

Why is my Blackberry sitting on a pile of books?

By David Booth

We can make people read what they don't want to read only as long as they are in school. We often judge the literacy worth of individuals by the place that one particular art form, literature, has in their lives. However, when we begin listing the various forms of print that fill up students' lives, we notice that they read many types of texts: computer screens, sports pages, comics, game manuals, TV guides, and school textbooks. The list goes on.

Those of us who spend our leisure time among books want to pass on our love. We want others to join us in the book club, to enter a bookstore or a library with excitement and to leave fulfilled even before reading our selections. We read the reviews, wait for the Saturday newspaper section devoted to books, talk to our colleagues about book gossip, and hoard our new purchases for holiday reading. Can we reconcile students and books as they grow into adulthood? We can; we do with many. But we will have to rethink our goals, our values, our definitions; to see texts as filling the world, changing us, fulfilling us, surprising us, validating us, informing us, and connecting us to our families, friends, and fellow citizens. Some texts will be print, some image, some both, most electronic, a very few on papyrus or homemade paper.

How will we balance the immediacy of visual images with the power of printed texts? We will not overcome illiteracy by ignoring the media in students' lives and pushing books and magazines, nor will we build literate citizens by excluding reflective, aesthetic, and informative printed texts. It may be more difficult to read a book than to watch a film, but much depends on the nature of the experience and the context and the text itself. Did the student choose it alone or with classmates? From the library? Is there a test on it? Is there time to accomplish the "reading"? Does it require the student to interpret and reflect and rethink assumptions? Is the student changed by what is seen, heard, or read?

We want our students to meet texts of all kinds and formats, to discover the options these can bring to their choices in life, but our definition of "book" is about to change. The year 2009 saw the launch of the Sony Reader, a portable device for digital books and documents, along with digitized titles from major publishers. The Reader is the size of a thin paperback and weighs 250 grams. Writing in the New York Times, Kevin Kelly of *Wired* magazine creates a fascinating manifesto for the coming change to our definition of books. "The world's texts are being electronically copied, digitized, searched and linked. The force of the web lies in the power of relationships. Search engines create a trillion electronic connections through the web."

Literacy instruction is central to schooling, yet for many children and adolescents, becoming effective readers and writers can be a difficult, even painful process. More time is devoted to literacy instruction over the Kindergarten to Grade 12 spectrum than to any other curriculum area. When one includes the large literacy

component found in other school subjects, this fact becomes especially apparent. The reason for this emphasis is clear: reading and writing capacities and interests are crucial for personal and societal well being in the contemporary world. Today, libraries (real and virtual) are filled with tens of thousands of books, journals, websites, e-files, and research documents attempting to provide background in how to teach reading and writing. And yet, more than one-third of North American adolescents struggle to read many forms of texts proficiently.

Researchers have provided insights into other factors that affect children's success in literacy. They have given teachers an awareness of how children develop intellectually and how they find meaning in everything and everyone around them. Ethnographic studies have alerted us to the social context of learning and the importance of a child's home culture. We now recognize the value of teachers establishing links with children's homes – both in order to learn about children from their parents and to allow parents to be partners with the school in helping their children become readers and writers. The most predictive statistical models show that engagement is a mediator of the effects of instruction on literacy achievement. If instruction increases students' engagement, then student achievement increases.

An Expanded Definition of Literacy Education

Just as global societies are redefining themselves, the concept of literacy is undergoing an evolution of its own. Theoretical and technological advances have transformed literacy from a simple dichotomy into a richer, more complex construct. More important than the simple ability to read, literacy now focuses on the ability to use information from a variety of texts and text forms in specific contexts. This focus places the practice of literacy outside as well as inside the place called school.

Communication is more than a matter of words. Indeed. Visual images – the view of the street, the picture in the advertisement, the action on the screen – often convey the larger part of the message. Parents, teachers, and book publishers have long recognized that pictures are important for young children, but only recently has exploration of “the media” – television, film, magazines, and especially the computer screen – been seen as an integral part of the learning continuum.

