


Reading, Literacy, and Education

Mikko Lehtonen
University of Tampere

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Abstract: In his article "Reading, Literacy, and Education" Mikko Lehtonen outlines a contextual approach to literacy. He asks how the changing relations of culture and economy, transformation of nation states and national cultures and changing notions concerning affect and cognition, transform notions of literacy and reading. Relying on the results of a recent Finnish research project on new reading communities and new ways of reading, Lehtonen highlights substantial continuities in the reading habits of the so called Google generation when compared to other generations of readers. Print media is not, however, connected self-evidently to cognitive reading among the said generation. Lehtonen concludes that the currently dominant ways of understanding reading are not necessarily the most useful when researchers aim at understanding the present ways of reading. Lehtonen calls for such research that would deepen the understanding of what media generations are, how the reading of printed texts happen in multimodal contexts, and what affordance various media forms, including print media, have for readers.

Mikko LEHTONEN**Reading, Literacy, and Education**

When literacy and reading are discussed, there is always something else at stake, too. Literacy and reading are *tabulae rasae*, blank canvases on which hopes and fears are projected. On the one hand, literacy is held to be a remedy for all kinds of contemporary maladies. In fact the dispersal of literacy is in modern western societies understood as a necessary condition for educating civilized citizens. On the other hand, a supposed lack of literacy of some (most often youth or adults with a lower level of education) is connected with a fear of general degradation of modern Western civilizations. The past is very much present as far as dominant notions of literacy and reading are concerned. Although literacy was not spread in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without media panic accompanying the birth of new readers' groups, in the late twentieth century reading was not only in the West but all over the world seen as a self-evidently liberating and empowering practice. After World War II it was clear that one could not act as a citizen of a modern nation-state without some kind of literacy.

These views of the blessed effects of general literacy have a solid foundation in certain historically developed social and cultural practices. Reading has indeed been a crucial part of modernization, secularization and building of nation-states. Secular national print cultures have contributed vitally towards liberating people from the authority of the church, local parochialisms and other similar power structures. The great social movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (worker's movements, women's movements, national liberation movements, gay liberation movements, etc.) would not have been possible without the circulation of printed materials. As Eric Hobsbawm writes of the post-World War II social revolution, "Universal basic education, i.e. basic literacy, was indeed the aspiration of virtually all governments" (295). On the whole, it would be hard to imagine the erosion of patriarchal social relations without literacy (see, e.g., Sassoon). Perhaps the most convincing sign of the universal acceptance of reading is the fact that sources of media panicking have already for about fifty years been somewhere else: television, music videos, computer games, etc. The global faith in beneficial impact of literacy can be seen, for example, in UNESCO documents. In its literacy strategy the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization promotes literacy for empowerment and lifelong learning, as well as "literacy and learning societies" programs providing literacy skills which enable citizens to actively participate in public life (see "Strategy" <<http://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/strategy/>>). As in many other such international and national documents, key words here are "empowerment," "learning," and "participation" and readers are understood in this and other similar documents as first and foremost citizens. In these documents literacy is a means for educating self-governing, responsible, and far-sighted subjects. Interestingly enough, "pleasure" is practically never mentioned in such documents.

The idea of the self-evident "blessedness" of literacy is strongly present in contemporary Western societies and dominant cultural understandings. Although the dominant views concerning reading are increasingly residual in their anachronistic adherence to the printed word as the only noteworthy form of textual interaction, they are still strongly influential. The influence of this view is in many ways justified. Reading is such a key technique of modern societies and selves that it would be practically impossible to imagine their "here and now" without it. Yet there are several processes severely undermining the dominant presuppositions. Recent Western academic interest in literacy is closely linked with rapid changes in reading habits: thorough mediatization and digitalization accompanied by the shaking of customary divisions between high and popular culture and rampant commodification of all forms of culture represent for many an epochal change, "the waning of the book" (see, e.g., Vandermeersche and Soetaert <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/2>>). While the demise of the book and other forms of print media is exaggerated and premature, something, indeed, is changing. In the eye of the ongoing storm it is, however, difficult to discover what exactly is changing and what survives the storm as before or in altered forms.

