Reconstructing the Teaching of Language: a view informed by the problems of traditional literacy in a digital age

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ABSTRACT In the authors' work at the University of Ghent they focus on the problem of cultural literacy in a digital age. In the first part of this article they confront the reader with recent complaints about our postmodern culture, mainly inspired by a back-to-basics movement. In the second part they consider or 'problematise' literacy in a postmodern and post-print society. In the third part they focus on 'language and literature' in a digital age - questioning the profession of language and literature teachers today. In the fourth part they try to describe how digital screens change our attitude towards books, culture and education in general, and writing and reading in particular. Changes in technology influence how we consider literacy in general and our ideas about learning and teaching in particular. In the fifth part they describe different new roles for teachers which have been influenced and even created by the digital revolution. From their educational viewpoint, the authors suggest a new kind of literacy is needed, starting from the fact that literacy is always constructed – situated – in a particular context. The discussion about the progress or the decline of our literacy should be situated in a historical, contextual framework. A historical perspective teaches us that literacy is a process rather than a product. When we know where our concepts of literacy come from, and how they are embedded in a cultural context, we will be able to understand how it evolves. Only such an understanding can provide an adequate basis for discussing the issues of language teaching and teacher training with new technologies and media.

Complaining, Blaming, Curing

Complaining

Comparatively few people today – in Western societies – are considered illiterate. Yet 'cultural' literacy is considered a major problem in our contemporary society (Soetaert & Top, 1996). At universities, in schools, in bars, in newspapers, magazines and talk shows people are complaining...
Curing

These laments are accompanied by a litany of cures. Arguing against postmodern and progressive educational philosophy, E. D. Hirsch (1988) stresses the importance of 'our' cultural heritage for education. He introduces the concept of 'cultural literacy' as an essential basis for learning and complains about the fact that in our contemporary education we have overstressed skills - and have too much naive faith in our students' competence to learn general knowledge and skills based on a few examples of good practice, a few experiences (the founding father of this model is John Dewey). Skills - according to Hirsch - cannot be taught separately from knowledge. And Hirsch created a list. A descriptive and prescriptive list of the knowledge shared by literate people (American, in the case of Hirsch, who also stresses the importance of a national perspective on cultural literacy). So the cure for Hirsch is a simple remedy: we have to teach again traditional 'myths and facts', described as 'the oxygen of social intercourse' (Hirsch, 1988, p. xii). Cultural literacy - according to back-to-basics - creates a common ground for discussion, a shared knowledge. We want to argue that such a quick fix is impossible - and is inadequate for the complex problems we are confronted with.

Stimulated by the back-to-basics movement, there have been lots of activities focused on the development of literacy and numeracy. However, these initiatives have very often been focused on traditional forms of literacy, and even have been critical of recent developments in media and digital literacy. The modern and postmodern forms of literacy were even represented as 'enemies' of traditional literacy.

'Problematising'

Post-times

A lot of trends in our Western society can be characterised by the prefix 'post'. Postmodern philosophers describe postmodernism as the loss of belief in 'grand narratives' and the consequent disintegration of communication into 'language games' (Lyotard, 1979). Economists describe our post-industrial society as a culture in which manpower has been replaced by information and automatisation, from 'manufacturing' to 'mentofacturing', for which we need a new job class of 'symbolic-analytic workers'. The world system of nation states is being transformed by the growing globalisation with important consequences, not only in terms of economy and commerce but also in the realms of culture and education. As a consequence of globalisation, modern national education can no longer be limited to cultural chauvinism. Of course, this will influence language teaching.

The new media are likewise transforming cultures and politics. Time and space are compressed; new global networks create new identities;
technology. We hardly realise that even books can be considered as tools, as
a kind of technology. The first thing we have to do is look back at the
development of the printing press and redescribe the book as a tool or as a
teaching machine (McLuhan, 1964). Indeed, the invention of the printing
press confronted the public with similar questions and doubts we have
today: could a book be an ideal tool for learning? Could students trained in
silent reading measure up to the skills of the past: a period of orality, a
period of slow reading? (McLuhan, 1964). We should realise that books and
reading/writing created a particular 'situated' literacy, constructing at the
same time modern academic scholarship and modern science. Schools,
universities and libraries as we know them today were institutionalised. The
invention and the development of books are also linked to the construction
of nationalism, the appearances of national libraries and museums, literary
canons, national histories, the 'emergence' of classes, capitalism, secularism,
colonialism, individualism, copyright, etc. Democracy created mass literacy.
The industrial revolution and printing shaped modernism in such a way that
it looked like a 'natural space' we are living in. Changing these tools creates
a feeling of nostalgia. And new tools create new emotions, new biases, new
feelings of naturalness (Ong, 1982). There is a fatal attraction of nostalgia,
and the usual suspect is technology.

