Producerly Texts: Implications for Language in Education

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The repertoire of skills and experiences learners bring to learning language and literacy is rapidly growing due to widening global television and telecommunications access. One consequence of young people interacting with multimodal media for significant portions of their waking hours is that, where educators once made use of learners’ reading-and-writing-with-print experiences to construct and support learning activities, learners now come to learning with a broader range of electronic and televisual literacy skills in which to frame and upon which to build instruction. This paper examines those features of televisual and electronic texts, especially those features shared and/or hybridised between television and the Internet, and puts forth a working definition of ‘producerly texts’ – akin to Barthes’ ‘writerly’ texts. How we read electronic texts and the implications of this ‘producerly’ activity for language in education is discussed.

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... it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium.


Introduction

There is little doubt that the global proliferation of telecommunications implies vast influence in how we understand and communicate about our world. From mimicking the social behaviours of those we see on television, to processing vast amounts of multimodal information on the Internet, our daily lives are filled with powerful images and information that contemporary scholarship little understands. Studies in language in education rarely address the growing, central role of electronic texts in daily life and the expertise gained through constant interaction with them. Similarly, a lexicon for describing and analysing the ways people read electronic texts – what marks this as experientially, sociocognitively unique – has yet to crystallise. This paper addresses the nature and consequences of sustained interactions with television and the Internet. It is proposed that these two mediums’ forms and characteristics have become hybridised with many shared and overlapping conventions, and that likewise the reading/viewing/interacting that we undertake with them is similarly
converging. I propose that these changes are neither trivial, nor can they be absorbed or accommodated by traditional notions of literacy.

In an attempt to articulate what it is we humans do with these media and the implications of this activity, I first discuss the conventions common to television and Internet screens and how the hybridisation of their conventions requires an examination of both mediums from the vantage point of generic ‘screen activity’. I then turn to an elaborated version of this activity that borrows conceptually and terminologically from the work of semiotician Roland Barthes, whose concepts of pleasure via film and literary texts parallel the kinds of pleasures Marshal McLuhan identified for early television, in an attempt to account for the lure and consequences of contemporary screen activity.

Screen Activity

Perhaps the most comprehensive empirical work concerning our relationship to screens is the work of Reeves and Nass (1996). In their book, *The Media Equation*, the authors compile the results of some 35 studies on human–medium responses: responses to both television and computer screens. They conclude that '[p]eople respond socially and naturally to media even though they believe it is not reasonable to do so, and even though they do not think that these responses characterize themselves' (Reeves & Nass, 1996: 7). Subjects in a series of experiments were not aware that they equated media with real life, real people and real places; their responses were subconscious, yet clearly mirrored the social responses we have to others in real situations. No matter how rich or plain the media, ‘mediated life equals real life’ regardless of the age, gender, education or profession of subjects (Reeves & Nass, 1996: 7). Reeves and Nass account for these uncanny social assessments by pointing to the fact that these appraisals and assessments are undertaken by brains that are designed for, and predisposed to do just that: appraise and assess what they see on screens as if what they perceived were real. In short, we are using old brains, brains accustomed to perceiving and assessing reality directly, to assess electronic texts. The results are subconscious reactions to media that mirror real life social behaviours (Domasio, 2003; Reeves & Nass, 1996).

Similarly, with the advent of television, media theorist Marshall McLuhan suggested that our relationship with media is one of close identification—that we indeed enter the world of the television screen and experience ourselves there through what he termed ‘depth involvement’ (McLuhan, 1964). This coincides with the Reeves and Nass findings that screens are responded to as if they were social actors, ‘human’. From studies of behaviours on the Internet, similar conclusions emerge. The literature on ‘presence’ in online environments, for instance, indicates that given various elements (e.g. social richness, immersion, realism, etc.), one experiences oneself as a part of the environment, especially when multitasking and communicating with others (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). A series of important studies also indicates that arousal—both mindful and mindless, positive and negative—is a major compelling force behind human attraction to media (Nass & Moon, 2000).

