Confronting the Next Frontier: Reading and Writing Web 2.0 Texts

By Marielle Palombo

What does it mean to be literate in the 21st century? In some respects, how we define literacy is changing so rapidly that trying to project a set of skills that will last a century is a futile exercise. Nonetheless, as educators, we are regularly faced with the task of defining and redefining what we believe students need to know and be able to do to function and thrive in their personal, professional, and civic lives. The March 2009 issue of ASCD's Educational Leadership explores many facets of "Literacy 2.0," focusing on the variety of skills and dispositions needed to succeed in a Web 2.0 world. As a foundation for all of the important literacies defined by groups such as The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/) and Project New Media Literacies (http://newmedialiteracies.org/), today's and tomorrow's students need to be able to read and write the texts of our times.

> Though these [Web 2.0 text] features are not entirely new, their recent convergence in the mainstream means that educators must now attend to them as part of the **main act** rather than a **sideshow.**

Web 2.0—also known as the read/write web or the social web—refers to the generation of the World Wide Web that engages people interactively with each other, as both authors and audiences, producing as well as consuming texts comprising a variety of media. Web 2.0 literacy skills build upon and extend traditional literacy skills (i.e., reading and writing printed texts), which are still necessary but no longer sufficient for full participation in contemporary society. Web 2.0 literacy requires deep understanding of and facility with essential features of increasingly ubiquitous Web 2.0 texts, which differ from printed texts and from earlier incarnations of digital texts in a variety of critical ways. Web 2.0 literacy involves:

- Reading and writing digital multimedia texts, which may include words, images, audio, video, etc.;
- Reading and writing digital hypertexts, which include embedded links within and beyond a given text;
- Reading and writing digital interactive texts, which include multiple authors in conversation with each other; and
- Reading and writing digital online identities, which include social networking or blogging profiles and other online personas.

Web 2.0 texts frequently combine these features, resulting in complex, multi-dimensional texts that require both technical skills and higher order skills to process and produce. For example, online news often takes the form of interactive hypermedia texts, which include words, images, and even video clips, in addition to embedded hyperlinks connecting the text to other related texts both within and beyond the publication at hand. Such texts are often also interactive, offering readers the opportunity to comment, thereby interacting with the text, the author, and other readers, generating an extended multi-author text. A close examination of each of these features illuminates considerations for educating students for Web 2.0 literacy. Though these features are not entirely new, their recent convergence in the mainstream means that educators must now attend to them as part of the main act rather than a sideshow.

Reading and Writing Digital Multimedia Texts

Fluency in reading and writing multimedia texts requires fluency in each individual communication medium, an understanding of what each lends to the communication task, and the capacity to achieve coherence through integrating different parts into a meaningful whole. Picture books, newspapers, and films are multimedia texts, and the best ones make

good use of what each medium affords in conveying a message. For instance, a photograph of Barack Obama being sworn in as 44th President of the United States provides different information and creates a different effect than a textual account of the event, and the two together complement each other, creating a richer integrated text.

Digital media have made it relatively easy for anyone with computer access to create multimedia texts, and Web 2.0 allows immediate global publication of those texts. The viral "Yes, We Can" music video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY) produced by popular musician will.i.am. and friends and circulated via YouTube during the 2008 Presidential campaign incorporates music, images, and text from Obama's campaign speech, telling a powerful story that capitalizes on each medium's unique contribution. Maira Kalman's multimedia blog post about the Inauguration (http://kalman.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/29/the-inauguration-at-last/), artfully composed of colorful illustrations incorporating words and images, shares her personal impressions of the day with the world at large. These digital multimedia texts, authored independently, published globally, and augmented by viewer comments, demonstrate the explosion of variety in text forms cultivated by Web 2.0.

In a Web 2.0 world, multimedia authorship has become significantly more accessible to everyone, including our students, and thus we must prepare them sufficiently for the opportunity to contribute their own multimedia texts to the global archive. Such preparation entails not only teaching the technical skills of creating and publishing multimedia texts online, but also teaching higher order literacy skills associated with composing in various media, such as interpretation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Composition is a powerful tool for making meaning across media with potential learning benefits throughout the curriculum (Smagorinsky, 1995).