Crisis seems also in the case of literacy to be a prerequisite of theorizing": "You only get to describe realities as they are disappearing, when they are dying" (Grossberg 322) and theories tend "to break out when routine social or intellectual practices have come unstuck, run into trouble, and urgently need to rethink themselves" (Eagleton 190). Reading and literacy are obviously such cases

where social practices have to be rethought as old realities are disappearing. It is no coincidence that, for example, New Literacy Studies evolved in the early 1990s. That was a time with a need for an approach "considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice" (Street 77). From the perspective of profound changes in cultural and media landscapes, literacy could no longer be taken for granted. Where literacy had been used as an idea and a concept to explain certain skillful actions, it was now itself seen to be in need of critical scrutiny on literacy, see also, e.g., Rutten and Soetaert <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/5>>).

The last twenty years or so has witnessed a public sense of rupture around notions concerning literacy and reading. Old ways of understanding the two do not seem to work anymore and new ways do not seem to work yet. To be sure, there is substantial work on new forms of literacy (e.g., Kress), but it has found its way to university curricula and scholarship — not to mention other educational institutions — only along a slow and arduous route. The confusion around changes in literacy and reading has been further increased by the fact that there are multiple temporal logics and discourses circulating around them. The dominant ideas concerning literacy and reading in Western societies and their educational institutions are still very much based on past social and cultural conjunctures ruled by the print media. From the viewpoint of ongoing rapid changes such ideas seem increasingly residual and are challenged by various emergent views where priority is often given to technological changes. Emphasizing technologies and their influence has time and again produced views where ongoing changes are declared to be epochal, as if there was a change from a period governed by the print media to another ruled by the digital media. In other words, in understandings of literacy and reading, ruptures have been stressed at the expense of continuities, either/or has dominated instead of both/and.

In here humankind travels towards the future while "looking into the past" (Benjamin). The futures for literacy and reading are open in principle, but they are constantly being nailed down in many ways. The ongoing changes are perceived from the perspectives of what is already known and believed in. The future is demarcated by human cognitive and non-cognitive capacities, deeply rooted social traditions, the power and conserving influence of nation-states and international organizations, global processes at many levels, various economical, technological and social path dependencies, and persistent economical, technological, environmental and political forms of inequality around the world (see Urry). The ongoing transition from societies and cultures dominated by print media to something else is conceived much in terms of the conjunctures left behind. Most importantly, I argue that rapid changes in literacy and reading cannot be understood just by studying literacy and reading. If literacy is a social practice, as New Literacy Studies proclaims, then it is always already a part of numerous other social practices and must be understood in its actual relations with them. Respectively, the alleged crisis of literacy must be interpreted in various relations to numerous other crises, such as the crisis of nation-states, the crisis of customary cultural hierarchies, the crisis of uniform audiences, and the crisis of the status of the printed word as the norm for other media forms. Here I take up three practices, crises, or contexts which I posit as vital for understanding current forms of literacy and reading: they are the changing relations of culture and economy, the changing role of nation-states and national cultures, and the relations of cognition and affect.

First, how do the changing relations of culture and economy influence literacy and reading? If culture in Western societies was in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century conceived as an autonomous sphere disconnected from politics and economy, this is no longer the case. Aesthetization of politics and cultural or creative industries are two examples of how culture spills over into these other key spheres of modernity: "The domain constituted by the activities, institutions and practices we call 'cultural' has expanded out of all recognition" (Hall, *The Centrality* 209). Eric Hobsbawm condenses in *The Age of Extremes* the new role of mass media in his history of the twentieth century suggesting that the world in 1991 "could bring more information and entertainment than had been available to emperors in 1914, daily, hourly, into every household" (12). In *The Culture of the Europeans* Donald Sassoon distills the cultural changes of the last two centuries as follows: "Since people are better off now than two hundred years ago, at least in the West, and have more money, more time and more education, the consumption of both high and low culture has increased

