messages. Myths are an expressions of important social meanings conveyed through images. They are a snapshot of a community's struggles and beliefs. If the Anansi stories became an episode in a written epic similar to the adventures of Odysseus in Homer's Odyssey, they could reach the status of a literary object of art that could be studied through aesthetic inquiry because they contain archetypal ideals. However, the language that is the medium of the story must rise to a figurative level of language and contain an imaginative quality. Phenix (1964) noted that literary language is exploited for its expressive, rather than descriptive effect; it is used to stimulate deep thought. It is intended as a source of aesthetic delight, not a means to an end. It is non-discursive; it is not exclusively meant to tell a story because the language is symbolic and metaphoric, offering layers of interpretation. Literary language uses patterns of sound, imagery, symbolism, metaphor, and myth. It can attach meaning to objects that become symbols. It explores the rhythmic possibility of language

using poetic devices to establish its syntax. Figurative language includes literary images which stand for something inner and ideal and may be connected with the senses.

Will what we gain in digital spaces be worth what we may lose?

How is a work of literature changed, for example, when it is expressed as a networked novel created collaboratively through novel wikis? When Homer's epics migrated from the oral tradition to the written page, what was lost and what was gained? Will what we gain in digital spaces be worth what we may lose? What happens to figurative language when it is integrated with sound and image? Can it survive, for example, within the structure of a digital film that can appeal to our senses and our intellect? There are many questions around the practice of teacher librarians as we explore how libraries can integrate transliteracy into their repertoire of teaching, coaching, and advising. What are the emerging digital genres? Is the e-book a transitional format? What are our students "reading" online? How does this affect library "collections"? What are the criteria for material selection? What are the effects of multimodal reading on comprehension, engagement, and learning? What are the effects of free choice in reading as it concerns not only what young people read, but when and how they read? How does collaborative content creation, including writing, affect student performance in traditional reading and writing?

While I cannot offer answers, I can leave you with some multimodal sources that provide information from researchers and practitioners who, like us, are struggling to understand transliteracy.

- Alan Liu: Transliteracies Project (Research in the Technological, Social and Cultural Practices of Online Reading). Accessed at: http://liu.english.ucsb.edu/transliteracies-research-in-the-technological-social-and-cultural-practices-of-online-reading/
- American Association of School Librarians (2012) Fall Forum: Transliteracy. Accessed at: http://www.ala.org/aasl/conferencesandevents/fallforum/keynote
- Kate Pullinger: My Secret Blog. Features: A Million Penguins Five Years On; Flight Paths features on Drunken Boat; Fiction and that 2.0 Thing: 'Networked 'and Turbulence. Accessed at: http://www.katepullinger.com/blog/category/transliteracy/
- Bobbi L. Newman: Libraries and Transliteracy, Acessed at: http://librariesandtransliteracy.wordpress.com/what-is-transliteracy/
- Pocket (formerly Read It Later). An app that allows you to save articles with one click and return to them at your leisure.
- Sue Thomas: Transliteracy Lecture. Accessed at: http://vimeo.com/2831405
- Sue Thomas: What is Transliteracy. An Introduction. Accessed at: http://nlabnetworks.typepad.com/transliteracy/2010/02/what-is-transliteracy-an-introduction-from-sue-thomas-.html
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