

What Happened When We Weren't Looking? How Reading Comprehension Has Changed and What We Need To Do About It

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The rapid appearance of the Internet in all aspects of our life raises an essential question for the reading research community to consider: *Are online reading comprehension and offline reading comprehension fully isomorphic?* The paper explores this question, using recent research to demonstrate how online reading comprehension differs in important dimensions from offline reading comprehension. It suggests that initiatives such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP), and similar policies around the world, fail to recognize the fundamental changes that have taken place to the nature of reading. These policies have required schools to focus reading instruction on the literacies of our past, not the literacies of our students' present and future. They deny the instructional support that students in greatest need require if we hope to prepare them for life in an online age of information. This paper concludes by describing what we might do together in order to respond to the new literacies of online reading comprehension.

The Internet is this generation's defining technology for literacy (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, in press; Leu & Kinzer, 2000). Over one billion people are now reading on the Internet (Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, n.d.). The rate of growth is exponential; most of it took place during the past five years (de Argaez, 2006). At this pace, half of the world's population will be reading online in another five years. In the history of literacy, no other technology for reading, writing, or communication has been adopted so rapidly, by so many people, in so many places, with such expansive implications for literacy (Purves, 1998; Reinking, in press).

Does reading on the Internet require new literacy skills and strategies? The largest recent review of reading comprehension research, the report of the Rand Reading Study Group (2002), concluded: "... accessing the Internet makes large demands on individuals' literacy skills; in some cases, this new technology requires readers to have novel literacy skills, and little is known about how to analyze or teach those skills." (p. 4). Recent work has confirmed this and is beginning to reveal the new skills and strategies required during online reading comprehension (Coiro, 2003; Coiro & Dobler, in press; Hartman, Leu, Olson, & Truxaw, 2005; Henry, 2006; International Reading Association, 2002; Leu, Castek, Hartman, Coiro, Henry, Kulikowich, & Lyver, 2005; Leu & Reinking, 2005-2008).

In this paper, I will provide an emerging definition of online reading comprehension (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Leu & Reinking, 2005-2008). The paper draws upon research done, both collectively and individually, by the members of the New Literacies Research Team¹ at the University of Connecticut and the Internet Reading Research Group at Clemson University². These data suggest that the nature of reading comprehension has changed (The New Literacies Research Team, in press).

I will also argue that public policies such as NCLB and NAEP in the U.S., and similar initiatives in other nations, have impeded progress in reading, distracting us from the fundamental changes that are taking place. This has happened because the assessments associated with these and other policies are based solely on the assessment of offline reading, ignoring the important challenges students face when reading on the Internet.

This failure has important consequences for education in the twenty-first century when the Internet is now a central source of information (Leu, 2000; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Lyman & Varian, 2003) and learning is increasingly dependent on the ability to read and comprehend complex information at high levels (Alexander & Jetton, 2002; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Leu, Leu, & Coiro, 2004). As a result of our collective failure, students are seldom supported in developing the new literacies of online reading comprehension in school (Castek, Leu, Coiro, Gort, Henry, & Lima, in press). *This is especially true for those students who require our support the most, because they have access to the Internet at home the least.*

This paper will argue that current public policies, state and national standards, assessments, curriculum, and instructional practices must change if we hope to prepare all students for the reading demands of life in the 21st century. It will define a robust agenda that we need to accomplish together if we hope to ensure that our next generation is fully prepared for their literacy future.

¹ Including: Erica Berg, Donna Bone, Jill Castek, Julie Coiro, Kent Golden, Douglas K. Hartman, Laurie A. Henry, Donald J. Leu, Greg McVerry, Ian O'Byrne, Mark Olson, Cara Pace, Nicole Smith, Mary Truxaw, and Lisa Zawilinski.

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