The Digital Reader, The Alphabetic Writer, and The Space Between: A Study in Digital Reading and Source-Based Writing

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explores how students engage with digital texts and use them in source-based writing. The article focuses on two findings. First, students engaged most frequently with strong reading comprehension strategies—engaging in dialogue with the text and using a cursor while reading, yet hardly employed reading strategies specific to digital texts. The relationship between these findings position students developmentally as “beginning” digital readers. Second, the “beginning” digital reader as writer draws on the digital text mostly at the sentence level, and much of the time, at the word level. Research suggests that such engagement may indicate reading and comprehension issues (Howard et al. 2010). Interestingly, the research participants demonstrated sophisticated reading invention work during the think aloud protocols: they seemingly understood what they read and interacted with the text in meaningful ways. However, this verbal invention work did not emerge in their writing. In an effort to understand the disconnect between reading and writing, the writer explores the differences between speech and writing as well as the role of audience and reading strategies in the translation of verbal invention to writing. Pedagogical suggestions and avenues for further research are presented at the end of the article.

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1. Introduction

For several decades, scholars have probed the question of how technology impacts reading practices, with studies focusing on accuracy, speed, fatigue, hypertext, comprehension, the role of attitude, e-readers, cognitive processes, navigation, and more. There has been much discussion and exploration over the past ten years about the screen’s negative effects on reading abilities and comprehension, which has prompted concern, especially among teachers. Nicholas Carr’s (2008) influential article “Is Google is Making Us Stupid?” and Maryanne Wolf’s work on digital reading (2008, 2010); (interviews in popular media)) exemplify these kinds of explorations. Carr (2008) argues online reading habits, such as skimming, engaging in distractions, and looking for specific information, have changed the way people read and has negatively affected people’s ability to engage in long, dense texts. Along the same vein, Wolf (2008), a cognitive neuroscientist at Tufts University, claims that the screen may have fundamentally transformed

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1 See Andrew Dillon (1992) for a literature review of empirical research conducted on reading in the 1980s and early 1990’s. See Ferris Jabr (2013) for recent studies conducted on reading.
our brains and altered our ability for the kind of reading that invites comprehension. Calling this phenomenon the “bi-literate” brain, Wolf says, “The problem is that many of us have adapted to reading online just too well. And if you don’t use the deep reading part of your brain, you lose the deep reading part of your brain” (qtd. Raphael, 2014). Further, she claims: “too much stimulation” online is the “nub of the problem” (qtd. Raphael, 2014). Published studies\(^2\) and mainstream media\(^3\) have further amplified concerns about reading on the screen, focusing on its harmful effects.

As writing instructors in the 21st century, these alarmist responses to digital reading are of concern. Students are increasingly reading on the screen for academic purposes, and using digital texts in research-based writing. Thus we need to determine how to best support them in effectively and successfully reading digital texts and incorporating them into their writing. In exploring college students’ digital reading practices and their work with digital texts in source-based writing, the qualitative research presented here seeks to reveal ways teachers might do so. In this study, like others on this topic\(^4\), I sought to discover how students, specifically college students, read on the screen. My goal was to identify the kinds of reading strategies they use to engage with screen reading, and how these strategies help them navigate the text for the ultimate purpose of working with the source in a research-based essay. My qualitative research study, which is comprised of coded think-aloud protocols of students reading on a laptop; surveys; interviews; and student writing, contributes to scholarship on digital reading in two distinct ways. While most studies on digital reading practices focus on elementary, middle, or high school students (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Larson, 2010; Roswell & Burke, 2009) this study focuses on college students, freshmen whom are all enrolled in a required first-year writing course. This in-depth study of six college students is also unique in that, to my knowledge, it is the first to explore students’ digital reading behaviors in relation to their source-based writing. The exploration of this relationship provides insight on not only how students engage with the screen, but how this engagement influences their writing practices and their ability to effectively and ethically work with sources in research-based writing.

The description and analysis of this data yielded interesting findings about students’ digital reading practices and these practices in relation to their writing: two of these findings will be discussed in this article. First, students engaged most frequently with effective reading comprehension strategies—engaging in dialogue with the text and using a cursor to assist them in reading, yet hardly employed reading strategies specific to digital and multimodal texts such as clicking hyperlinks, engaging with images or video, or opening a new window. The relationship between and among these findings developmentally position students as “beginning” digital readers.

Second, the participants’ writing reveals that they worked with the digital text mostly at the sentence level, and much of the time, at the word level. Research suggests that such engagement may indicate reading and comprehension issues (Howard, Serviss, & Rodrigue, 2010). Interestingly, the research participants demonstrated sophisticated reading invention work during the think aloud protocols. They seemed to have both understood what they read and interacted with the text in productive ways. Yet none of this verbal reading invention work emerged in their writing. This finding begs the question of how one can be both defined as a developing reader and sophisticated reader, and what happens in the space between reading and writing. Further, this finding more generally raises questions about the relationship between a person’s reading development and their work with sources in research-based writing.

I explain the findings and implications of the data in detail below. I conclude the article posing questions for further empirical research on reading and making pedagogical suggestions for the teaching of digital reading.

2. Method

For this qualitative study, I recruited 12 student volunteers over the course of one academic year. All student participants were enrolled in their second required writing course at a medium public state institution in the Northeast, and none of the students were in the same class. Participants were in the process of researching and gathering sources for a source-based writing assignment. The assignments were not exactly the same but had similarities. With the

\(^2\) For example: OECD (2015); National Endowment for the Arts (2007, November); ACT (2006); Joliffe “Students, Computers and Learning: Making the Connection;” “To Read or Not to Read;” “Reading Between the Lines;” David Joliffe and Allison Harl (2008); and Jacob Vigdor and Helen Ladd (2010, June).

\(^3\) Titles such as: “Computers in the Classroom Negatively Affect Reading Skills” (Girdusky, 2015) and “The Four Negative Sides of Technology,” (DeLouch, 2015, May 2) for example.

\(^4\) Some examples include Jennifer Roswell and Anne Burkee (2009); Julie Coiro and Elizabeth Dobler (2007); and Anne Mangen, Bente R. Walgermo and Kolbjorn Bronnick (2013).
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