Many people are confused about literature and literacy. The first definition of literature in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary is “written works, esp. those whose value lies in beauty of language or in emotional effect.” Too many parents and teachers regard only novels, poetry, and “literary non-fiction” as reading, and many boys and men think that they are not readers because they don't choose one of those genres.

The thinking that “novel” is the magic word for literacy is unfortunate for many readers. Today, even in Grades 3, 4, and 5, the whole-class novel is the main reading strategy. At least a third to half of a class likely can't handle that text. Yet it is mandatory methodology, chapter by chapter. Is the goal literacy or literature? We need to examine how we can have both. The library can actually help children escape into a more "real" world.

We want our students to work towards independence, to develop into lifelong readers who see texts (on screen and on page) as friendly objects. How can we help students to think carefully about the texts they "read", to become aware of how a text works, so that they can become critical and discerning readers? One answer to meeting the needs of our students is to offer more options in libraries and in classrooms so that their text selections can become varied, even more challenging. We can show them possibilities, without demeaning their present literacy lives and choices.

As teachers and librarians, we have all experienced the disappointment that comes from a student revealing boredom or dissatisfaction with something we had judged to be a wonderful piece of literature. Finding appropriate and interesting books that represent quality literature for our students is a complicated task, but it is a significant way to help them become critical and creative readers.

Learning to appreciate a particular text is a developmental, lifelong process, dependent on many variables – background, skill, experience, familiarity, life and text connections, purpose, situation, and so on. We need to move towards supporting readers' decisions about the print resources they select – their newspapers, novels, magazines, their work and organizational materials, and their choices of reading for fun and games. We then need to consider in our school and classroom libraries how to increase the options that resources can offer and explore with students how different texts and text forms work- what to look for and what to expect - so that they can make informed choices and select the resources that will give them the most satisfaction.

We need to help young people, regardless of background and ability, to look at their responses to different texts, to reflect on why they feel as they do, and to consider the author's role in determining how they respond to the ideas and words in texts. Not surprisingly, reading the texts we want or need to read in search of deeper understanding may be the answer to many of the common problems teachers and parents face in opening doors and windows for their young people.

The literature canon for youngsters has not altered much over the last 50 years. The same novels are used throughout most school districts in North America, without much awareness of equity or gender issues. The books are often read and analyzed chapter by chapter, with too little attention paid to the impact of choice and the teaching strategy on the future literacy lives of the students.

How can a text full of long, uninterrupted print passages compete with the visual and aural sensations that beat upon young people and catch them in the media net? Young people are inundated with so many texts from television, cereal boxes, advertising, and computer games. Can we draw on the range of powerful literature we have access to for motivating reluctant readers to explore the ideas, the other worlds, the information, the surprises, the sense of imagination contained inside the very books they too often disdain? What if these readers could find themselves engaged in a book they couldn't put down? What would change in their reading lives? Would they forget their reading problems and simply read?

Many of today's young readers enjoy reading a different type of text from those we are most familiar with – the graphic novel. This shouldn't come as a surprise, however, in a world where visuals from television, videos, games, and computers fill so much of our youngsters' time. In an increasingly image-filled culture, this new literacy medium offers alternatives to traditional texts used in schools, while at the same time promoting literacy development. For many of us, comics are tainted as a lesser genre, relegated to childhood's Saturday morning leisure time. But many of today's graphic novels include a complex and art-filled variety of genres, from fiction to biography, social studies and science, representing social, economic, and political themes and topics that readers might not choose in other types of texts. As well, they present opportunities for incorporating media literacy into the reading program, as students critically examine this word-and-image medium.

Why are we so afraid of comic books? What is it that we find terrifying about them – this art form that I read for five years as a child? In Grade 7, I had the biggest comic book selection in my neighborhood, and my parents never complained. But many teachers (and librarians) are absolutely terrified of comic books. Is it the big words – because they do have big words? Is it the art form that is unfamiliar to us? Well, most of us have read comic books. So, what is the problem?

