

Chapter 13

Tablet English: Student Perceptions of an iPad- Based Digital Literacy Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a conceptual framework underpinning the implementation of an iPad-based curriculum designed to foster critical digital literacy skills. This is followed by a description of the implementation of this process within a full-year 11th grade English course, and reports data gathered from a survey designed to capture student perceptions of the use of iPad-based texts and applications for course content and creation.

INTRODUCTION

As both mobile learning technologies and Internet capabilities continue to progress, it is important that educators look for ways to foster digital literacy skills in their students to prepare them to succeed in a digitally-connected future. When these technologies are incorporated into classrooms, students are able to “deal with knowledge in an active, self-directed and constructive way, leading to learning results that are more transferable to situations outside school than are the results of traditional teaching methods” (Volman & van Eck, 2001, p 614). By engaging students in lessons meant to connect with content in a process mediated by technology, teachers can not only improve the digital literacy skills of their students, but also prepare them to become more active and productive digital citizens of the future.

This article reports on just such a process. It begins with a conceptual framework that underpins instruction designed around mobile learning technology and digital literacy with a goal of preparing students to become both critical readers and authors of web-based content within the classroom setting. This is followed by a brief explanation of how this process was incorporated into three 11th grade English

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classes, who benefited from the daily use of iPad mobile tablet computers and a curriculum adapted to take advantage of digital textbooks and web-creation applications. Finally, the article reports on survey data that was collected to evaluate the perceptions of students regarding both the use of iPads as classroom textbooks and as platforms for the creation of digital classroom projects.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK/THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Through the last decade, the vast majority of students have improved their capacities for communication over the web, while the web has grown increasingly more interactive to accommodate new communication means (Hay, 2010). As a result, students are becoming more adept at skimming information for the answers they seek, but are losing the ability to maintain sustained attention to a single source in the manner teachers often desire (Burbules, 1997; Hay, 2010). However, as Livingstone (2004, p. 79) explains, “audiences and users of new media are increasingly active – selective self-directed, producers as well as receivers of texts.” It is the task of educators to design learning activities that help students to move from flighty, casual browsers of the Internet to those who become critical consumers and content creators in order that they may best take advantage of existing and emerging web-based technologies.

Hypertext

While individuals encounter hypertext links daily in their use of the Internet, in the classroom setting it is important to expand this term beyond the simple use of clickable links to include a notion of entire hypertext “books.” Whereas in a traditional print narrative one turns the page to find out what happens next, in hypertext “what happens next, what else the text will yield by way of narrative, of information or of meaning possibilities, is at least partly a matter of what link the reader chooses” (Carusi, 2006, p. 168). This unique capability of hypertext changes the way in which texts are read in web-based readings, potentially altering traditional patterns of student interaction with “textbooks” within classroom settings.

In hypertext environments, text is often non-linear or multi-linear, connected through links rather than the linear nature of page turning, which allows readers to choose their own path through the reading (Mobrand & Spyridakis, 2007; Uso-Juan & Ruiz-Madrid, 2009). The usage of links can expand the way text is read, with hypertext links creating implied connections and juxtapositions for the reader (Burbules, 1997), often not present in traditional print text. For students who are increasingly both familiar and adept at interaction in an environment connected through hypertext links, the increased freedom and opportunity this presents can be used to open the door to a more engaging educational experience.

“Hyperreaders,” “Transmedia” and Digital Literacy

The term “Hyperreader” was first used in the late 1990s by Nicholas Burbules to differentiate – from casual browsers or users of the Internet – those who not only consume online text but also alter and add to it in a critical fashion (Burbules, 1997; Burbules & Callister, 2000; Hay, 2010). Burbules (1997) explains that hyperreading “involves the reader making connections within and across texts, sometimes in ways that are structured by the designer/author, but often in ways determined by the reader.” When engaged in a process of hyperreading, individuals simultaneously make use of digital media for interpretation of texts and to contribute to the text, ultimately blurring the distinctions between reader and

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