Chapter 16

Google Unbound: Using Web 2.0 Tools to Develop High Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an exploration of Langer’s Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction in the context of the 21st century. A social-constructivist, Langer identifies five stances that highly literate readers use to interpret a text. Noting that much of Langer’s oeuvre was written prior to the advent of the Internet, the author provides transformational teachers with research-based examples of skills and lessons for using Internet technology to tap into a diversity of voices in the literature classroom. Framed in the context of a society that has recently experienced the democratization of information, where citizens need to be able to quickly interpret a variety of voices, this chapter explores the social construction of knowledge in the classroom and online to prepare them to be participants in the social construction of knowledge in the Information Age.

INTRODUCTION

Google has replaced Prometheus. The archetypal trickster is unbound, Pandora’s box is loosed and the world is glutted with information. The myth of Google, the myth that information is at our fingertips (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Granka, 2010), is exacerbated by an inability to handle the information overload (Lim, So, & Tan, 2010) or read it critically (Williams, Karousou, & Mackness, 2011). Modern adolescents have access to more information than in any other time in the history of the world (Bertolt, 2009; Gray, Thomas, & Lewis, 2010; Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Pinder-Grover & Groscurth, 2009). While their complicity in the generation of information on Web 2.0 applications and platforms compounds the glut, its potential for collaboration and critical thinking is also just beginning to be explored as a pedagogical tool (Gouseti, 2010; Jukes, McCain, & Crockett, 2010; Lim, So, & Tan, 2010; Williams, Karousou, & Mackness, 2011; Bobish, 2010; Dlab
& Hoic-Bozic, 2011; Humrickson, 2011; Wood, 2010). Small sample sizes and studies of narrow uses of the Internet as a pedagogical tool, however, compound the paucity of research. A research-based, unified purpose and integrative approach to understanding how to harness the Internet for educational purposes on a large scale is needed (Gouseti, 2010; Jukes, McCain, & Crockett, 2010; Lim, So, & Tan, 2010). Langer’s (2011a) Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction offers a way forward. Over the course of the last several decades, she has developed a research-based pedagogy as well as classroom techniques that teachers can use to help students develop the high literacy that they need to sort through, tap into the richness of, and create meaning out of the glut. Much of Langer’s work, however, was written prior to the advent of the Internet, and her more current work mentions the potential of the Internet only in passing (2011b). This chapter proposes ways of adapting her oeuvre for the Internet Age: it will look at ways to engage and enrich knowledge and understanding as well as critical thinking about literary texts through transformational leadership of the culturally diverse voices of the 21st century classroom using Web 2.0 applications.

The goal of Langer’s pedagogy is a concept she terms “high literacy,” the ability to interpret a variety of new texts through a community that taps into experiences with previous texts and life experiences. Langer (2001) defines high literacy by saying:

Although basic reading and writing skills are included in this definition of high literacy, also included are the ability to use language, content, and reasoning in ways that are appropriate for particular situations and disciplines [...] and that knowledge becomes available as options when students confront new situations (p. 838).

High literacy is the product of a process she terms “envisionment building.” Envisionment building is the movement through five stances, or perspectives, that a reader occupies while developing an interpretation of a text.

Langer’s approach to developing high literacy places her squarely in the social-constructivist camp, an educational approach that is the legacy of Vygotsky, Bruner, and Bakhtin’s student-centered theories of learning. Their work has direct implications for the Internet generation, whose interconnectivity means they are already versed in the contemporary activities of social-constructivism. Langer’s student-centered model is in contrast to the prevailing test driven approach of content-centered models. While the content-centered model has, for generations, yielded research-based techniques for setting goals, motivating students and assessing learning, Dewey’s legacy has only recently begun to generate research-based techniques that can be used in the classroom. Applebee, Langer, and Purves (1991) admit as much and thus begin their quest to rectify the problem of the teaching of high literacy over the subsequent two decades. Many of those publications present quantitative research on classroom practices that lead to both high literacy and successful achievement on standardized tests (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Langer’s (2011a) approach, however, does not address the ways in which the Internet can be tapped as an educational experience.

The first section of this chapter provides a context for social-constructivism and discusses the advantages and pitfalls of the use of socially constructed knowledge in education over content- and standards-based education. The second section reviews research on the strengths and weaknesses of the use of Web 2.0 applications in education. The third section discusses practical techniques for teaching adolescents how to achieve the five stances of envisionment building using Internet technology.
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