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NEW LITERACY: OVERCOMING EDUCATIONAL DIVIDES

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Annotation

Reconceptualization of literacy is regarded as essential in re-creating educational paradigms for the benefit of the digital generation. The author discusses the ways of overcoming the divide not only between the generations, but within the generation of teachers and educators born in the previous, industrial age.

The line of consequences from the ‘information revolution’ to the rise of informational economy and network society, and further to major changes in education seems to be obvious to all. It is no less obvious that communication is central to these changes. However, to witness the process does not necessarily mean to realize its scope and consequences. Times are ever changing, we say, and there have always been clashes between generations, so it is not surprising to come in conflict with novelty when you reach middle age. We, teachers and educators, have always been wise enough to pass on knowledge to students in any circumstances, even in times of wars and revolutions. Therefore, we might consider public debates about this revolution as ‘much ado about nothing’ – or nearly nothing. Anyway, students have been taught without computers for ages.

In fact, things are much more dramatic than most of us can imagine, for in the line of events one more influential factor is involved, literacy. Few of us, Russians, heard about the reconceptualization of literacy, accompanied by literacy wars, although some outstanding warriors’ names are familiar to us. In this paper I will observe the battlefield of literacy wars, providing a vision of the

main front lines that divide the foes and the nature of barriers dividing them. These include the digital divide, the divide between traditionally and innovatively thinking educational policymakers, and disciplinary barriers. I will also consider the role played by teachers of writing in eliminating the barriers and re-creating education for the new era.

The first literacy paradox is the digital divide, which separates ‘digitally savvy’ young people born in the last decades of the 20th century and ‘digital natives’ born in the mid-2000s (Prensky, 2001; Bennet et al., 2008) from the ‘digitally literate’ adults who learned how to use the computer at an older age. In terms of literacy, the distinction is similar to the one between native and non-native speakers of a language: however hard we try to develop the skill, we will never use it as naturally. This distinction is clearly revealed through the attitude to innovations. For instance, how many of us would install the new version of MS Office the moment it becomes available? But digital natives do it willingly and without an effort.

The digital generation does not only think, but live differently. Their ability to play with symbols, signs, images, video and sound, or switching from PCs to iPads impresses us, but their neglect to books depresses. The conflict between the generations reaches its peak when the two meet in education. The question of who ought to adopt whose rules of the game (literacy rules) becomes crucial, but whether we like it or not, the answer is not in favour of books, nor is it in favour of traditional values. As it is hard to agree that our time is gone, many of us tend to oppose change – disagreeing subconsciously or openly. Thus, we get a second divide, the one between those who foster cardinal, conceptual change in education and those who oppose it.

The knights of literacy wars are not yet a legion, but they have already won a number of battles, and are gaining support around the world. The war was declared by the Australian professor Ilana Snyder in her book ‘Literacy Wars’ (2008) in defense of the new generation against those teachers, educators and

policymakers who hold strongly upon traditional approaches to teaching literacy. The foes immediately closed up and started criticizing the book claiming that the author threatened to undermine the values of education and culture. However, eventually critics agreed that even the skeptical would have to re-think the areas surveyed in her book (James, 2008).

The idea behind Snyder's book as well as the works by other Australian professors who foster New Literacy Studies (Green & Beavis, 2012) is not just about how to teach reading and writing today. It is about competing views on what contemporary society is and what it should be; it is therefore about social and political issues underlying literacy and inseparable from literacy. Indeed, the information revolution caused a re-conceptualization of literacy, which, in fact, is only the third in history, the first two being the invention of writing and the invention of printing. The dramatic influence of these two on teaching and learning cannot be overestimated; consequently, their precedence gives an idea of the scope of change to which we are exposed now.

