Hypertext and the Changing Roles of Readers

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F our years ago when I decided to include Web technology in my eighth grade language arts class (*EJ*, September 1999), I suspected that my students were developing new reading strategies in order to construct meaning from electronic text. Furthermore, I suspected that their roles as readers were undergoing subtle, but important, changes. Those changes were directly related to the nature of hypertext and other electronic texts. My students seemed initially confused by the choices they were asked to make when they read hypertext, but their confusion quickly gave way to what I think of as a more animated mode of reading, where they read chunks of text for important ideas and sought links that would take them to information they wanted. Hypertext, especially informational hypertext, placed them in an environment where they had to read differently, and perhaps more efficiently, than many of them had read before.

Hypertext is the electronic linking of text that we often find on the Internet. When we click on a linked word or image, we are able to access another place on the Internet. This mode of reading, this act of clicking that presents a reader with a new screen and often an entirely new topic, calls upon readers to approach meaning construction in a different way. As English teachers we need to help our students transact with hypertext and think reflectively about the meaning they are constructing from that form of text every bit as much as they do with printed text. We need to recognize that reading hypertext is a different experience for our students.

The idea that hypertext is read differently should not be such a stretch for us English teachers. We read menus and billboards differently. We read magazines and novels differently. We read textbooks and computer manuals differently. We have no difficulty seeing these differences and discussing with students what they entail. It seems logical, then, that we would provide students with opportunities to read hypertext and discuss with them the ways in which they approach that writing form.

Why Is Electronic Text Different?

Some theorists like George Landow and Richard Lanham believe that the simple presence of a cursor on a screen alters the electronic (and hypertextual) reading experience because the cursor is a physical means of inserting the reader into the text. It creates a visual reminder that the reader is always present. Lanham also believes that because text resides on a hard drive, server, or disk, readers approach it differently. The fact that electronic text is no longer caught between the covers of a book, that it only becomes present when a reader calls it up on a screen, invites the reader to come closer to the text, to write the text anew each time he or she engages with it. This is not so different, actually, from Louise Rosenblatt's theory that readers call texts into being each time they transact with them. Jay Bolter, however, believes that because hypertext is "non-print, undark, dry, unimprinted, prone to sailing off" (86) it is dynamic and volatile, and the

reader loses track of where the writer has left off and the reader begins. And while I wrestle with the difference here between a cursor that marks a reader's presence and an index finger that guides a reader across a printed page, I acknowledge that electronic text is different and that readers approach it differently, that they participate or transact with hypertext in a way that is not generally possible with print media.

The difference perhaps resides more in the attitude that readers bring to hypertext and other electronic texts than in any difference in the text itself. Critics of electronic text, particularly hypertext, like to point out that it is difficult (and dangerous) to read hypertext in the bathtub (Birkerts).

And they are right. When I want to read something long, I print it out and read it at my desk or on my couch. But perhaps the reason I do that is because I am used to book text. I'm used to its conventions, and I know what to expect. I did not learn to read at a computer. I did that stretched out on my bed, hoping my mother wouldn't drag me away to dust mopboards or change the cat litter, so the pleasure of reading is, for me, caught up in those secret moments when I could sneak and read. And in those stolen moments I became accustomed to the feel of a book, to the conventions of book text and magazine text.

But conventions change, just as they did in the transition between scribal culture and book

culture. Our students spend a great deal of time interacting with gaming texts in such formats as Nintendo and PlayStation. And they are becoming increasingly used to negotiating text on the World Wide Web, either as e-mail or in chat rooms, as well as on Web sites. We teachers need to recognize that fact and even celebrate it. We can do that by asking students to reflect, either orally or in response journals, on those differences.

One way I challenge my middle school students to think is through their response journals. For example, I might ask, How did you find information about slavery in the Web sites you looked at today? Or, after asking students to read a brief article about Mark Twain and then viewing a Web site about him, I might ask, Are there any differences in the way you read the article about Mark Twain and the way you read the Web site about him? It is important to give students a chance to talk about the differences.