We have to move away from technophobia (certainly in the humanities,
languages, social sciences) and try to become technophilic. One possible way
to do that is to redefine the relation between technology - tools - and
creativity, to redefine the borders between technology and art.

From a traditional perspective, there is a gap between the two; from a
postmodern perspective both can be connected. It is precisely in the digital
world that the borders between art and technology have been blurred.
Becoming an artist in the digital age implies very often some form of
technological competence. Probably the separation between technological
competence and any other expertise or discipline will become more and
more vague.

In our project we focused on two obsessions in education: the crisis in
cultural literacy and the power of computers. Some conservative
educationalists ignore computers; they consider modern technology to be
the prime suspect in their complaints about the crisis in modern times (the
literacy debates in the 1980s). Some progressive thinkers introduce the
computer as a solution to this crisis.

But we should also dissociate ourselves from utopian thoughts:
'Political utopias are a form of nostalgia for an imagined past projected on
the future as a wish' (Otterspeer, cited in Ignatieff, 1991, p. 43). Technology
will not lead us to paradise but (hopefully) not to hell either.

We would like to defend a common-sense thought: technology is not
bad or good in itself, it is the way we use technology that determines the
value. But we cannot escape technology, there is no happy ending, literacy
cannot be completed 'because there is nothing to complete, there is only a
complex kind of literacy. In this phase of the process we tend to conceptualise these skills as being additional, but they are rapidly becoming elementary in our society (as rudimentary as the print-based skills). Indeed, the skills and the ability to use computers to improve learning, productivity and performance have become as fundamental as more traditional skills. Yet, we want to stress the importance of relating digital literacies with traditional literacies but then we should reconceptualise the print-based literacy not as ‘natural’ skills but as part of a culturally constructed literacy.

We need to review our understanding of literacy skills for today’s students. Indeed, they will be working in a different workplace – in a new digital world. Just as students of the past needed support in learning the essential skills of functional literacy (pen, paper and books), students of today need to learn how to manage computers (word processors, databases, the Internet).

Language plays an important role in this literacy revolution. So we can summarise the problem by asking three simple questions:

- How do new genres change our definitions of literacy?
- How are language and language teaching altered by the digital revolution?
- How do teachers behave during these revolutionary times?

In the next two parts of this article we focus on language and literature (teaching) and the role of teachers in the digital world.

**Language and Literature in a Digital Age**

What happens to language and culture on the computer screen? How do computers change our literacy? How have language learning and teaching been influenced by digitalisation?

Before dealing with these questions, we would like to ask a fundamental question: how did our discipline change? The recent digital revolution should be embedded in what already happens in our discipline: the study of language and literature.

Our view is inspired by a simple question: are we only going to use the Internet to teach culture in a traditional way or can we capitalise on its potential to give students access to new kinds of culture(s)?

**Problematising Our Profession**

Our profession – language and literature teaching – is in crisis, at least described from a traditional perspective or compared – as in back-to-basics – with an ideal and probably idealised past. We share these troubled times with other disciplines, because this crisis is embedded in a complex postmodern culture and is part of economical, social and political
the boundaries between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are historically constructed by an institutional cultural network.

Today we are witnessing a deconstruction of the conventional classification of art into high and low, fine and applied. The concept of ‘true’ art was often used as a kind of ‘litmus test of the level of civilisation a group of people had supposedly achieved’ (Philips & Steiner, 1999, p. 7). We realise that perceptions of objects of art change over time and today we problematise ‘the slippery line that divides art from artefact from commodity’ (Philips & Steiner, 1999, p. 15). Media play an important role in this transformation of art, in this blurring of traditional borders.

Problematising Language Teaching

Technological changes have been in the air for many years but they rarely impress language and literature teachers, who - in general - have been boasting about their indifference to technology. But today technology is pushing us. Society expects us to prepare our students for the job market.

Language teachers are expected to train students and are obliged to reflect upon ‘what they need to know and what they need to be able to do, with respect to things that are in our domain - and our domain is the domain of textuality’ (Scholes, 1998, p. 65). They need to be literate in a traditional sense (reading, writing, listening, speaking) but also ‘across a various and complex network of different kinds of writing and various media of communication’ (Scholes, 1998, p. 130). Society is looking for productive fields of knowledge and study, for skills that matter in the new economy (post-industrial). Language teaching is obliged to ‘instrumentalise’, to present justification for what is being taught.