First and foremost, the new generation faces the challenge of obtaining much more active and productive knowledge than expected of those who lived in the previous, industrial era, now viewed as the age of mass consumption. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (Framework for 21st Century Learning, 2011) outlines three groups of skills essential for the 21st century: *learning and innovation skills*, such as creativity, critical thinking and communication; *information, media and technology skills*, which encompass information, media and ICT literacies; and *life and career skills*, which include flexibility, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility. In other words, in the 21st century 'knowledge is the coin of the realm, and the ability to think critically is a prerequisite for democratic participation' (Cummins et al., 2007, p. vi).

It is obvious that such productive and critical thinking skills are developed individually and cannot be taught through traditional mass education, which

fosters mass consciousness and imposes mass values upon individuals. This sort of education used to match the industrial age. Sir Ken Robinson (Robinson, 2010) depicts it in a metaphor comparing education to a factory, from which students are issued according to similar age and measured by similar standardized tests. Instead of developing each student's abilities individually, such schooling overloads their memory with unnecessary information, often outdated, and eventually diminishes divergent thinking to ordinary limits controlled by traditional answers fixed in teachers' books. Divergent thinking is the basis of creativity, which Robinson considers the cornerstone of the new education and defines as the ability to produce original ideas that have value (Robinson & Aronica, 2010).

Robinson's definition demonstrates a strong connection between the individual character of creativity and its public outcomes. This connection is emphasized by researchers in communication technologies and their impact on society. According to Professor Mark Warschauer (2004), the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on the informational exchange can be regarded in four major ways: written interaction, long-distance many-to-many communication, global hypertext and multimedia (p. 25-27). It is worth noting that in his concept of CMC literacy, Warschauer emphasizes the shift from oral interaction to written. Consequently, sophisticated technology-based media communication with individual, written input and diversity of potential critics challenges participants' creativity and engages their self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, and flexibility. In short, CMC becomes essential in binding all the 21st century skills together.

Consequentially, the concept of new literacy embracing these skills is strongly connected to social practices. Designing a flexible 3D model of literacy, Professor Bill Green (Green & Beavis, 2012) views it in three dimensions: operational, cultural, and critical, which he maps respectively onto language, meaning and power (p. 30). Special emphasis is made on the critical

dimension and writing, which implies production of knowledge rather than its consumption. Being actively involved in the construction of text specific to a given situation, students do not only produce meaning, but also learn how to make meaning (ibid., p. 10). Thus understood, literacy empowers individuals both socially and politically. The idea that literacy is a matter of power is also expressed by Warschauer (2002), who connects literacy with social inclusion and access to resources through ICT, which all together enhance social, economic, and political power of individuals or communities.

Because of the multiple competences implied by the new concept of literacy, embracing writing, multimedia, intercultural communication and technology embedded in social practices, the concept of literacy is now often referred to in its plural form as 'literacies'. The New London Group coined the now widely used term 'multiliteracies', recognizing the necessity to re-design the concept in a variety of ways to meet the needs of today's society (New London Group 2000). Along with the term 'l(IT)eracy', developed by Green (Green & Beavis, 2012), it provides a vision that helps understand the complicated nature of new literacy and the variety of its implications.

The plurality of literacies leads to cardinal changes in education, the two paramount issues being those of teaching writing and incorporating technologies into the learning process. However, if digital literacy is commonly developed by the digital generation beyond education, writing skills in their academic, public sense are not easily obtained. Writing competences, inseparable from the production of meaning and knowledge, and therefore power and social inclusion, presuppose a higher form of communication, in which an individual can express his or her original ideas in the appropriate form and with the use of the appropriate arguments to persuade the public in the value of these ideas. Such communication skills can only be developed in education through simulating social practices.

The precedence of writing over other skills is accepted by researchers in both New Literacy Studies and rhetoric and composition. Being developed individually and highly dependent on critical thinking and discussion skills, writing is the most complicated of all language skills. It is also the most demanding in terms of publicity, making the writer responsible for the text being understood by distant, unknown and diverse readership. Because of that, writing is being considered central for higher education in general (Young, 2006; Bean, 2001) and most often regarded in terms of interdisciplinary, across-the-curriculum approach.

