Knowledge E
Engaging minds

Conference Paper

Reading and Writing in Digital Age: Combining Analogue and Digital Methods in Teaching Humanities

Yu. A. Stepanchuk

Ural institute of Humanities, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

Abstract

The process of reading and writing sophisticated texts forms a vital part of education in humanities; however, instructors today routinely face the challenge of students often lacking elementary reading and writing skills. This fact can be explained by the change in dominant reading and writing technologies and their respecive *affordances*. Humanities students can be taught to read and write complex texts through the thoughtful use of 'analogue' experience of previous generations combined with the acute awareness of the new conditions and changes brought by the digital technologies.

Keywords: education, higher education, humanities, reading, writing, digital technologies, affordance

🔓 **OPEN ACCESS**

1. Introduction

Historically humanities were always dependent on creation, interpretation and transmission of complex texts that demanded sophisticated reading and writing practices. However, today we constantly hear that these practices are in crisis. The teachers constantly notice and widely discuss the worsening writing and reading skills of their students. But any attempt to answer this question is often cast in a mysterious, or even mythological light. Everybody agrees that this crisis *must* be somehow related to the digital revolution – but how exactly?

2. Methods

We believe that the answer to this question is simple and, precisely due to its simplicity, often escapes closer scrutiny. Media researchers since Harold Innis have been demonstrating repeatedly that every medium creates a certain set of opportunities

and limitations. Innis called this characteristic a *bias* of communication, meaning by it mostly technical qualities of a medium that guide its users in a certain direction.

Another term used to describe the same phenomenon is *affordance.* Introduced by J.Gibson to describe how a living organism interacts with its environment, this term became widespread in science and technology studies. In this respect *affordance* is defined as a set o relationships between an individual on the one hand and technical object or system on the other. What is particularly important here is the aspect of interdependence: affordances are determined not only by the functions of an object itself but also by people's preconceptions (inevitably influenced by cultural filters) on how to use this object.

Let us now see how this terminological approach may help us to understand the difference in reading and writing practices of our digital age compared to the previous print-dominated era.

3. Writing and Reading in the Gutenberg Era

The printing revolution created an increasingly large *number* of texts that could be read. This influenced the relationships between the readers and the texts: the readers had to read considerably more than ever before [5, pp. 47–49]. Simultaneously there was a flowering of *writing* culture, both in personal and in academic life. Note-taking was seen as an indispensable part of intellectual work. The most popular method in use were the so-called *commonplace books*: notebooks containing systematically organized excerpts from the books one read. Throughout XVIIth–XVIIIth centuries, the practice of *commonplacing* was widespread. It was used both for self-improvement and for academic careers. Among its proponents who enthusiastically recommended it are Francis Bacon, John Milton, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson and many others [7]. The principles and approaches used to keep and organise such handwritten notes were transmitted from the teachers to the students [4], or even printed as popular how-to books. For example, in the XVIIIth-century John Locke's commonplacing manual was popular [11]; it was widely recommended, and served as a template for similar manuals [7].

As a result, according to the historian Robert Darnton, in modern era, "Reading and writing were… inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things, for the world was full of signs: you could read your way through it; and by keeping an account of your readings, you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality" [4].

What were the causes of the popularity of commonplacing? In other words, what set of *affordances* of printing culture encouraged such a deep connection between reading and writing? These affordances were both technical and cultural. The popularity of writing was increased as the paper became cheaper and more accessible (unlike the Middle Ages, when the practice of note-taking was hindered by the high price of parchment [10]); simultaneously we witness the growth of literacy. Handwritten notes were the only way an ordinary person could copy a passage or summarise a reading material. An increased amount of texts on the market made writing indispensable – it was no longer possible to rely on memory alone, as was the case in oral tradition. Finally, we see that handwritten note-keeping became a cultural practice that was perceived as an necessary part of education and self-education. The teachers required their pupils to take notes; university instructors expected their students to do it; popular templates and manuals on how to take notes were widely available.

The practice of commonplacing gradually lost its popularity in the XIXth century; however, the need to keep notes for any kind of intellectual works remained high. Arguably, throughout XIXth and XXth centuries the art of taking reading notes gradually shifts becoming not a cultural to a personal practice. The knowledge of how to keep such notes was transmitted informally – usually orally – within the intellectual professions [3]. In academia, the old commonplacing method was replace by a slip-box approach better suited to organize a large amount of diverse information. The most famous XXth-century proponent of this method was Niklas Luhmann who also spend a lot of time reflecting on the connection between reading, writing and thinking. Luhmann called his slipbox (*Zettelkasten)* a 'communicative system' and a 'partner in communication' and noted: "It is impossible to think without writing; at least it is impossible in any sophisticated or networked (*anschlußfähig*) fashion" [12].

4. Digital Revolution and Its Discontent

Luhmann, like many others, eagerly anticipated computer revolution believing that it would bring new forms of knowledge systematization and organization. In reality, when computers became widespread, the popularity of complex writing has greatly decreased. Instead of a synthesis between old analogue and new digital knowledge practices, there was a break: the old tradition of academic note-taking, which was only weakly systematized and mostly existed as a personal practice, was subsumed by the *affordances* brought by the new digital media.

Why do digital media not only do not facilitate writing, but often seem to actually prevent it? The primary cause is their technical characteristics:

1. It is easy to download and save texts and other materials – this ease erases or significantly diminishes the need to make notes and excerpts from the temporarily available sources.

2. Unlike print material, it is often easy to copy-paste an excerpt or a a quotation instead of copying it by hand or summarising it.

This technical lack of *need* is supported by the cultural practices of writing, such as:

1. The diminishing use of handwriting and the prevalence of typing and digital manipulation – often already in elementary schooling of even in pre-school [9].