So, language teachers have to regain their prestige not only by referring to the past but by suggesting an agenda for the future. Today, teachers are obliged to pay attention to ‘rhetorical techniques of interpretation that can be applied to a variety of cultural texts’ (Bérubé, 1998, p. 25). We must learn ‘to build departments whose interests and objectives are less at odds with their immediate public responsibilities’ (Bérubé, 1998, p. 111). Very often language departments at universities tell their students they will learn to become ‘independent thinkers who will fearlessly question the established beliefs and institutions of their society - but that, additionally, they will acquire the skills that will qualify them for the profession. If you study English, you will learn how to see through corporate capitalism while qualifying for a job at IBM!’ (Graff, cited in Bérubé, 1998, pp. 144-145). The link between these two ‘promises’ should be less mysterious. The missing link can be found by taking the digital revolution as seriously as a cultural revolution.

We suggest that new disciplines such as cultural studies and discourse analysis can help us in reconstructing our profession (Soetaert & Van Kranenburg, 1998). In this search for a new prestige, it is necessary to come
What have we learned so far? Before addressing this question for future scenarios, we would like to link some recent ideas with ideas from the past.

If we are indeed witnessing a revolution comparable to the Gutenberg revolution, we should also be able to learn something from the past. We find, for example, that transformations in thinking, reading and writing do not occur overnight. We are talking about hundreds of years of evolution, the results of which we consider today as ‘natural’. When printing had been invented by the end of the fifteenth century, people at first were hardly aware of what kind of cultural breach this was about to entail. It took a while before people realised what shifts the art of printing was causing.

As we know, in the beginning was the Word. And then writing came, then printing, and then the computer. All these media changed our views of culture and of literacy. By means of writing and later printing, memory was externalised: writing and books were mnemonic devices outside the brain. And writing and print – words in images – allow manipulation. With the arrival of the computer, all this escalates; it can all be done faster, and it becomes different.

The effect of our new revolution – similar to Gutenberg – is only slowly coming on. But one thing is already plain for everyone to see: the screen, and not the book, is the medium. If McLuhan (1964) was right in stating that the medium is the message, then we can wonder how new media are changing our messages.

Writing and Reading on the Screen

Let’s start our story of computers from the moment screens were being used as word processors. Writing on a screen allows us to quickly shape and record our thoughts; the electronic text is immediately available, and offers a handy tool for manipulation and interaction. In addition, joint writing and communicating about texts becomes easier. And other texts – entire libraries – are available on-line today. Intertextuality was reinvented on the screen. Today, printed and electronic texts are confronted with each other, as two ways of dealing with information. But what exactly happens when a text comes on screen, and is revised and saved? Our dearly beloved literacy winds up in a machine that transforms text into hypertext. How did hypertext come about?

Hypertext

The possibilities of the computer were the stuff of dreams for Ted Nelson. Nelson (1987, 1990a, 1990b) was one of the first to be fascinated by the invention of an all-encompassing system of writing, reading and information, a machine of literacy. In 1960, Nelson wrote an essay and built up a
cyberspace as such a communicative setting. Indeed, new genres are emerging in a digital environment. In these environments writing has become functional and popular again. But writing in cyberspace is different and lots of new genres are emerging (emails, email lists, web pages, real-time writing in multiple user domains, etc.). In the near future, it seems most of our writing will be done in networked environments. Inevitably, new genres and new kinds of discourses will be developed.

Writers of hypertexts are confronted with new complexities. How do they link their ideas and thoughts? When nodes are linked, we should be aware that different links could be suggested. How do we entice our readers to follow them? And if you let them wander freely, how do you know what they are reading? We are confronted with a writing without a beginning or an end – at least, such boundaries are not defined by a writer. The reader decides when and where to begin. We need a new rhetoric and a new definition of reading and writing. Very often, we transfer a text from one medium (print) to another (computer screen), violating the rhetoric and the genre. So the linear structure of the printed text gets transformed into something different on the screen.

If we analyse the rhetoric describing hypertext, we are confronted with a real revolution: hypertext as a new genre to free the writer and the reader from the linear constraints of the printed page and the book, freeing readers to become writers too ... Hypertext also blurs the division between speaking and writing or at least problematises the differences between genres. Hypermedia further problematises the difference between word and sound and image ... Indeed, the increasing user-friendliness found in programs that can manipulate audio-visual content and the growing preference for screens over print will make hypermedia the dominant cultural genre. On a more philosophical level, hypertext frees print from traditional linearity, it frees us from 'either/or' positions and invites us to consider new ways of thinking, arguing, writing ... So, some argue, it comes closer to how the mind works – closer to how we really think, with associations, jumping to conclusions and across boundaries. Hypertext is said to foster 'a literacy that is prompted by jumps of intuition and association' (Heim, 1987, p. 30).