Somehow, comics are not serious. And we like books or art that is serious. We like fine art; it requires training. We're suspicious of art that doesn't conform to our expectations. Of course, Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus, the Saga of the Holocaust*, is somehow outside this debate. In other countries, like Japan, young men are moving into graphica in a very big way: comic novels, read by middle-class people. On subways. Altering our definition of what a conic is. How, then, do we uncover our own biases? (Libraries were the first to stock graphic texts.)

Being multimodal, graphic texts represent new, contemporary forms of print and visual literacy, and motivate readers to read words and images with significant comprehension. The illustrations and designs support the reading of these stories, pictures, photographs, poems, information selections, posters, and cartoons, as children become readers of all types and formats of texts, in books and on screens, making connections to media experiences in school and at home. These books are highly visual, incorporating art, design, and graphics in support of the printed text. Graphic stories – fiction and non-fiction selections, written and drawn by graphic artists – involve the young readers in texts that represent new contemporary forms of literacy that will motivate them to read words and images with significance.

How can we connect the power of texts that matter to other curriculum areas? One winter, I set out to re-live the lunches of my childhood by cooking a big pot of potato soup. I reached for my gift set of Julia Child's cookbooks to find the recipe – and found myself entranced by her description of the history and romance of this old-fashioned potage. How strange and fitting that even directions for soup can become a literary experience, that words labeled "non-fiction" can draw from me, the reader, a response both cognitive and aesthetic and bring back all those years of comfort food and secure noon hours? Such is the power of writing when

writer and reader connect, and torrents of meaning rush back and forth between print and eye. Recently, I overheard a conversation in the grocery store between a couple, where the young man asked the young woman to select a cabbage, because he was going on the Internet that night to find a great recipe. If he's lucky, he may discover the story of cabbage soup.

What is the curriculum if it isn't story? Stories of other times; of people we never knew but want to; of places that no longer exist but in the mind; of fin, fur, and feather; of trees that were here by the thousands and are now all but gone; of volcanoes that wiped away villages; of rivers ten million years old; of strands of genetic information that alter our concept of life; of telescopes that let us look back to the birth of the universe.

When did we forget that everything is a story? (Even the Dairy Bureau of Canada calls its presentation to children *The Story of Milk*.) Was it when we decreed that non-fiction writing be devoid of emotion in order to balance more imaginative "creative" fiction? Did this lead us to drain factual information of excitement and passion by creating curriculum materials that were lifeless?

It makes more sense to see "literature" as a vehicle for making connections to curriculum: a novel of pioneer life as part of the social studies unit, a poem about the mysteries of the deep as an introduction to a science lesson. These linkages help children to form the collage of stimuli and information that surrounds them into a connected learning web. Yet at the heart of the curriculum, I prefer to see the very words the experts use: the scientist's appeal for ecological courage on the basis of experimental findings and their implications; the historian's blend of the hardships of pioneer life with the traces of their journeys across the prairies; the sociologist's discussion of urbanization and the charts and figures that illuminate the multicultural complexities of the neighborhood; and the home economists guide to a bowl of soup through a look at a cultural heritage.

There are many jokes about children sitting in libraries, copying long passages from encyclopedias, or parents researching and writing the projects their children are assigned. Our classrooms have come a long way from demanding that projects submitted without our guidance be artistically beautiful creations often relying on parental support. Now, we see them as in-depth research projects that demonstrate the students' high-level learning in both content and process, and that offer them opportunities for teaching others about what they have discovered. If we want students to develop as young writers, it is important to help them set up a system that enables them to experience the earning that grows from a project personally, so that they acquire skills of handling information. While we may assist by providing data, by offering to be interviewed, or by helping to publish the final drafts, the students should have ownership of their work.

Occasions in which students present their inquiries offer opportunities for both oral communication and written and visual demonstrations of the research. I am impressed by the power of overhead transparencies and PowerPoint to prompt students to consider carefully how they will represent their findings. Young investigators may want to distribute a guide sheet for observers to note their

learning and to ask further questions. Displays and bulletin boards on screen and on walls let other students benefit from the research.