In its short history, television has evolved from mimicking the theatre’s proscenium arch to including multiple frames, icons and animation effects that evolved
from, and that were once the domain of the computer screen (Figure 1). Computer screens, with an even shorter history, have evolved from mimicking the static page of a book to 3-D virtual worlds where one can vicariously experience virtual realities—once the domain of film and television. Personal digital assistants (PDAs) are likewise appropriating the norms and conventions of their predecessors. This dynamic borrowing and melding of media craft and conventions result in a type of hybridisation that is influencing our relationship with these screens. Television, the Internet, and most recently, PDAs are in a constant state of remediation—that is, they are continually changing and reflecting one another’s craft and conventions (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). As Bolter and Grusin assure us that remediation—the borrowing of older forms and conventions by new forms—is nothing new. Indeed, such practices are inherent in the historical development of our arts and tools: our needs and practices shape these borrowings which, in turn, reshape our tools. Such ongoing remediation requires that we adapt not only our tools but also our knowledge of the world from experience to experience, from medium to medium. Thus, in business meetings, we can bookmark a point in a PowerPoint-based discussion to which to return later; on a television screen, we can be invited to link to another screen (channel) and on the Internet, we can make a date with three people in different time zones. To each of these screen actions, we have applied knowledges from a different domain to make sense and to take action. We likewise apply structures known subconsciously about being in the world to our screen activity (Fagerjord, 2003). These ‘cross-convention’ practices indicate a flexibility for which our species is rarely lauded and one that is in no place better demonstrated than in hybridised screen practices. To thus label such activity as simply reading, viewing or navigating seems inadequate when commonalities across activities appear to be evolving out of and between our flexible practices into unique activity, screen activity.

**Figure 1** Television and Internet screens merge forms and conventions
Activity with contemporary screens involves choice—a great deal of choice, the nature of which is both similar to and unique from readers’ choices in print media. When reading print, readers can navigate the texts they read: skimming, scanning, flipping through pages, using indices to locate specific information and the like. Moreover, in making choices as to the ordering of what they read, readers can effectively suspend the overall intent of the document’s author in favour of their own aims. Many of the choices print reading affords exist beyond the preferred, linear paths print/literary authors fashion, paths that imply a surrender to the will of the author in lieu of goal-directed activity. Screen activity offers a similar range of choices. In both mediums, rather than anticipating that a viewer/reader will approach a screen in a top-down systematic way, authors anticipate that viewers/readers scan and seek the information which interests them, while viewers/readers anticipate that the information on a television screen or a web page will be laid out in such a way that can serve their aims. Televisual texts have begun to emulate Internet texts in this regard: a typical television newscast, for example, has up to six frames of information at hand which viewers can scan and select to read or not before selecting to go to a different channel. Bolter and Grusin (1999: 6) call this ‘a welter of media’. This semblance of reader/viewer choice responds to our evolving habits of seeking while we view/read with particular aims in mind rather than to being led through information linearly. It is also, I contend, a force behind the melodramatisation of what are otherwise simple, linear stories that must get told and that must hold viewers’ attention—viewers who are more and more accustomed to continually making choices as to how they move through information. Melodrama, frenetic editing and shaky cam techniques are part of a frantic effort to maintain our impatient, choice-nurtured psyches. In short, where navigating information and experiences used to be the bailiwick of the web; we now do much the same with cable and satellite television, both now comprising the texts with which we actively produce meaning.

Producerly Texts

Across time and across disciplines, meaning-making with texts of all kinds has been the preoccupation of theoreticians, researchers and instructional practitioners. The advent of texts other than print texts (television, web pages) has raised questions about how we read these texts; how we interact with them to construct or produce meaning. I propose that electronic texts are similarly read, albeit in a producerly, multimodal fashion, in a manner akin to Barthes’ writerly readings where pleasure is inherent by virtue of the viewer/reader’s intimate familiarity with convention (Barthes, 1975, 1989). Electronic texts are potentially producerly due to our extensive experiences with and facility with their conventions. Moreover, the socio-emotive responses to screens, as reported by Reeves and Nass, support the notion that these encounters are pleasurable, just as writerly readings are to those reading print.