enormously — unsurprisingly. Audiences have increased well beyond the imagination of the cultural producers of two centuries ago" (xxi). In such conditions, popular culture has become practically synonymous with culture in the lives of Western people to the extent that Michael Denning — in his *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* — can write that "Mass culture has won. There is nothing else. The great powers of broadcasting and mass spectacles are second nature" (103). Along with all these changes, culture is increasingly discussed not as a value in itself but as a tool for gaining economic profit. The most vocal proponents of the "waning of the printed word" are newspaper and magazine publishers and book publishers. At the same time the international and national publishing industries are going through rapid changes (see, e.g., Rønning and Slaatta). Book publishing is integrated into large transnational media conglomerates and books become global commodities (J.K. Rowling, Dan Brown, Stieg Larsson, Paulo Coelho, etc.). Discussions on the future of the book are also discussions on the developments of various media forms and their mutual relations (on changes in book cultures and publishing, see, e.g., Schiffrin; Striphas; Thompson). As a consequence of all this, the relations of literacy and citizenship must be complemented by looking also at reading and consumership. At stake in reading is not only the education of responsible citizens but also the enjoyment of consumers. "Citizen" has long referred to a responsible and rational figure that moves in areas of cultural, social and economic life, whereas "consumer" has been seen as an inhabitant of the marketplace. Responsible citizenship and hedonistic consumerism seem, however, to be articulated to each other in contemporary societies: if the aesthetic and pleasurable dimensions of literacy and reading are not taken into account, it is not possible to conceive all of the impacts literacy and reading have also for citizenship (see, e.g., Lehtonen, "Mission").

Second, how do the transformation of nation-states and national cultures influence literacy and reading? Reading is a linguistic practice, most tied to "national" languages. Images and sounds cross national borders more easily than words which have to be translated from one language to another. Print media has had a pivotal role in building nation states and national cultures, whereas globalization of culture has taken place primarily in auditive and visual media forms. This is not to say that books, at least some books, would not move from states and cultures to others. What is interesting is that increasingly books which become translated are in various ways tied up with other media forms. International bestselling books would be practically unimaginable without the accompanying films based on them: the novels of Rowling, Brown, Coelho, or Larsson mentioned above are telling examples. The consumption of culture is nowadays less confined to national political, economic, or cultural borders than ever before (see Tomlinson). The movement of people, ideas, and cultural products undermines national borderlines: "Moving people, money, goods and messages belong to more than one world, speak (literally and metaphorically) more than one language, inhabit more than one identity, live in more than one home" (Hall, "New Cultures" 206.) If literacy and reading have been studied first and foremost from the perspective of national cultures, they must also be analyzed in the light of the new mobility paradigm (see Urry). From the perspective of the paradigm of mobility, transnationally circulating books are part of diverse "connections at a distance" that organize social life and, for their part, challenge the sovereignty of modern states and thus reading is not confined to customary national borders (Urry 47; see also Sturm-Trigonakis). On the contrary, reading is not just a part of moving or even of breaking such borders, but is also of constructing new borders (for example between various transnational reading communities or such communities and national reading communities). The transnational and national reception of E.L. James's 50 Shades series is a recent example of the intermingling of reading communities and faltering of national borders. All this requires breaking away from methodological nationalism, i.e., the assumption that nation states are the natural political and cultural forms of the modern world (see Wimmer and Glick Schiller). Instead, there is a need to discern the multiple ecologies of belonging in the contemporary world (see Braidotti).

At the same time, it is again necessary to bear in mind that also in the case of reading, mobilities are structured and hierarchical. Along with increasing heterogeneity caused by intensifying mobility of cultural goods, there are also new forms of global homogeneity. Globally almost 50% of translations are made from English and only 6% into English (UNESCO). In 1990 2.96% of books published in the US were translations. In the UK 2.4% of books published in 1990 were translations (UNESCO). The

one-way cultural traffic between the Anglo-American center and its peripheries is further cemented by the relative slowing down of traffic between peripheries. To give one example: in 1960 out of translated books published in Finland, 292 were from English, 119 from Scandinavian languages, and 171 from other languages. In 2010 there were 1526 books translated from English, 337 from Scandinavian languages, and 569 from other languages published (Statistics Finland).

Third, how do the changing relations of notions concerning cognition and affect transform literacy and reading? As mentioned above, reading is still predominantly conceived as a cognitive pursuit, whereas the affective dimensions of reading are largely neglected. Yet reading is crucially a form of in-between-ness, as are affects (see Seigworth and Gregg). Reading is a form of belonging to a world of human encounters and as readers read, they are not only acting, but also acted upon. Affects are a vital part of reading from the outset, present already in choices of what to read and what not. There is no cognition without affect and vice versa. Also, the reading of non-fiction has its affective dimensions. Taking affects seriously in relation to reading would also bring with it a need to broaden definitions of what knowledge is: written texts should not be privileged automatically as the principal form of proper knowledge. On the contrary, changes in current media landscapes demonstrate a need to break away from scriptocentrism, that is, the assumption that the only knowledge which counts is in written form. Such a shift would open up a new perspective into literacy and reading in their actual contexts, not as the sole sources and forms of knowledge but as a part of the inevitably multimodal contemporary media practices.

