Chapter 3
Digital Literacies and Text Structure Instruction:
Benefits, New Language Demands, and Changes to Pedagogy

Tracey S. Hodges
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7490-8711
University of Alabama, USA

Sharon D. Matthews
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7233-4451
Texas A&M University, USA

ABSTRACT

In considering the intersection of digital texts and reading comprehension, teachers now need strategies and instructional tools that promote deep, critical thinking of multimedia text. One area of literacy instruction that can increase students' reading comprehension of multimedia texts comes with understanding, analyzing, and evaluating text structures. As a first step to understanding what research says about integrating text structures with digital literacies, the researchers conducted a systematic literature review of articles published between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2017. While new literacies, visual literacies, and other digital media show increased prominence in education, the researchers identified only eight studies focusing on how text structures are unique to digital content. In the present chapter, the researchers analyze benefits and new language demands presented by these studies. Additionally, the researchers discuss implications for teacher practice and pedagogy when intersecting text structure instruction with digital literacies.

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INTRODUCTION

Do students learn better when reading print or digital texts? Current research is examining this question, with results indicating that the answer is not quite so simple. In short, an achievement gap exists between students of differing socioeconomic levels with students who have greater access to Internet in the home showing higher levels of reading comprehension on digital platforms (Leu, et al., 2014). Because this achievement gap exists, schools become more impactful as they provide access and digital tools to all students, regardless of their Internet or digital access in the home.

At the same time the digital achievement gap is developing, students are being tasked with increased evaluating and utilizing skills when reading online texts. Rather than reading texts alone, students are asked to evaluate the credibility of online sources and then utilize those sources to create a compelling argument. With these increasingly complex tasks, students require additional instruction and in-class supports to better comprehend the texts. One method that can help teachers provide more detailed instruction is to consider text structures with digital media.

Broadly, digital literacies research has strongly focused on integrating literacy skills with technology skills (Castek & Manderino, 2017; Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009). This broad aim has been necessary for understanding how technology can be utilized to bolster literacy skills. In 2019, digital literacies are no longer an aspect of literacy education but are integral to the practice of developing competent readers (Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Grote-Garcia, 2018). Therefore, the integration of technology and literacy needs to become more nuanced and more targeted to help children develop specific knowledge and skills.

A clear goal of American education is focused on bringing modern technologies into classrooms, but the field still shows a need for improvement. Technology integration has been proliferated by recommendations from educational agencies to integrate digital literacies into classroom instruction (National Council of American Teacher Educators, 2002; UNESCO, 2007), and to use technology as a viable tool for learning (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; the International Literacy Association, 2006, 2009). Yet, little research explores exactly how digital literacies can promote stronger reading comprehension and other literacy skills. Even the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governor's Association, 2010) do not include a specific strand for technology. The only reference to technology inclusion mentions using technology, generally, in content areas.

Research on digital literacies has established practices, frameworks, and skills that help children navigate multimedia texts (Leu et al., 2014; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). At the same time, literacy scholars have explored strategies and skills needed to develop reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, when digital texts and reading comprehension intersect, teachers need strategies and instructional tools that promote deep, critical thinking and understanding of multimedia text (Jiménez, Roberts, Brugar, Meyer, & Waito, 2017; Lapp, Moss, & Rowsell, 2012; Sullivan & Puntambekar, 2015).

One specific aspect of digital literacies that has not seen much attention is the focus on text structure instruction. Reading comprehension increases students' understanding of digital texts in the form of multimedia texts and their understanding, analyzing, and evaluating of text structures. Text structure research has demonstrated that when students are explicitly taught how to identify specific features related to structures, they improve in their understanding of the overall main idea of the text (Ray & Meyer, 2011; Read, Reutzel, & Fawson, 2008; Reutzel, Read, & Fawson, 2009). While this evidence is strong with print-based resources, text structures have not been explored in digital media.