**Link with the Past**

Although hypertext is introduced as a revolutionary genre, it is also possible to link some of the central concepts with older ideas, where 'old' implies BHF: Before Hypertext. The hypertext philosophy can be linked with recent constructivist ideas about education in which knowledge is described as a construct that comes about as something growing within a community, by means of dialogue, as the result of negotiations. When we are talking about texts, this implies that a text acquires its meaning as part of a tradition. The text starts functioning within a network of other texts. Indeed, the new media stimulate an active approach to knowledge. In doing so, the
heterogeneity of materials. The computer comes to the teacher's aid in making a lively and more or less living anthology in which it is easier for him or her to call upon or add new materials that cater to questions from the students, that deal with new social themes, or that link up with new genres.

No wonder a rigid canon is the result of printing, where reactions to corrections can only be slow. A hypertext or hypermedia application, therefore, ties in more closely with recent visions on the construction of canons as developed in literary theory. And of course, artefacts are changing too.

**Technological, Artistic Leaps**

Walter Benjamin (1968) observed that in the history of every art form it is repeatedly possible to find periods when artists develop aspirations that in principle can only be realised by a change in the medium itself. This implies an innovation in the form of a technical leap that eventually produces a new art form: photography, film or video, for instance.

Literature, too, will change as the written word mutates into an electronic text. Electronic reading and writing are direct answers to the limits of the printed book. Meanwhile, modern art forms have started interacting: literature with movies, photography, video, music, etc. That does not mean everything will disappear, but there is no doubt a lot will be changed. And we cannot but be curious about the exciting attempts to create new genres with new media. Within these new genres, too, limits will arise with which authors will have to struggle.

What will such a new genre look like?

Although it is impossible to predict, it seems likely that the new genres will be closer to a postmodern, post-print society in which information comes at us simultaneously, discontinuously and dynamically.

**Word, Image, Sound**

In fact we should also problematise what we have been doing in this article: although there are four skills, we have overstressed writing and reading and neglected speaking and listening. We have overstressed the changes in written literacy, compared with oral, visual, tangible literacy .... Inevitably, we are children of an older literacy (mainly focused on written discourse), but hypertext is easily transformed into multimedia by linking word, image and sound and by blurring the traditional boundaries between separate media cultures.

The introduction of new technologies and new media may force us to reconsider and problematise many long-standing, deeply entrenched theories about the writing process. Also our ideas of 'writing' can change fundamentally because writing an essay, for example, can consist of more
the communicative approach was considered to be the lack of content, the lack of a shared cultural grammar.

Today we are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the communicative approach, so the debate between traditional or communicative approach is no longer so engaging. However, we are also confronted with lots of new ideas, concepts and approaches which cannot be described as a new unified paradigm.

Possibly this trend can be described - for language teaching - as a 'post-communicative' approach. By adding the prefix 'post' we stress the idea that older discussions between traditional and communicative theories are outdated. But there is one thing we need to stress: that the discussion about content - cultural literacy - is still very high on the agenda. In back-to-basics, content was narrowed down to traditional cultural content. In the communicative approach, content was neglected because communication was the buzz word. Today, interaction is the new buzzword, and again content is minimised. The main challenge facing education today is that we need a radical way of conceiving text and of reconfiguring discourse and content. Essentially, we need a new way of organising knowledge.

One recent methodological trend, content-based language teaching (CBLT), emphasises the fact that language does not consist of 'empty skills' but is a medium for content, and content is a resource for learning language. But again, we have become aware that we live in 'a domain of subject-dependent knowledge and subject-dependent reality ... We literally create the world in which we live by living it' (Maturana, 1978, pp. 60–61). CBLT will be influenced by the use of the computer. Teachers will be more or less obliged to use the Internet. And the Internet will transform our teaching and movement towards a new educational paradigm.

Some people are worried about this inevitable evolution. They are deeply concerned with a basic question: 'How do I fit the Internet into my pedagogical goals for my students?' Probably we will be obliged to rephrase this question: how do I change my teaching to fit the Internet?

We may also be obliged to rephrase our definition of language immersion, of CBLT. Again, the digital environment itself changes the space in which we teach; it creates a space in which we can learn a language in real interaction, using the real language in real communicative situations.

