

## EDITORIAL. TEACHING WRITING IN A CHANGING SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE

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This special issue of *L1—Educational Studies in Language and Literature* focuses on what it means to teach writing in secondary schools in the age of new media. We approach this topic from the understanding that people worldwide are now operating within a ‘changing semiotic landscape’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) that is associated with social, economic and technological change. This changing landscape of communication is affecting not only how we read and write, but also is expanding the range of semiotic modes and media with we habitually engage in order to make meaning, communicate and get things done in the world. Now, for example, in order to be fully literate, people need not only to be able to read and write using language and the technology of pen and paper; they also need to be able to comprehend, design, compose and disseminate multimodal meanings using digital multimedia. The new digital media in turn are dominated by the representation space of the screen (rather than the page), the meaning-making mode of the image, and the multiple and non-linear affordances of electronic hypertext. These developments pose significant challenges for teachers charged with the responsibility of teaching language, literature and communication, and it is to precisely to these challenges that the authors in this special issue turn their attention.

Just as TV has transformed our lives in many ways, so too the computer and the internet are transforming our ways of thinking, living and communicating. For example, the so called “data base form” as an interface between computer and human beings represents a new way of structuring our experiences and our world (Manovich, 2001). The world now appears to us as an endless and unstructured stream of pictures, texts and other data. From a semiotic perspective, the computer’s interface mediates cultural messages by means of different media. By organising the informa-

tion in a specific way, the interface offers a particular model of the world. Manovich (2001) highlights the techniques or commands one has to be familiar with in order to be able to handle today's computerised media, which include the ability to make selections among all the information available, but also the opposite – the ability to be able to 'assemble' and combine things together. Thus the argument is that people today are engaging in new literacy and other social practices, and developing different social and cognitive competencies, as they use new media as a matter of course in everyday life.

What changes like these mean for education and schooling remains unclear. However, we know that across the world, many young people of secondary school age are now for the first time familiar not only with print-based writing, but also with forms of hypertext and multimodal writing enabled by multimedia computers. Outside school, many of their emotional and intellectual investments are tied up with forms of digital media culture such as computer games, eBay and social networking websites like MySpace. However, despite the widespread take-up of networked multimedia computers within schools over the last decade, little systematic attention has been paid within curriculum frameworks to the study and production of digital texts and digital forms of communication. Especially in the senior secondary years, curriculum and assessment models continue to make little or no reference to expanded notions of literacy and communication that take account of the increasing use of semiotic modes other than the linguistic, or to textual practices other than those which are print-based. In many contexts, secondary students continue to be assessed solely by how well they can demonstrate their ability to read and write about scientific and literary texts, and to (re)produce their 'readings' and understandings in the traditional essay form. In these contexts – and in first language curriculum in particular – writing has been undertaken "in the service of reading (the 'essay')"

(Green, 2001, p. 251), and the texts to be read and written have been confined to print texts.

Responses from language and literature teachers to the significant cultural shifts associated with globalised digital technologies (Castells, 1996; Poster, 1990) have been mixed. At one extreme sits the view that it is not tenable to try to incorporate the new media into conventional language and literacy curriculum frameworks within school education. According to this view, the real-world spaces and practices in which young people engage with new media are unlikely ever to be replicated within the structures of schooling. It is argued that a fundamental mismatch exists between the social practices in which young people engage with digital literacies in their free time, and the social practices associated with the teaching and learning of literacy in the classroom. Consequently, according to some educators, existing curriculum and pedagogical practices – along with the purposes and structures of schooling – need to be fundamentally re-thought in the information age (e.g. Bigum, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

In contrast, other educators have attempted to theorise and research empirically the possibilities of incorporating the study and use of new media within existing school structures and curriculum frameworks. Curriculum historians of subject English (e.g. Green, 2001; Morgan, 1996), for example, have reminded us that the history of the subject has tended to be text-centric; the reading and writing of print texts

– and often explicitly literary texts – has been central. There has also been an emphasis in subject English on writing *about* print literature from particular perspectives, and in order to develop particular student dispositions and sensibilities. Learning to write *about* literature has in turn been accompanied by learning to be a writer *of* literary forms such as the poem, the short story, and so on. Only within school subjects such as media studies have there been sustained attempts to engage with emergent forms of expressive, aesthetic and representational practices associated with digital technologies.

Historians and theorists of language and literature teaching rightly point out that the widespread use of digital forms of expression and communication raises complex issues for the literacy curriculum. With specific reference to writing, for example, what does it mean to ‘write’ multimedia or to ‘compose’ on the computer? What kinds of design and composition practices bring together all the semiotic resources of pictures, sounds, and written text as evidenced in multimedia (Green, 2001; Kress, 2003)? Further, which of these practices can and should be taught within language and literature courses? Moreover, what does it mean for individual teachers to try to address such questions in “an educational world that is still largely print bound and logocentric”? (Green, 2001, p. 254). To take a highly contentious example, while quotation, assembling, recycling and other forms of what we might call ‘copying’ – as well as forms of networking and database use – offer significant possibilities for composing and aesthetic production on the computer, such practices are often anathemas to those working within the cultural traditions associated with high valuations of the solitary author and creative and ‘original’ literary artist.