In a Web 2.0 world,
multimedia authorship has become significantly
more accessible to everyone, including our students,
and thus we must prepare them sufficiently for the opportunity to
contribute their own multimedia texts to the global archive.

Since reading texts and writing texts inform each other, students need regular opportunities for guidance in both reading and writing digital multimedia texts. As educators, we must incorporate into our teaching practice instruction in the standards and rhetorical conventions that characterize a variety of digital multimedia text forms, and also in using the tools to create them. Many students bring technical skills with them into the classroom and are often able to share those skills with teachers and other students. Given the inequities of access, however, schools must ensure that all students have a common skill base and a common set of experiences with reading and writing digital multimedia texts.

Reading and Writing Digital Hypermedia Texts

Hypertext, or text that is directly linked to related text, images, sound and other data, is one of the hallmarks of the original World Wide Web. Its invention decades ago launched a revolution that has exploded with Web 2.0 now that hypertext authorship has become widely accessible. Thanks to a boom in user-friendly, browser-based tools, authoring and publishing hypermedia are as simple as using a word processor. This has led to mass proliferation of hyperlinked online documents, exponentially increasing connectivity within and between texts, the ideas contained in them, and the people behind them. Hypertext is foundational to self-publication media such as blogs (online journals) and wikis (web sites for collaborative authorship), which are designed specifically for producing nonlinear, connected texts. With so many people authoring linked texts, the web has become profoundly interconnected, and writers are exploring the possibilities that such connectivity offers with a Renaissance-like burst of collective innovation. The online version of Frank Rich's regular New York Times column, for

example, includes many embedded links to sources he mentions, thereby offering a window into his authorship process and an opportunity for readers to trace his information path. Such embedded links can deepen and enrich what an author has to say by incorporating contextualized connections to what others have to say.

Reading digital hypertexts has become as commonplace as reading books, and yet it offers a different reading experience. It involves self-directed navigation of nonlinear texts, requires in-process decision-making about which links to click on and when, and demands complex cognitive processing to maintain focus and coherence. Hypertext allows for multiple paths through a text, which can help to engage students in active reading, but also demands skills and strategies that must be taught explicitly to many.

Writing hypertexts involves more than the technical skills required to create hyperlinks or embed RSS feeds (links to dynamic, episodic content, such as blog entries, news headlines, or podcasts). It demands an orientation to writing as a social act, in which writers are in communication with others and their ideas. It requires deliberate consideration of audience and attention to text structure with anticipation of how readers might navigate the text and make meaning of it. It changes the nature of citation to include the option of pointing directly to other texts from within a text, thus weaving a layered tapestry of collective, interconnected thought that preserves attribution transparently. Writing online hypertexts situates ideas and information within a broader social context.

Reading and Writing Digital Interactive Texts

Reading and writing interactive texts is another critical aspect of Web 2.0 literacy. From blogs to wikis to network profiles and discussions, most Web 2.0 texts invite conversation by design. This is, in fact, one of the defining features of Web 2.0, which is inherently social. Whether one comments on a friend's Facebook wall, responds to a status update or shared content, comments on a blog post, or participates in a discussion forum or synchronous chat, the result is an interactive text that tracks a written exchange between readers and writers. Most online news includes an opportunity for audience response, as do YouTube videos, Wikipedia articles, and many other sources of web content. Reading the comments on an online opinion piece expands the text to include additional voices and perspectives, and contributing to the dialogue engages the sort of interplay between reading and writing that deepens thinking and enhances communication.

> With so many people authoring linked texts, the web has become profoundly interconnected, and writers are exploring the possibilities that such connectivity offers with a Renaissance-like burst of collective innovation.

These interactive texts follow certain rhetorical conventions and require an understanding of how they work. While many students bring experience with such texts from their personal lives, and are often highly engaged by interactive writing, they are typically not as familiar with discourse norms for academic interactive texts. It is important that teachers provide students experiences with online discussions about literature, culture, history, and science, for example, and communicate expectations for appropriate academic discourse. Just as students use oral language differently on various occasions, they need to learn to write differently in academic versus purely social contexts, even if using similar tools. Experiencing academic writing as a social activity can help students understand the potential role of written communication as a collaborative thinking tool within "knowledge-building communities" (Hakeda & Wells, 2000).