Poststructural ways of understanding appear to converge around a combined notion of gestalt, connectivity and complexities via our idiosyncratically positioned relationships with representations. Form-meaning connections along the
way are thereby transient and situation-specific. In no other context is this more apparent than in electronic texts where viewing/reading frenetic visuals on both the Internet and television can often have a destabilising effect, where a lack of direct, sensible connection of form and meaning can surprise, cause disequilibria, but ultimately please. What seems to keep the users of electronic media on target, devoid of vertigo, is their goal directedness: in the case of television, settling in to gaze on another world; in the case of the Internet, locating what is desired, another form of entrée to different worlds. In both cases, I suggest that there is pleasure (in the Barthesian sense) to be derived from the production of meaning in tandem with what is on the screen. This I will call, as does Fiske (1994) in the context of good television, producerly pleasure.

At least some of the powerful draw of television and the Internet is attributable to simple pleasure – the pleasure in transcending everyday life, emoting, laughing, learning about different ways of being through the screen. I will put aside these ‘simple pleasures’ for the moment to clear the way for a distinct kind of pleasure – producerly pleasure – that complexifies what we do with electronic texts. A useful analogy of a simple to producerly pleasure continuum is the reading of a grocery list (simple) to reading a great novel (producerly, although in this case in keeping with Barthes’ distinction, writerly) pleasures.

**Producerly Pleasure**

*In this perspective, reading is a veritable production: no longer of interior images, of projections, of hallucinations, but literally of work: the (consumed) product is reversed in production, into promise, into desire for production and the chain of desires begins to unroll, each reading being worth the writing it engenders to infinity.*


Both Barthes and McLuhan based their careers on illuminating the figurative physicality of texts: Barthes the literary, McLuhan the televisual. Both attempted to explicate our responses as physical, as sensual. More recently, film critic Laura Marks deems our material relation to tele/electronic texts as an experience of immanence in that we simultaneously sense ‘the physical bodies of platforms and servers; the bodies of software that are dematerialised into commodities or rematerialized as social goods; the tired bodies of programmers. These bodies are all immanent in the pages that flash on our screens.’ We thereby understand media corporeally (Marks, 2002: 191). Television texts can likewise be considered as immanence; their raison d’être, their artifice, their agenda is, except for extraordinarily rare moments of transcendence, palpable. Immanence implies structures that are not arbitrary and it is these structures, how we come to know what we know about them, and how we thereby experience the producerly pleasures inherent in knowing them well, that have a central place in our daily viewing/reading.

In Barthesian terms, the writerly implies a sufficient facility with linguistic and literary convention to allow the creative enterprise of co-writing/co-constructing meaning with a text. When it comes to electronic texts, the
‘producerly’ likewise implies a sufficient facility with the conventions and constraints of these media to allow for the creative enterprise of co-writing/co-constructing meaning. Unlike the literary texts Barthes refers to, the well-rehearsed narrative structures that we deal with most today are non-linear, take place simultaneously with many other texts that are most often neither complementary nor competing, and offer choices that are only superficially textual/cohesive/meaningful by virtue of on-the-fly association. These very characteristics are the conventions of our electronic texts and the means by which we derive producerly pleasure. Attentive viewers/readers work to produce meanings from what passive, ‘viewerly’ viewers may let slide by their perceptual radar. Satisfying reading/viewing is movement to merge, conflate what one knows with what is new. In Barthes’ case, what is new is only what comes from writerly reading, something that is accomplished once the conventional has been internalised and assigned to the subconscious. We derive pleasure in interacting with the text as if it were a catalyst for our own thinking, imagination – we create (‘write’) our own meaning as a result of the reading – the text causes us to write.

Similarly, in 1964, in the context of the exploding popularity of television, McLuhan observed that when we enter the world of the screen, we experience the medium as a physical extension of our anatomies. This emphasis on the physical aligns with Barthes’ experiences of the ‘writerly’, as in writerly texts: those texts whose structures and conventions sufficiently resonate with their readers that a reading becomes a writerly, and thus a pleasurable, blissful activity. In short, electronic texts can be considered literate ones in that the vast majority of their readers recognise immediately and facilely their conventions and use these in the active production of meaning. Moreover, we, as televisually literate people, understand production qualities and conventions well enough to derive pleasure from both the adherence to and the violation of these rules. Television and the Internet can be at once producerly texts – ones that viewers actively co-produce in ways not dissimilar to Barthes’ writerly text – and viewerly texts – ones for which, like readerly texts, ‘trigger routinized, well rehearsed narrative structures’ (Bruner, 1996: 138). Tabbi calls these structures ‘procedures for ensuring textual stability’ and rightly points out that these are ‘still under construction in electronic environments’ (Tabbi, 2002: xxv; see also Tufte, 1990).