Differences to Ponder

I know my students would rather go to the computer lab than do anything else, and they would rather read text on a computer than text in a handout. When they are in front of a computer, they are totally engaged, consciously making decisions about where to click, what to read next, and what to add to an electronic text. There is something different going on. It could be novelty. I suspect it is something more.

It may be that they feel a greater sense of agency—defined by Janet Murray as the ability to take meaningful actions and to see the results of those actions (126)—when they are reading electronic text, especially hypertext. They feel a greater sense of control over what they read and how they read, and they can see instantaneous results from the choices they make as readers. Hypertext gives permission to readers to insert themselves into the meaning construction process and "write" a text in a way that is often different from what the author foresaw. Hypertext makes us conscious of the blurring of the reader/author role. Book technology seems to fix our notion of authorship, while hypertext challenges us to rethink that role and the role of the reader.

One of the ways that teachers can help students develop this sense of agency is through scavenger hunts. (See sidebar.) In many scavenger hunt activities, teachers collect a series of Web sites that deal with a particular facet of study in their classrooms, and they give students some open-ended

questions. The students search for the answers in the Web sites the teacher has collected. It is important for teachers to understand, however, that simple recall questions are probably not going to help students develop this sense of agency. Rather, teachers need to include thought-provoking questions. For example, prior to reading "Punto Final," a poem by Shirley Hill Witt, a teacher might put together a scavenger hunt about the Spanish Conquest and the role La Malinche played as an interpreter for Cortez. A scavenger hunt question might ask students to decide whether La Malinche was a traitor or a victim and to give reasons for their opinion.

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One thing that English teachers need to understand is that in a hypertext Web there is no "order" to the information provided. In other words, no part of the text is considered more important than another. So teachers need to revise their own sense of how text should be organized. Hypertext authors understand that readers will negotiate their text very differently from what they, the authors, anticipated or even intended.

Ilana Snyder believes that hypertext is changing our notions of authorship. She notes that the absence of textual autonomy and centeredness disperses the author. But Snyder points out that the amount of control experienced by a reader is largely dependent on hardware and software. In hypertext fiction published by Eastgate Systems, links can be hidden in the text, and the reader must either search for the links by randomly clicking on words that might be a link or execute a key stroke in order to see where the links are on the screen.

But it isn't only our sense of authorship that Snyder believes is changing. She also believes that computers shape the way we think, encouraging some kinds of thinking and discouraging others. She uses the example of a blackboard where text is created with the assumption that it will be erased. Paper and pen writing encourages writers to attend to grammar and spelling and to use a more controlled type of thinking. Computers invite writers to think nonlinearly and cooperatively. She points out, "We organize our writing space in the way we organize our thoughts, and in the way in which we think the world itself must be organized" (69). This means, according to Snyder and a number of other theorists, that hypertext and other electronic texts are changing the way we think, altering the way in which we organize our ideas.

Perhaps one of the best ways to help students understand this concept is to have them write hypertext documents. (See sidebar.) My students create three large Web projects during the school year—a poetry annotation, a biography Web, and a Web dealing with African American culture or history. Teachers who want students to become better Web readers may want to engage students in a short poetry annotation project. Students could begin by taking a short poem, "The Eagle" by Tennyson, for example, and highlighting key words, phrases, and even literary techniques. Teams of students could take one line or image from the poem, find out more information, and present that to the class. Each group could write their information in a word processing program and make links from the poem to their bit of annotation. The Web does not even have to be published on the Internet. The links will work on a single, stand-alone computer or on a local area network.

Such activities will help students realize what George Landow means when he writes that hypertext blurs the boundaries between reader and writer. He claims that, because of the nature of hypertext, the reader has to make choices and act upon those choices by clicking on a word or image, thereby becoming "active." Perhaps a better word here would be "deliberate," since all acts of reading are active. Reading is not a passive activity. Hypertext reading requires the reader to make deliberate decisions about which path to take within a hypertext Web.