Reading and Writing Digital Identities

Finally, given the highly networked nature of Web 2.0 where

everyone is essentially an author, knowing how to read and write digital identities is becoming an increasingly important part of being literate. Whether viewing a blog post, a YouTube video, or a wiki page, figuring out who authored the text is critical to placing it in context, assessing its credibility, and understanding the viewpoint it represents. Learning to read identities is a critical part of learning to read Web 2.0 texts.

Similarly, in a world where everyone is potentially an audience, we must write our identities with care and consideration of who may be reading what we produce. We may have multiple online identities for different audiences and purposes, but we must be thoughtful in managing those identities and the texts we produce through them. For instance, a student may create one online identity for a social network, another for a class wiki, and still another for a personal blog, each with a different voice, rhetoric, and style, and each with an integrity of its own, backed by different aspects of the student's background. One is likely to include different details in profiles for Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) for social networking purposes, LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com) for professional networking purposes, or a Ning network such as Classroom 2.0 (http://www.classroom20.com) or The English Companion Ning (http://englishcompanion.ning.com/) for connecting with a particular community of practice. We must help students understand who their audiences are, not just figuratively, but literally. Posting a comment on someone's blog or Facebook wall may not be as private or secure as many students imagine (see "Keeping Our Children Safe" by Gerry Leone, this issue). Students may be facile with the technical aspects of Web 2.0, but they need the guidance of informed adults to help them understand the broader implications of their authorship.

Whether viewing a blog post, a YouTube video, or a wiki page, figuring out **who authored the text** is critical to **placing it in context**, **assessing its credibility**, and understanding the **viewpoint it represents.**

The expansion of authorship in the Web 2.0 age has changed the literacy landscape dramatically. According to a recent report on results of a national survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart et al., 2008), "Most teenagers spend a considerable amount of their life composing texts, but they do not think that a lot of the material they create electronically is real writing" (p. i). The study also found that, "Overall, 82% of teens feel that additional in-class writing time would improve their writing abilities and 78% feel the same way about their teachers using computer-based writing tools" (p. iv).

This picture of today's students as enthusiastic writers presents a great opportunity for educators. New literacies can offer leverage in teaching traditional literacies, as well as strategies for capitalizing upon experiences that today's students bring to the classroom in teaching academic skills and content with digital communication media. The first step, of course, is to become more Web 2.0 literate ourselves. Educators and students alike have key roles to play as both teachers and learners as we join forces to meet the challenge of equipping ourselves to read and write the texts of our times.

Marielle Palombo's *professional experience includes education research, curriculum design, professional development, media production, and teaching at the K-12 and graduate levels. Her doctoral research at the Harvard Graduate School of Education investigates the potential for Web 2.0 media to support the teaching of composition and promote the development of authorship, literacy, and content understanding among students at the intermediate and secondary levels. She currently works as a middle school literacy coach and education consultant. She can be reached at marielle.s.palombo@gmail.com.*

References

Kalman, M. (2009, January 29). The Inauguration. At Last. And the Pursuit of Happiness. Retrieved 8/7/09, from http://kalman.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/29/the-inauguration-at-last/

Haneda, M., & Wells, G. (2000). Writing in Knowledge-Building Communities. Research in the Teaching of English, 34(3), 430-457.

Lenhart, A., et al. (2008). Writing, Technology and Teens. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Smagorinsky, P. (1995). Constructing Meaning in the Disciplines: Reconceptualizing Writing across the Curriculum as Composing across the Curriculum. American Journal of Education, 103(2), 160-184.

WeCan08. (2008). Yes We Can - Barack Obama Music Video: YouTube. Retrieved 8/7/09, from http://www.youtube.com/user/WeCan08

Resources

Classroom 2.0 - http://www.classroom20.com/
The English Companion Ning - http://englishcompanion.ning.com/
The Partnership for 21st Century Skills - http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/
Project New Media Literacies - http://newmedialiteracies.org/
Educational Leadership: Literacy 2.0 (March 2009) -http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/mar09/vol66/num06/abstract.aspx