A producerly text, then, is one that is so crafted as to trigger our craft/convention knowledge subconsciously and thereby allow us its pleasure through the consequent ease of our individual, interpretive meaning production. It is writerly in that we are sufficiently versed in its norms so that our experience with it is elevated to pleasure. I propose two aspects of the pleasure derivable from producerly texts: seeking (to seek information) and the other identify (to see and experience oneself). These two actions – seek and identify – are by no means fixed: with so much information and selection, with so much happening on screens at any one time, our purposes shift. Nonetheless, I will argue that these two forms of screen activity serve as the main impetus behind the producerly pleasure we derive and are essentially what keep us in front of these screens.
Pleasure Through Seeking

The act of seeking is central to our sociobiological selves and is particularly central to contemporary forms of interaction with television and the Internet. Our minds are very much in the habit of looking out for signs, cues, innuendo, information, patterns, alliances, and above all and not unrelated, for pleasure. Contemporary seeking is shaped by and shapes the availability and accessibility of choice (what television channel, what url, what frames, what links) and the choices we make about our own purposes for interacting with these. We have recently experienced a stark shift away from text as a closed set of hermeneutics to open networks whereby textual knowledge is only known for its momentariness, of a conscious moving through highly mediated environments where we make selections on the fly as to what to attend to from one nanosecond to the next. More and more of our waking hours are now spent navigating electronic texts with seeking being a primary modus.

This screen activity has been described as ‘the aleatory delirium of the digital’. It is all about the joy of movement, of hopping around, assembling bits and pieces on the fly – sometimes intentionally, most often serendipitously (The New York Times Sunday Magazine, 2003: 61; see also Burbules, 2002). It is about infinite choices that often waylay intentions – we have all found ourselves coming up for air after surfing television channels and the Internet having lost sight of the original goal of our activity. In any case, there is pleasure inherent in the seeking with the element of choice playing a central role in the quests we undertake. We select what to attend to, and by virtue of making a thoughtful selection, process the meaning attendant of the selection in a more producerly fashion than if we had had no options. A case in point is a favourite pass time of the younger generation – watching and re-watching recorded materials – selected scenes and moments to repeatedly re-view. I would venture that Barthes would consider this a third reading, where the conventions of the often-watched sequence are well known and is thereby eminently writerly/producerly/pleasurable.

Pleasure Through Identification

In tandem with seeking, identification is a key to our attraction to, and our pleasurable production of meaning with these texts. Being sufficiently facile with the conventions of electronic texts in order to see oneself, or at the very least connections to oneself, is part and parcel of producerly pleasure. Television has always been the medium par excellence to exploit viewers in this respect, first and foremost through compelling commercials. Earlier television commercial genres overtly manipulated our desire to see ourselves by making extensive use of picture-perfect, larger-than-life actors to tell us what we wanted, needed and just had to have. Contemporary commercials employ this and additional, more subtle techniques that manipulate our desire to see ourselves on and through the screen, idealised or not. Computer screens, especially websites that borrow commercial strategies from television, likewise provide elements for identification.

