

Reading and the digital revolution

Maryanne Wolf recently pondered the digital revolution's potential to 'unravel 5000 years of learning' in relation to reading (*Will kids lose skill to think?*, HSun, 20/10/07). Such an alarmist view of technological change is reminiscent of attitudes to other historical developments, including the invention of the electric light bulb and television. They too initially prompted fears about potential irreparable damage to the human body.

Not everyone would agree with Wolf's view that children should '*develop an expert reading brain, before the digital mode dominates their reading*'. This view privileges the reading of traditional print texts over engagement with the full range of texts available in today's world. From a sociocultural perspective, expertise in reading (and literacy more generally) involves learning broad repertoires of practices which enable children to decode, make meaning, produce texts and demonstrate critical understandings across all texts they will encounter – at school, outside of school and in the future. From this perspective, children's experiences of 'reading' are important, regardless of the mode. Whether children grow up 'reading' literature, junk mail, the World Wide Web, mobile telephones or even computer games, they are using literacies as part of daily sociocultural practices and are laying the foundations on which to build further knowledge and expertise.

It is reported that children are developing useful skills with digital technologies, even as they play computer games (*Computer games are good for you*, TIK, 18/10/07; *Nurse, hand me the latest video game*, Aust, 21/02/07). Whilst reading from left to right and from the top to the bottom of the page is appropriate for the reading of (English) traditional print materials, digital texts require different skills. For example, reading can entail moving 'through' and 'across' texts via hyperlinks or making meaning from a range of multimodalities, including visual images, sound bytes and linguistic components. Different skills are required to do this successfully, but they should not be regarded as lesser than those required for traditional reading.

Children need wide experiences and repertoires of practices that will enable them to read, understand and critique any text that they meet. Rather than the print-followed-by-digital approach proposed by Wolf, children need expert teaching that builds on the literate experiences they bring to school and ensures expertise in both traditional and digital modes.

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