In this special issue, each of the contributing authors begins from the view that schools do need to engage seriously with the new media. Each explores some of the many complex issues surrounding the necessary interconnectedness of print and digital technologies in contemporary language and literature teaching. In particular, each focuses on issues surrounding the teaching of writing in secondary schools.

In [\*The teaching writing in the upper secondary school in the age of the internet and mass media culture\*](#), Per-Olof Erixon examines the teaching of writing in Sweden and specifically considers the views of teachers of writing about the potential implications that changes in culture associated with the new means of communication might have for the curriculum. He argues that the curriculum is facing challenges that arise from the widespread use of the Internet and media culture by young people, but also from the fact that school in today’s society, where the border between the private and public is blurred, more and more seems to be turning into an intimate institution (Habermas, 2003; Ziehe, 1989), where relations between teachers and students are based on personal and informal rather than formal and more authoritarian relations. Erixon argues that this has an effect on how students deal with school tasks like writing.

Articles by Beavis and Burn focus more closely on the specific connections and disconnections that exist between students’ in-school and out-of-school uses of computer games in the Australian and UK contexts. In [\*Writing, digital culture and English curriculum\*](#), Catherine Beavis focuses on how subject English might build bridges between students’ in- and out-of-school experiences of narrative and multimodality. She considers the potential implications for the ways English teaching is

shaped in turn, with respect both to the nature of texts studied and to what counts as 'writing' within the curriculum. In [\*'Writing' computer games: Game-literacy and new-old narratives\*](#), Andrew Burn proposes a notion of "game-literacy" which, he argues, involves both the 'reading' and the 'writing' of computer games, and which could productively be developed within the classroom. The purpose of his research is to work toward a detailed notion of aspects of game-literacy, understood as a subset of media literacy.

The final two articles deal with issues surrounding the writing of hypertext and its potential uses within writing and literature classrooms in the context of Year 10 curriculum in The Netherlands and post-16 A-Level English in the UK. In [\*Clashing cultures? Linking literature and hypertext in an A-Level literature classroom\*](#), Sasha Matthewman argues that new digital genres clash with the 'traditional' version of subject English as represented in Advanced Level Literature exam courses in England. This argument is set within the context of an ongoing political imperative to integrate ICT into the school curriculum, together with general optimism amongst many English teachers regarding the potential uses of ICT to enhance teaching and learning in aspects of subject English. The paper focuses on hypertext which has been the subject of some exciting theoretical claims about its value for literary study, ranging from its provision of access to searchable databases, texts and research, to its potential to democratise the publishing process and change the relationship between reader, writer and text (Delany & Landow, 1991). The paper ends with some speculations about which aspects of 'traditional' English should be retained and valued in an age of information saturation and multimedia hype.

In [\*Writing hypertext: Learning and transfer effect\*](#), Martine Braaksma, Gert Rijlaarsdam and Tanja Janssen begin from an understanding shared with other contributors that ICT play an important role in text composition and revision. However, their study of hypertext in the writing classroom is undertaken within a very different research paradigm. They invited a large number of students in Years 8 and 9 to perform two linear and two hierarchically-structured writing tasks under think aloud conditions and compared the results. They found that although hypertext writing and linear text writing relied on the same set of cognitive activities, hypertext writing required more of these activities in order to fulfil the task and was more likely to stimulate students to use analysis and planning activities. They speculate that there might be benefits for some students in the inclusion of hypertext writing in the curriculum not only because students have different learning styles, but also because there may be some positive 'transfer effects' on the quality of their linear writing from practice in producing the hierarchically structured writing of hypertext.

The articles thus show in different ways and from different perspectives that young people not only are dealing with different media, but are also approaching 'texts' in different formats with competencies they have acquired from their use of different types of media inside and outside school contexts. When it comes to textual interpretation and understanding, their strategies seem to be imported across media borders. The message from these articles seems to accord with Mackey's (2002) argument that our understanding of how literacy works for today's young people will only grow and become more useful if we also take into account how young people adjust to and understand text in different formats and media.

The contributions in this issue thus in different ways dissociate themselves from a traditional and dominating pessimistic discourse about media, according to which society's history of the adoption of new media is interpreted as a history of decline. Drotner et al. (1996) remind us that this pessimistic discourse traditionally has been voiced most clearly from among media historians and caused what Drotner (1992) calls "media panics". She claims that an active role in the production of such discourse of media panics has been taken by teachers, librarians, literary critics, and to some extent, researchers. These people all hold their positions in existing cultural and social hierarchies and, not surprisingly, many of them feel threatened by new media. The stated objective of this discourse is and has been to protect children and youngsters from undesirable influences. Much research within the field of teaching writing has derived its nourishment from this discourse. However, this view has often been based on feeling rather than common sense.

In contrast, implicitly and explicitly, the contributors in this special issue represent a media ecological perspective, according to which, like their biological counterparts, media ecologies are understood to be diverse, continually evolving and complex. The perspective is based on a conviction that young people today are able to navigate in a diversified media landscape and develop competencies and literacies of different sorts, which they can use in a variety of media settings. This perspective also involves a desire among the contributors to bridge traditional demarcations between more institutionalized teaching and learning in a school setting on the one hand, and informal learning in youth culture and free time settings on the other. Just how far language and literature curriculum frameworks are likely to be permeable to, and accommodating of, such emergent literacies remains to be seen.

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