There are several excellent ways to help students experience this blurring of boundaries between reader and author. One is through Web forums and discussion lists, where students might discuss a literary work. Ncte-talk, an online discussion group, sponsors the Talk Zones. These are discussion lists that focus on a particular literary work and invite students—both high school and middle school—to participate in the discussion. Teachers monitor the discussion but do not necessarily participate. For more information on the Talk Zones, see NCTE's Web site at www.ncte.org.

It is also possible to engage students in discussion forums on a smaller scale. There are chat programs that allow students in just your classroom to discuss a particular topic. Using a computer rather than their "voices," students type their comments and questions. The action is much like that of any chat room, but the conversation is focused on one particular topic, and the participants are not necessarily "in disguise." You will need to talk to a technology person in your district to set up a chat client for you. It is through the act of adding text to a larger discussion that students experience hypertextuality. The discussion may seem disjointed, with several threads happening at once, but it is this disjointedness that helps students build their ease in dealing with the "fuzzy borders" of text.

Hypertext, because of its openness—its fuzzy borders that are so easily permeated—makes the author's role as diffuse as the boundaries of the text itself. Hypertext does not typically have a beginning, middle, and end. Listserv conversations, as well as chats and Web forum discussion, help students deal with this lack of traditional order. Hypertext disrupts that comfortable linearity that we often inflict on students. Instead, it tends to flow, much like conversation, shifting and changing as new speakers arrive or as a new topic is introduced. Landow talks about Walter Ong's theory regarding the relationship between computer technology and orality. Ong argues that computers have brought with them a "secondary orality" that is very similar to the participatory sense of community and a focus on the present moment in oral cultures. And though Ong seems to go astray when he talks about computers and sequential processing, he (and Landow) make the interesting point that books and their authors cannot be challenged in any immediate sense. In order for readers to challenge most forms of print text, they must delay the exhibition of their challenge.

Hypertext readers, however, can challenge a text immediately, or as immediately as the reader can write a response and link that response to the author's text. This ability to insert text within a larger

domain places the reader and the writer in a kind of dialogue that cannot happen as easily in the world of paper and ink. This happens in the Talk Zones, and it happens when students discuss a literary work in a chat room environment. Landow and Lanham believe, then, that hypertext readers more fully merge their role with that of the author. The poetry annotation exercise is another way for students to realize this merged role of reader and writer.

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But Janet Murray poses an interesting point. She believes that in electronic text, such as hypertext and gaming texts, the author exists as a choreographer. The reader is not the author of the text but can experience many of the "exciting aspects of artistic creation—the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials" (153). Murray makes an intriguing point. The reader of electronic text, and especially hypertext, is not experiencing authorship. The reader is experiencing agency (126). She points out that the kind of agency that takes place in the reading of hypertext fiction, particularly, is rather rare in more traditional narrative forms. The difference may be that by entering a computer environment, the reader alters the environment of the text through his or her participation.

Historic Precedence

Historically, there is precedence for this shifting role of the reader. Hypertext is not the first textual innovation to do so. Ilana Snyder reminds us that in manuscript days scribes often altered the work they were copying. This blurred, even then, the boundaries between author and reader. Snyder adds that the tradition of print literacy privileges the author. Nothing, supposedly, can be changed about a text once the author (along with the publisher and editor) have finished with it. But French literary critic Roland Barthes, in his interesting essay "The Death of the Author," points out that a piece of text is "not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God), but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (116).

Most hypertext theorists would agree. Snyder also points out that oral texts had many of the features that theorists claim are inherent in hypertexts. Oral texts could be revised at will by the speaker, who altered stories depending on the prompts from an audience. But book technology provided a new framing device for narrative and other forms. Murray points out that with electronic text the "author" is procedural, like a choreographer, "who supplies the rhythms, the context, and the set of steps that will be performed" (153). The reader, or as she calls him or her, the "interactor," is a

> navigator, protagonist, explorer, or builder, [who] makes use of [a] repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance among the many, many possible dances the author has enabled. We could perhaps say that the interactor is the author of a particular performance within an electronic story system, or the architect of a particular part of the virtual world, but we must distinguish this derivative authorship from the original authorship of the system itself. (153)

In this sense, Murray is reminding us that each time readers enter a hypertext Web they create a "new" text, written by the choices they make as they travel through the Web. And Landow consistently reminds us that the text an interactor reads is not necessarily the text an author planned. This is an important concept for student readers and writers because it reinforces the fact that readers and writers approach their tasks with purpose, and those purposes may not be the same. All this seems much like the ancient storyteller, who changes the text to fit the wishes of each audience. The audience and the storyteller (author) collaborate to create the narrative.