Screens give us a database of models, scripts and ways of being against which we can judge the play of our many identities; they provide patterns to which we can aspire (or not) and criteria for self-critique. One need only calculate the
number of human faces, real or represented, that populate screens. These assist
us in our continual quest to locate informative antecedents for our actions and
for our dilemmas. Our identities are forever re-organising, continually dynamic
and thrive on rich environments that serve as both mirror and model. Moreover,
cartoon theorist Scott McCloud persuasively argues that because our mind-
picture of our own face (our self) is merely ‘a sketchy arrangement . . . a sense of
shape . . . a sense of general placement’, cartoons – being of the same imagistical
sort – are a means of seeing and experiencing ourselves (McCloud, 1993: 36).
Minimal signification makes entrance into the world of electronic texts easy and
at the same time maximises the saliency of select shapes, actions, emotions and
reactions. This amplification through simplification reflects our predisposition
for filling in missing information, for completing the most basic outline of a
concept (McCloud, 1993: 30). We have long recognised this natural propensity
as a fundamental feature of print literacy and orality – filling in the interstices
of symbolic and auditory representation with our knowledge and experiences.
McCloud’s contention is backed up by recent media research that finds television
viewers’ ready attribution of complex personalities to even the most simple
outline drawings with hints of human attributes (McCloud, 2000; Reeves &
Nass, 1996). Likewise, at the dawn of the popularity of television, Marshall
McLuhan was quick to point out the ‘depth involvement’ made possible by
minimal representation (McLuhan, 1964: 152) whereby the ‘viewer, or reader, is
compelled to participate in completing and interpreting the few hints provided
by the bounding lines’ (McLuhan, 1964: 148). Barthes too recognised the power of
simple, minimal representation (in his case, literary depictions of the quotidian)
against which and through which one experiences the pleasure of identification;
the everyday, the mundane as a way of experiencing the pleasure of seeing
oneself and identifying with characters and contexts. One need only look at the
popular smiley face (two dots and a curve in a circle) for a sense of this base
reaction to simple forms (see Figure 2). This craft aspect suggests a source of

Figure 2 McCloud’s human face abstraction pyramid
producerly pleasure through experiencing screen representations as human, as ourselves.

Screens present a great deal of information and opportunity for pleasurable production of meaning. A chief anchor for this production is ourselves—who we are at the moment of seeking and production and within the moment of production—our most decisive index is our own physicality. Recognition of this vast range, power and pleasure of production is an essential element in understanding contemporary human learning and the implications, real and potential, of electronic literacy.

Implications

In considering the global reach of televisual and electronic texts, their producerly possibilities and pleasures become significant. For one thing, the repertoire of skills and experiences contemporary students bring to learning is rapidly growing due to widening global television and telecommunications access. There are clearly linguistic and sociocognitive consequences of these producerly interactions with electronic texts as they come to influence the ways learners are navigating, understanding and communicating about their worlds. One major consequence of interaction with electronic texts, for example, is that where educators once made use of learners’ reading-and-writing-with-print experiences to construct and support learning activities, learners now come equipped with a broader range of electronic literacy skills and experiences for which instruction must account and accommodate. From contemporary theoretical and practical perspectives of language in education, these ‘producerly’ literacy skills, like traditional literacy skills, represent ways of knowing and doing language that, when well understood, can serve to enhance teaching and learning processes. At the very least, these need to be a part of the education calculus for theoreticians, researchers and practitioners.

Given the complexity and challenges involved with learners’ identity, taking into account where they come from in regards to the ether and the airwaves is of tantamount importance. Just as traditional literacy skills are evaluated and incorporated as part of ongoing instructional assessment, learners’ electronic literacy skills make up a large part of who they are and who they see themselves to be. Learners are bringing more and more diverse ways of seeing themselves in and through the world via producerly interactions and their pleasures. For language educators, there is an opportunity to guide learners to understand the conventions behind their experiences of pleasures with electronic texts through articulating the anatomy of the producerly ways by which they have these experiences. Additionally, teacher activism through awareness of the anatomy of pleasurably production can also help learners avoid the risk of pleasure being brought about through passive submission and/or lack of critical reflection.

An additional, not unrelated source of pleasure is that which is derived from resistance and subversion, from being in control. No place offers more possibilities for both than on television (where pleasure through subversion dominates) and on the Internet where we like nothing better than to resist being restricted or directed—unless of course there are underlying motives of accomplishment.
Even then, however, we feel we are ultimately in control. Learners benefit from knowing that while these resistances are optional, there are consequences for both active and passive stances. The choice is ultimately as personal as one’s producerly pleasures.