Research in teaching writing across the curriculum at university level in many ways correlates with research in teaching literacy at secondary school level. The popular shift of a teacher's role from 'the sage on the stage' to 'the guide on the side' and further to an 'expert learner' and 'part of the learning environment' (Krauss, 2009), can be found in other terms in works on rhetoric and composition. For example, Art Young (2006) regards the context of teaching writing as "the middle ground", an interactive social space, where the students transform their personal ideas into a public text by discussing them with their classmates and the teacher. The "middle ground" therefore places the teacher into a position of a 'more experienced academic practitioner' or 'partner with more experience' (p. 36), who organizes discussions among students and participates in them. Testing their personal writings in a debate with a familiar audience (the peers and the teacher as a partner), students gradually manage to develop their writing skills to the extent at which it becomes possible for them to communicate effectively with the public at large.

It is especially important to note here that education becomes understood as partnership which is characterized by the on-going intellectual dialogue, in which students are expected to participate actively and responsibly, whereas teachers are required to guide their inquiry and encourage independent thinking (Academic Literacy, 2002). Young emphasizes the fact that teaching through

partnership makes communication real and helps students to avoid copying academic style, which means ‘pretending to communicate’ (Young, 2006, p. 36).

As a result, the process of learning through writing, discussion, and technology provides the basis for real life and career skills, which enables individual members of society to use their creativity to the advantage of both themselves and the public, producing new ideas and establishing new values.

This unanimity among researchers in different fields shows that there is the third barrier to overcome, the disciplinary one. Advocates of teaching language, writing and literacy across the curriculum are calling for collaboration among teachers of different subjects in schools and faculties in universities (Bean, 2001; Young, 2006). Writing across the curriculum (WAC) has already gained considerable support in the US, which resulted in creating WAC Departments, where faculty members and writing tutors share ideas and work in close collaboration. The WAC approach helps students overcome the barrier between disciplinary writing and writing in language classes (Bean, 2001).

Moreover, the interdisciplinary approach to writing leads to the idea that academic publications should be delivered in a language that can be comprehended by more general audience, that is, authors should combine the academese and the vernacular. Gerald Graff (Graff, 2000) argues that today’s public is much more interested in social, cultural and political issues than ever before. This means that even genre-specific or narrow disciplinary papers might be read by uninitiated readers (p. 1046).

The necessity of making academic research accessible to general public is, in fact, one more result of the information revolution. Public is becoming more and more concerned about cultural, political and social issues, but concerned individually, demanding to gain knowledge directly from competent sources, and not just mass media. That is why education should enable students not only

to select and critically assess information, but actively participate in discussing it and become able to express their position in public.

There is one more aspect worth mentioning when discussing new literacy: the English language as the language of cyberspace and global communication. Not intending to discuss issues of the spread of English in this paper, I would only admit that in today's Russia (and, I believe, in other non-English-speaking countries), children learn English beyond school, just as they do technology. CMC empowers some of them so effectively that my long experience in the language tarnishes when I witness my teenage students play with idioms and expressions of contemporary English or refer to interesting information they learned via the English-speaking Web. This adds to the view that learning is becoming more and more independent from the system of education.

To sum up, the new concept of new literacy can and should be used as a powerful instrument in creating new concepts and methodologies in education. Teaching multiliteracies with the focus on writing and discussion skills will lead to the shift from mass education towards individual development of each student, with regard not only to his or her age or gender, but also socio-cultural background, preferences and habits. Teachers should do their best to overcome the bias against new values and new forms of communicating knowledge, as well as disciplinary barriers and the barriers between different stages in education. We must work collaboratively in terms of new literacy to enhance students' divergent thinking and creativity, and provide the 'middle ground' for the development of productive skills and the critical dimension of literacy. The main barrier to overcome is therefore not between the generations, but within the community of teachers and educators who are to work for the new world being part of the previous one. The contours of this new world are already quite visible, and we should adapt to its environment, however uncomfortable for us it might seem. Education has lost its monopoly in transferring knowledge, but its

role in society has not diminished. It is only subject to change, for which each of us is responsible.

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