The Decline of Literature?

Sven Birkerts blames hypertext for "delivering a mighty blow to the long-static writer-reader relationship. It changes the entire system of power upon which the literary experience has been predicated; it rewrites the contract from start to finish" (163).

Birkerts warns that hypertext is ruining literacy and literature, along with killing the author. He argues that the "subjective ecology of reading" allows him to feel the power of the words on a page, and that this power cannot be felt with hypertext. I am reminded of an interesting *National Geographic* site on the World Wide Web that allows readers to "become" someone accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, in the seventeenth century. The background of the narrative is black. The reader hears wind in the trees, the tolling of a church bell, the fall of footsteps up the stairs of the gallows. Ultimately the reader "dies." The effect is chilling. Students who read the narrative are totally engaged, and yet they are clicking on frames and making choices as to how to proceed, how to manipulate themselves away from the hangman's noose. The reader "feels the power" of the text.

We must remember what Louise Rosenblatt tells us, that readers bring a text to life. In order for that to happen, readers must write the text for themselves, and in the reader's mind the text sifts through previous experiences as the reader goes through the meaning-making process. In this sense the reader is always central to the text. This is also true of hypertext.

Three Kinds of Readings

Teachers are not the only ones, of course, who will have to deal with the changing roles of readers. Hypertext writers will have to envision different readers who have different purposes. Slatin actually identifies three different types of hypertext readers: the browser, the user, and the coauthor (158). The browser reads for no particular purpose other than to find something interesting with which to engage. Many of our students have experienced this kind of reading already. The user is looking for specific information and uses hypertext to find that information. We see these readers in our classrooms and in our computer labs, and we ask for this kind of reader to emerge when we assign research tasks. The scavenger hunt experience is particularly useful in helping students develop this kind of reading ability. Then there is the third kind of reader that Slatin talks about, and it is that kind of reader that we should focus on. We should be challenging our students to read as coauthors, as collaborators who deliberately insert their own writings in response to a piece of electronic text. This means that students are delib-

erately, consciously reading and collaborating with an author and are using computer technology to add to the body of knowledge that is growing on the Internet. While scavenger hunts can help facilitate this kind of reading, poetry annotations and Web forums and discussions are excellent vehicles for moving students closer to reader as collaborator.

The "Naturalness" of Hypertext

There are those who would want us to believe that hypertext and other forms of electronic text are not natural. They are forgetting their history of text. Landow, citing Tom McArthur, points out that, first, there is nothing natural about the printed book. It took four thousand years for it to come about, and that evolution disrupted the previous "elites," the scholastics, who had worked hard to conventionalize the plots and themes, not to mention the structure and look, of the texts of their time. The printing press, Landow points out, presented the scholastics with a different order, a different way of organizing knowledge, and this new way may have appeared disjointed, even chaotic (Landow, *Hypertext* 2.0, 77).

This sounds all too familiar when we listen to the complaints of those who feel electronic text is a threat to our literary tradition. Hypertext certainly reflects a shift in textuality, but it is not a threat. We are in an age of transition, and perhaps the day will come when we look incredulously at the quaintness and clumsiness of books in much the same way as we look at old scrolls. But books will not disappear for a long time.

Hypertext, whether it is literary or pragmatic, whether it is Stuart Moulthrop's latest novel or a new version of a spreadsheet program, is here. It will affect us all in one way or another—either through the simple click on a name in an e-mail message, the calling up of data in a spreadsheet, or the browsing for information on the World Wide Web. It is here. We will adapt to hypertext with as much ease or as much difficulty as we adapt to a changing larger culture.

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