2. The preference for visual, instead of written, presentation evident, for example, in the popularity of PowerPoint presentations where the density of information is considerably lower compared to texts [14].

All these factors, together with the diminishing cultural practice of writing, create a situation in which students write considerably *less,* in purely quantitative terms. Moreover, we would not be greatly mistaken to say that the influence of these effects is felt not only by the students but by the teachers themselves. However, the students experience these effects much more strongly: they suddenly find themselves in an environment where their habitual digital information skills clash with the completely different reading and writing tradition inherited from the printing era. The lack of reference points and guidance on *how* to read and to write; the lack of understanding that writing is an indispensable part of reading; and an overuse of copy-paste skill create a situation in which a considerable number of students survive and complete their education in the state of confusion, never truly grasping what their teachers mean when they urge them to 'read properly'.

The results of this confusion and uncertainty are witnessed everyday by the humanities instructors. Since there is no need now to make excerpts by hand, contemporary students never experience this unconscious and mastering of academic style that used to have happened 'naturally'. Students rarely summarise what they are reading in writing, therefore reducing their level of understanding and losing an opportunity to develop their personal writing style.

5. Discussion

What can we do to overcome this trend? While media approaches to education are widely discussed in Russia today [8], the issue of writing attracts relatively little attention. As we said earlier, modern digital media are technically *biased* towards the passive copying and consuming of content. Since these technologies eliminate the purely technical need to write, there is only one thing we can do to correct this bias: we have to consciously compensate this negative *affordance* through cultural and educational practices. In practical terms, it seems that the two simultaneous approaches would be useful.

First, we need to deliberately and consciously introduce handwriting in teaching practice. There are multiple theoretical research and practical approaches that show that handwriting is highly important both when *mastering* writing and thinking skills and as a more efficient tool for understanding and memorising information (compared to typing) [6], [13]. A vigorous and systematic use of handwriting can be found in some foreign (classical British universities, which have never lost this tradition; Bard College in the USA, etc.) and Russian (Institute of Liberal Education, Saint-Petersburg) educational institutions demonstrating a high degree of success [1–2].

Second, we need to teach students, equally deliberately and consciously, how to take academic notes and to create a note database that would help them to become independent researchers. Today this database has to be digital: an easily searchable format would make such a database much more useful for research and text writing than any paper note-taking.

Unfortunately, contemporary software market do not offer accessible tools geared towards this kind of academic work. A few existing research-oriented note-taking tools are usually expensive an complicated in use, not to mention having a problem with Russian localisation. The market of note-taking applications is dominated by the general-purpose software (Evernote, Microsoft OneNote, Google Keep etc.) that may be used for academic purposes, but only if we take time to adapt them to the academic needs.

6. Conclusions

We have seen that the existing situation can be changed if we truly grasp its causes and approach it systematically. Humanities education requires the development of sophisticated reading and writing skills. If we lose these skills and fail to pass them to

the next generations, this will become a serious concern not only for the humanities – we may be facing a crisis of cultural break with the previous tradition that could become inaccessible mentally, if not physically. We may also find it challenging to transmit *any* complex forms of knowledge.

References

[1] Akhapkin, D. (2014). Analiticheskoe chtenie i pis'mo v sisteme sovremennogo obrazovaniya. *Liberal'noe obrazovanie v Rossii: teorii, diskussii, metody,* pp. 166–187. Saint-Petersburg: Faculty of Liberal Art and Sciences, Saint-Petersburg State University.

[2] Timofeev, V. (2014). Sistema predtekstovykh zadaniy i rabota s tekstom dlya razvitiya navykov kriticheskogo myshleniya. *Liberal'noe obrazovanie v Rossii: teorii, diskussii, metody*, pp. 140–152. Saint-Petersburg: Faculty of Liberal Art and Sciences, Saint-Petersburg State University.

[3] Ahrens, S. (2017). *How to Take Smart Notes: One Simple Technique to Boost Writing, Learning and Thinking*. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

[4] Darnton, R. (2000). Extraordinary commonplaces, *The New York Review of Books*. Retrieved from http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/12/21/extraordinary-commonplaces/ (accessed on March 12, 2017).

[5] Eisenstein, E. L. (2005). *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

[6] James, K. H. (2012). The effects of handwriting experience on functional brain development in pre-literate children. *Trends in Neuroscience and Education*, vol. 1. no. 1, pp. 32–42. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4274624/ (accessed on March 19, 2018).

[7] Johnson, S. The glass box and the commonplace book. Retrieved from https://stevenberlinjohnson.com/the-glass-box-and-the-commonplace-book-639b16c4f3bb#.ttqjkdt70 (accessed on January 19, 2017).

[8] Kirillova N.B. Media studies within the system of contemporary culture studies education//Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie), 2018, № 3, С. 72-80.

[9] Konnikova, M. (2014). What's lost as handwriting fades. *The New York Times: Science*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/science/whats-lost-as-handwriting-fades.html (accessed on December 03, 2017).

[10] Kwakkel, E. Medieval notepads. Retrieved from https://medievalbooks.nl/2014/12/12/medieval-notepads/ (accessed on January 19, 2017).

[11] Locke, J. (1706). *A New Method of Making Common-Place-Books*. London: Printed for J. Greenwood, bookseller, at the end of Cornhil, next Stocks-Market. Retrieved from http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.HOUGH:3209685

[12] Luhmann, N. Communicating with slip boxes. Retrieved from http://luhmann.surge.sh/communicating-with-slip-boxes (accessed on December 26, 2016).

[13] Mueller, P. A. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. Retrieved from http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/04/22/0956797614524581.short (accessed on February 02, 2017).

[14] Tufte, E. (2006). The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within (second edition). Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.