Guiding learners to know that they know the conventions of electronic texts is critical. Taken a step further, increasing awareness and understanding of screen activity can serve to legitimise its accompanying producerly pleasures, and in so doing, empower. Joyce (2002: 91), in writing about his navigation around an essay, says he was ‘secure in a sense that I know to know what it means, even if I do not linger long enough to do so, even if I move on without any secure understanding’. Electronic text viewers/readers navigate electronic texts in just such a way. The more versed one is in screen activity, the more experienced, the more producerly readings become. Realising one’s producerly potential should thereby be a part and parcel of language and literacy learning of all types. Certainly knowing and naming the sources of our pleasures with these media is an important part of contemporary literacy. A key lesson that should pervade language in education then is to master the vocabulary of electronic text conventions; learn the language you need to know what you know (Kauffman, 1997).

Where learners are spending a good portion of their waking hours interacting with electronic texts, this screen activity can, and should, be probed, understood and exploited beyond the simple cliché of screens and ‘increased motivation’. We need to problematise screen activity beyond this in order not only to use it intelligently in teaching and learning, but also to speak about it in other than overly simplistic terms. Teaching electronic literacy skills, such as screen conventions and their implications, can unveil and push learners to critically examine the messages of these media and encourage them to be mindful, critical consumers. Electronic text conventions and learners’ facility with them need to be made explicit as well as situated in contexts relevant to their lives.

Producerly pleasures make up a constellation with a number of points of interest: most prominently, the keen familiarity we are developing with the multimodal forms and features of electronic texts that allow for pleasurable, producerly viewings/readings. The evolution of electronic conventions, moreover, is a participatory one. As we view and produce electronic texts, we participate in their normalisation; therein, the added pleasures of social, generative participation. Overall, our generative capacity as direct producers of these electronic texts and the pleasures we derive from the creative capacity of others are compelling aspects of electronic literacy in need of further examination and naming. The two aspects of producerly pleasures discussed here – seeking and identification – are suggested in an attempt to articulate the anatomy of the producerly pleasures we derive from interaction with electronic texts. Finally, electronic texts on many levels, from numerous perspectives, represent a venue par excellence to teach, to dialogue, to debate, to assess, and as I argue elsewhere (Meskill, 2002), most importantly, to witness language and literacy learning. Recognising the inherent pleasures we derive from the seeking and identification we undertake as screen activity is one place to begin when conceptualising teaching and learning in a world permeated with such pleasures.
Conclusion

Recent shifts in perceptions of, and practices with texts—that is, away from treating written material as directly reflective of singular, authorial meaning, toward more response-based, meaning-making approaches to text—have yet to sufficiently accommodate the many features and characteristics of the electronic texts with which we so frequently engage as part of our contemporary literacy practices. In examining those features of electronic texts, especially those features shared and/or hybridised between television and the Internet, a working definition of ‘producerly texts’—akin to Barthes’ ‘writerly texts’ has been proposed. How we read electronic texts, it is argued, is more in keeping with how we construct meaning with television than with the readerly texts we traditionally associate with literacy instruction. The cross-conventions these hybridisations employ and what the facility exercised by contemporary readers and writers with these imply for language, literacy and learning are in need of similar examination. Indeed, there have been numerous calls, admonitions, warnings and hyperbole over the role of electronic texts in literate lives; especially as these impact literacy learning in schools. It is imperative for educators to not just be aware of, but to be conversant in these evolving literacy practices as they become more intrinsic to all aspects of daily life. For language in education, the notion of producerly pleasure and its subcomponent activities—seeking and identification—imply much concerning the ways learning is conceptualised, used, taught and tested.

All texts wield influence on how we communicate with one another—from numerous social models on television, to the bulleting of information on the web—these shape how we understand the world and communicate in it. The Internet inherits the ubiquitous, ever-presence of television, with both media now deeply woven into the social fabric of our daily lives. They are social constructions—they shape and are shaping the contexts in which they develop and disseminate. As such, there is much that is potent and exciting about the web and television that can liberate and expand language and educational inquiry and endeavours. In order for this to happen, I believe we need to expand and articulate our conceptions of electronic texts and develop common, productive vocabulary to frame, explicate and inform educational theory, research and practices.

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Note

1. An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the 2003 British Association of Applied Linguistics Conference on Multimodalities, University of Reading, UK.

References

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