As processes, reading and writing become tools for student researchers, if their motivation for making an inquiry is strong. Often, classrooms with helpful reading and writing programs forget the difficulties inherent in using a single textbook or the complexities involved in reading information books from the library and the Internet. It is often useful to have the students reflect on their research experiences. They might write about the books or other resources they have read, perhaps discussing new facts they have learned or problems they have experienced while researching.

Why Librarians Love Blackberrys and Books

Books and screens will co-exist for the near future. Book people are strong-willed proponents of the paper-print media, but technology will continue to expand as young people are born wireless. Students will need teachers, librarians, and friends to promote and provide choices to extend and enrich their literacy options with different texts, along with time and places and opportunities for adding new ones to their crowded lives.

The future has already arrived for many teachers and librarians in many schools. E-writing and online texts have changed how we describe and define the reading and writing events that surround our children. Our understandings of literacy are changing, and the skills it requires may not be best represented in current standardized testing. We have models of teachers using literacy events in their classrooms, with carefully thought-out learning objectives and assessment criteria. We recognize, however, that technological resources are hard to come by and school requirements are having trouble catching up with the changes that our students meet every day. It will take time, but I am amazed how far schools have come in adapting to new technologies.

- **Social networking:** Integrating social networking into classroom events is evidenced in new educational articles and books, alongside a variety of websites. Blogging activities (Google Blog Search, Google Reader, Flickr) are popular in many classrooms and libraries that I have observed. Let us consider what these modes of written discourse will mean to the students' growth as writers.
- **Independent inquiry:** Having students write informative yet reflective texts based on intensive and extensive research will remain important, but inquiry approaches are now being seen as effective modes of promoting thoughtful, cooperative opportunities for intensive and extensive reading and writing, where students choose topics of interest, find their own resources, and write up their data. Moving to this type of activity can increase the reasons in the students' lives for both researching and writing.
- **Streamlined writing tasks:** Computer programs focusing on specific strategies for assisting us as writers can increase motivation and decrease what we may see as drudgery. They allow us to skip tedious operations and let us focus on the composing aspects of our writing. And for students in difficulty as writers, we now

have assistive programs that format our work, read our words aloud as we write, offer us revision suggestions, and provide support for writing our ideas in a particular genre.

- **Numerous exemplars:** We have many examples of models and exemplars of student writing, linked to assessment and to suggestions for mini-lessons and specific practice. I recommend that the students examine sets of these samples and find those that match their own levels of competency – computers can now help do this for students.
- **Authoritative assessment:** New assessment methods have given us information about the craft of writing that we lacked before. We now can read a child's written piece and assess the specifics of the student's progress as a writer of this type of text. We know what to look for and what to do if we don't find it in the work – I feel so much more professional in talking to the students and in reporting to the parents.
- **Computer capabilities:** The techniques of cutting and pasting, inserting graphics, downloading maps, drawing and painting with a mouse, formatting, and creating books have brought writing to the fore of student interest. I watched one class spend hours during the week preparing to share their reports: writing their results, revising them when they found new data, add the graphic items to support their written texts – they didn't want to stop their work.
- **Literacy in content areas:** In language arts class, in the library or in the writing workshop, we teach strategies for writing in different genres, for different functions, and with different styles, forms, and formats; however, some of these events could be carried out during other subject times. In secondary schools, many teachers are exploring the literacy functions of the disciplines with the students, helping them become more effective readers and writers as they learn about the content, procedures, or forms used in the particular field of study. As we all become more adept at incorporating literacy strategies in our subject classes, students will gain a much clearer understanding of how language works.
- **Digital interactivity:** For shared writing times, the SMART Board offers interactivity. You can use a laptop connected to the SMART Board to navigate to different sites with a variety of programs and then choose one to incorporate into your interactive class event. Of course, you can use an overhead transparency or a flip chart to promote interactivity, but using digital power is much more effective in helping children explore, revise, create, and pattern texts. Fifty years ago, Bill Moore, my language arts supervisor, worked with my Grade 7 class using chalkboard and chalk. Yet, so much interaction can be implemented with many more students with the support of technology – and Bill would have been leading the charge into the digital world.

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