eTexts and Teacher Education: Considerations for Text Structure and Purpose in Mobile Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how misunderstandings about eTexts may misguide educators when choosing how to incorporate eTexts into teaching and learning. A review of the existing literature finds that generalizations across different types and forms of eTexts and a reader’s purpose and proficiency yield only more confusion. However, having a better understanding of the types of texts (both structure and purpose) operationalized in the studies as well as why these constructs impact eReading elucidate the potential benefits for more mobile reading pedagogy. Furthermore, the adoption of mobile pedagogies, as they relate to digital literacy, can occur on a programmatic scale, but requires a large-scale understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of the learning and/or reading task, technology, and discipline.

KEYWORDS


INTRODUCTION

Readers today spend more time reading eTexts in bits and bytes rather than reading traditional texts in paper and ink (Clark, 2014). How readers come across a particular piece of material and the reasons why they might read a specific text are complex but often guided by prior knowledge, experience, and human inquisitiveness. For instance, this piece of text has been written with an expository text structure for an informational purpose thus the reading experience is not directly comparable to reading fiction for pleasure. Yet, the current academic discourse about the pedagogical impact of eTexts and eReading in schools merges these constructs of structure and purpose together. In the remainder of this article, the authors explain why these variables of “structure” and “purpose” should receive more attention when discussing the research-based efficacy of digital reading of eTexts and how these shifts may influence literacy-based teacher education.

Teacher educators realize that there are many pedagogical tools for mobile learning that afford students more opportunities for authentic learning tasks (Kearney, Burden, & Rai, 2015). Higher levels of student engagement are bound to occur when teacher educators move away from product-based outcomes and instead encourage students to address real-world problems, raise awareness for social issues, and find answers to their own questions. Yet, this leap of faith requires risk and a flexible toolkit that can be employed across content areas. Baran (2014) stated “as educators begin to understand the potential of mobile learning in education the role of teachers and teacher educators...
in integrating mobile devices becomes essential in addressing students’ learning needs across several disciplines” (p. 29). Schuck’s (2016) mobile pedagogy research then exemplifies the personalized, authentic, and collaborative teaching and learning opportunities with math instruction in the primary grades. Teachers are ready to embrace the affordances of mobile pedagogies (Domingo & Garganté, 2016), and content area literacy lies at the heart of making meaning from a wide range of complex and diverse types of texts, especially eTexts across all disciplines.

Additionally, with the advent of new, emerging technologies superficially devoid of any literacy-based applications (like maker-spaces, artificial intelligence, wearable computers, coding initiatives, and augmented and virtual realities) the amount of accessible, differentiated resources can be overwhelming to teachers and teacher educators. Specifically, the types of reading we do and the cognitive processing associated with consuming — and to some extent, producing — these digital texts creates both new problems and new solutions. Previously the authors made some suggestions for considering and evaluating eBooks that included familiarizing students with the basics of the reading device (e.g., iPad, Kindle, Nook, and more), teaching students to transfer print-reading skills, being wary of gimmicks and distractions, and also having sound pedagogy (Schugar, Smith, & Schugar, 2013). However, in their initial assessment of reading comprehension the authors failed to fully acknowledge the larger reading constructs associated with eTexts and literacy — namely, structure and purpose — and also how confusing these terms may impact approaches to teacher education.

DEFINING READING PURPOSE AND TEXT STRUCTURE

In short, text structure and purpose are two reading constructs that have been marginalized in the research on eTexts because over-generalization. Specifically, students’ eReading experiences and abilities are combined together without regard to the significant differences that might exist as a result of readers’ ages, abilities, the structure of the text, and purpose for the reading. It is known that differences exist in students’ abilities to comprehend texts of various text structures (Schugar & Dreher, 2017), and readers who report enjoyment when reading for pleasure on mobile devices may become overwhelmed when faced with the task of reading academic texts from a digital device (Schugar, Schugar, Smith, 2014). Reading preference and reading skill are very different constructs and teachers and teacher educators should be careful when using this research to inform instructional decisions.

Text Structure in eTexts

Text structure can be defined on a continuum from exposition at one end to narrative on another. On one side are narrative texts, which are structured with story grammar following the formula of Freytag’s Pyramid for dramatic structure, which includes background information, rising action, a climax, falling action, and a resolution. At the other end of the text structure continuum is expository texts. A bit more complicated than narrative structure, expository text can be structured in one (or more) of six ways: description, definition, cause and effect, compare and contrast, problem and solution, or sequence (Dreher & Kletzien, 2015). In the middle of the continuum are hybrids or mixed-structured texts, which contain elements of both narrative and expository structures.

Early learners read mostly narrative texts like picture books, fables, and nursery rhymes. This is not because young children are incapable of reading exposition; indeed, research would suggest quite the opposite (Duke & Kays, 1998; Pappas, 1993). Instead, caregivers are often drawn to stories that are familiar, entertaining, and have a designated way to be read from beginning to end. Expository texts on the other hand, may appear boring or cumbersome to the reader, who might try to read the text like a story (beginning to end) instead of choosing bits and pieces to focus on (as many expository texts are designed to be read). Young children, however, crave information about their world, and studies have shown that in early childhood they are often drawn to both narrative and expository texts (Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, & Shapiro, 2007).
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