CALL (computer-assisted language learning), TELL (technology-enhanced language learning) and TILL (technology-integrated language learning) all refer the role of ICT in language learning and teaching. They show that technology is more than an 'add-on' and probably TILL is the best acronym - implying that computers are integrated in our culture. So probably the C of computer and T of technology will disappear in all these acronyms. After all, we do not talk about BALL, BELL and BILL, referring to books-assisted language learning, etc.

We have tried to show that technology affects human communication and culture in a very fundamental way. The problem is: 'What we've lacked
gradual shift in the teacher's role: from a lecturer and purveyor of information towards a coach/facilitator, providing structure and supporting students' performances and reflection. Some of the theoretical concepts developed from a constructivist perspective appear to follow concepts developed in on-line educational practice and theory (or vice versa). So the role of coach or facilitator is also inspired by the new on-line learning spaces.

**Teamwork, Collaboration.** Teamwork is one of the major buzzwords in the discourse of employers today. Job advertisements are calling for employees who can manage information, adapt flexibly and creatively to changing requirements, and work together in a team.

The introduction of new technologies may render the standard course lecture obsolete, and force teachers to take up a new role that is less individualistic. Future courses may be designed by a team of educationalists, subject specialists and technology experts. So teamwork will also be essential for developments in ICT.

But ICT will also influence the communication in a team. Through ICT, 'professional networks' can be created for diverse reasons: discussing shared problems, asking for advice, giving access to job opportunities and so on.

ICT can be introduced from two major perspectives: synchronous collaboration (e.g. meetings, phone calls, teleconferences, etc.) and asynchronous collaboration (e.g. email). In our project, we mainly focused on asynchronous collaboration (between the partners and in teacher training with students). The advantages of this kind of communication are obvious: participants are able to join the team based on their own schedule, motivated by their own interests; participants are able to reflect before communication and after receiving communications; and there is a record of the proceedings. In general, ICT has the potential to improve communication on certain levels. But we should not deny the drawbacks: extra workloads and new power structures and communication rules emerge. Moderating a discussion group and coaching a team in cyberspace are as difficult in cyberspace as in the real world. In a new communication space, new roles and skills emerge.

**Reflective Practitioner, Teacher-as-researcher.** The concept of the 'reflective practitioner' was developed by Schön (1983) who introduced a practice inspired by reflection as an ongoing process of professional development and as part of lifelong learning. Other researchers have problematised the distinction between 'learning in practice' and 'learning in an intellectual sense' (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). Indeed, in applied fields there can be no such thing as neutral objectivity. The direct, culturally unmediated apprehension of reality is impossible. Researchers construct and so interpret reality.
The importance of creating networks is essential for creating a joint practice in the complex process of learning to become a teacher. The focus indeed is on communication in networks, and also communication about research. But the problems are not only theoretical; they can be very practical in nature: participants are spread over different time zones and different areas, there are problems with physical contact (owing to constraints with budget, time, space ...).

Information technology can solve only part of these problems. During our project we were confronted with the problems of creating such a community. How will these discourse communities change our understanding of ‘becoming a teacher’? Especially when the new networks of teachers-as-researchers are constructed on-line.

Such networks and the concept of teachers-as-researchers are also essential to the study of the impact of technology:

Little is known about the impact of technology on standards of students’ work, on the quality of the learning experience, on the acquisition of core transferable skills or on the changing role of students, teachers and other staff. Such research does not necessarily have to be large-scale and quantitative; small-scale, qualitative action-research projects could guide practice at the local level, thus strengthening claims of educational institutions to be fully learning organisations. (Lewis & Merton, 1996)

We need joint practice and examples of good practice demonstrating the way in which computers can be integrated into the professional life of newcomers to teaching.

Teacher as Designer. Technology today ‘creates an impetus for major transformation in the institution of schooling, and it also offers new tools for carrying out this transformation in ways not possible before’ (Office of Technology Assessment, 1995, p. 4). New sites of education resemble the ‘workplaces’ of the ancient guild system.

There is a growing consensus that teachers should be computer-literate: ‘The Information Society so highly praised by the EU (European Union) Delors White Paper must be completed and matched by a Learning Society, if we do not want to fall into an over-informed world and a valueless culture based on ‘zapping’ and ‘patchwork’ superficiality’ (Richardson, 1997, p. 29). This competence is essential as the teacher of the future has to consider what kind of communication serves the teaching and learning.

What should teachers know about computers? Teachers should be familiar with ICT and be able to utilise and integrate it in their practice. Inevitably, their practice will have to be reoriented and evaluated as an ongoing and ever-changing practice. Apart from learning to use the computer, teachers should be thinking about how the computer can be
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