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### The New Literacies of Online Reading Comprehension: Future Directions

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# The New Literacies of Online Reading Comprehension: Future Directions

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## **Abstract**

*Research in four areas has the potential to dramatically improve how practitioners address the challenges of integrating digital texts and tasks into their literacy curriculum. Advances in defining and measuring key components of online reading comprehension are rapidly emerging. In addition, instructional models, such as Internet reciprocal teaching (IRT), can lead to the acquisition of online reading comprehension, but teachers need access to sustained professional development that is aligned with their own learning goals.*

**Key words:** *new literacies, online inquiry, online reading comprehension, online reading proficiency.*

Research in the acquisition of new literacies is rapidly expanding in ways that can support classroom teachers. As I look to the future of both research and practice in the area of online reading comprehension, work in at least four emerging areas has the potential to dramatically improve how practitioners address the challenges of integrating digital texts and tasks into their literacy curriculum.

## **Basic Research**

One vital research trajectory seeks to better understand the dynamic set of skills, strategies, practices, and dispositions learners need to successfully conduct online inquiry for academic purposes. Basic studies in this area can help researchers operationally define key variables associated with online reading and translate findings in ways that are helpful to classroom teachers. Recent work provides insights about



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the nature of online reading comprehension among readers of various ages as they read on the Internet, independently or with a partner, for information about self-selected or teacher/researcher-selected topics, and for purposes including acquiring knowledge, synthesizing information, or being entertained (see Coiro and Dobler 2007; Zhang and Duke 2008; Walraven, Brand-Gruwel, and Boshuizen 2009; Cho 2011; Coiro 2011; Coiro, Castek, and Guzniczak 2011; DeSchryver 2011; Dwyer 2011; Maloch and Zapata 2011; Morsink 2011). Emerging work has also identified reader dispositions that appear to play a role in online reading proficiency (see O'Byrne and McVerry 2009; Coiro 2012; Putman forthcoming).

However, much more needs to be learned about how online reading comprehension plays out across larger sample sizes of academically and linguistically diverse students who read across multiple and disparate digital texts for an even wider range of purposes and practices. Primary grade teachers, in particular, are craving information about how young children tackle the challenges of reading on the Internet and the extent to which insufficient decoding skills may or may not interfere with the ability to interact with and learn from online texts.

### ***Assessment***

A second important area of research pertains to assessing reading comprehension in online contexts (see Coiro and Castek 2010). The educational community is in dire need of innovative ways to validly and reliably measure processes such as (1) the ability to critically evaluate, synthesize, and communicate new understandings related to a self-generated task that looks completely different from one student to the next and (2) the ability to perceive, sort out, and respond to multiple agendas and perspectives represented (or missing) across a collection of online texts. As most U.S. states turn toward the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers 2010) to guide their thinking about what to expect from learners at each grade level, schools will be looking for leadership from the reading community to provide performance-based means of determining how students are developing these proficiencies during the year to better prepare them for the demands of annual high-stakes assessments.

Innovative work has revealed promising findings from three new formats of assessment instruments designed to reliably and validly capture seventh graders' ability to use the Internet to research, comprehend, and communicate information about science problems (see Leu et al. 2012). Progress has also been made in clarifying how these online reading assessments reflect key elements of what the CCSS expects from students by seventh grade (see Coiro and Kennedy 2011). However, school districts are eagerly seeking similar assessment formats or entirely new measures able to capture the online reading and research proficiencies of elementary and high school students. Moreover, little attention has been paid to developing assessments of other literacy practices involving the use of the Internet for learning. Important work in developing multiple assessments of online literacies still lies ahead.

### ***Instruction***

Recent studies that identify productive ways of teaching online reading across a range of grade levels has also established a promising research base from which future studies might emerge. In upper elementary school classrooms, for example, instructional practices involving challenging tasks, problem-based inquiry, explicit strategy instruction, collaboration and discussion, peer-to-peer scaffolding, and gradual independence from the teacher can lead to the acquisition of online reading comprehension (see Castek 2008; Dwyer 2010; Kingsley 2011).

Similarly, in middle school settings, an instructional model known as Internet reciprocal teaching (IRT) significantly increased seventh graders' ability to read and comprehend information online compared to students in control classrooms (Leu and Reinking 2010). During IRT, teachers actively facilitate interactive group work and strategy discussions as students in a one-to-one laptop setting engage with authentic curriculum-based challenges (see Leu et al. 2008). As students gradually gain proficiency in online reading skills, they are invited to develop their own lines of inquiry and collaboratively work with others using the Internet to solve the important problems they have defined.

At the high school level, when critical reading becomes increasingly important for academic success, Ostenson (2010) reported that focused instruction in how to discriminate between trustworthy and untrustworthy Internet sources had a positive impact on eleventh graders' ability to make sound judgments about credibility, especially when students were given more control over selecting the texts they read. Elsewhere, Manderino (2011) highlighted important ways that urban high school students of varying reading ability and diverse ethnic backgrounds use multimodal texts to mediate their understanding of historical events. Studies such as these can pave the way for additional work that explores the extent to which specific instructional practices and types of digital texts appear to mediate or complicate online reading comprehension across the disciplines.

### ***Professional Development***

With respect to professional development, the time has come to develop innovative solutions that support teachers in their efforts to learn and practice new literacy ideas in their classrooms—even when the language and structures for understanding these ideas continue to rapidly change from one year to the next. Short single sessions for large groups of educators outside of the actual classroom are no longer deemed effective supports for today's teachers. Instead, professional development needs to be long-term and systematic, situated in authentic and meaningful social contexts, and aligned with teachers' own professional development goals (Putnam and Borko 2000).

Sustained professional development around literacy and technology integration should, first, expose teachers to examples of concrete classroom applications and real practices, and second, offer scaffolded opportunities to collaboratively redesign these practices to fit their unique classroom needs (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and

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Yoon 2001). A recent analysis of nine studies across six different countries suggests that much can be learned by exploring the benefits of engaging teachers in collaborative curriculum design opportunities focused specifically on how to integrate online reading instruction to meet the diverse and changing needs of teachers and the students with whom they work (Voogt et al. 2011).

In closing, I look forward to joining with others across diverse lines of thinking to actively pursue answers to questions in these four areas. As we forge ahead together, I believe this work can truly make a difference in preparing students and teachers for the new literacies that lie ahead.

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