There remains, then, a dilemma: who, and on what grounds, would have the right to define what counts as all-round education and/or knowledge? This question might lead to the realization that instead of a "given cultural heritage" there are incessant definitional struggles. From this perspective the question is not predominantly "what is all-round knowledge?," but "who has the right to define what counts as all-round knowledge?" Along the way, also dominant definitions of knowledge which rest upon residual conceptions contrasting cognition and emotion, knowledge and skill, mental and physical labor might appear problematic. There is, then, a need for more extensive notions on what knowledge is. At the same time there is, however, also a need to defend traditional non-instrumental forms of knowledge. Almost thirty years ago in *The Post-Modern Condition* Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote of the vanishing of the idea of knowledge for knowledge's sake: "Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the "knower", at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process. ... The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (*Bildung*) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so" (3). For Lyotard, the relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge was tending to assume the form already taken by the relationship the commodity producers and consumers produce and consume — the form of value: "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange" (Lyotard 3). As knowledge was to cease to be an end in itself, it would lose its "use-value" at the expense of its "exchange-value" (Lyotard 3).

Thirty years after Lyotard's text, it would be hard to argue that he had it all wrong. The commodification of knowledge has been, in academia at least, accompanied by the rise of new positivism. As Joe L. Kincheloe and Kenneth Tobin write in "The Much Exaggerated Death of Positivism" that "Many of the tenets of positivism are so embedded within Western culture, academia and the world of education in particular that they are often invisible to researchers and those who consume their research" (513). For Kincheloe and Tobin, this "undead" positivism never operates in the name of positivism, but yet it "like a zombie walks the socio-political and educational landscape shaping the way we think, what we see in the world, and, of course, how we produce knowledge" (514) and they call a central part of this phenomenon "crypto-positivism" as an "adherence to a scientific method derived from the natural sciences and deemed necessary for a rigorous social science" (514).

The "crypto-positivism" of Kincheloe and Tobin meets Lyotard's knowledge produced in order to be sold in that both take social reality for granted. Crypto-positivist knowledge produced for its

exchange-value tends to be what those who are already big fish need in order to maintain their positions. In areas of literacy and reading, such knowledge consists largely of various reports ordered by ministries or commercial media enterprises. In such reports, dominant cognitive structures, categorizations, and modes of recognition prevent conceiving the future not as a mere continuation of "now": in other words, such knowledge is highly selective and exclusive. I map above, among other things, what experiences, forms of agency, and practices seem to remain misunderstood, undiscussed, or are distorted in such knowledge concerning reading: "Inclusive" knowledge on literacy and reading would, on the contrary, cover such objects, subjects and forms of knowledge that have remained unknown, misunderstood, or become distorted (on this, see also Thrift 99-100). Such inclusive knowledge on literacy and reading would be based on the idea that knowledge is not a finished state of things but production where humans share "in the process of knowing, rather than taking on board a pre-established body of knowledge" (Ingold 228).

Current changes in literacy and reading are often viewed from perspectives of technological changes and with an either/or logic. I argue for a different approach characterized by seeing literacy and reading in their actual contexts. As a part of such an alternative view, there is a need to look not only at changes, but also at continuities in practices of reading. Here is a brief example, a research project funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation and concluded in 2012 by Juha Herkman and Eliisa Vainikka in *Uudet lukemisyhteisöt, uudet lukutavat* (New Reading Communities, New Ways of Reading) where actual reading habits of media users born in the 1980s and the early 1990s were researched and analyzed. Reading in the project was understood not only as traditional intensive form of textual intercourse, but also as browsing and viewing of multimodal textual materials. The general media usage of the young adults between 16 and 30 years old was looked into with the help of a questionnaire (N = 323), media diaries (N = 15), thematic interviews (N = 15), and focus group interviews (three groups, 10 interviewees). All the materials were collected in spring 2011. In sum, the authors of the project attempted to find among current student populations from Finland (Tampere region universities, polytechnics, high schools) such new forms of reading which would have prognostic value concerning developments in general media usage (for a similar survey and analysis, see Tötösy de Zepetnek <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1811>>).

The results of the project are published in two books in Finnish (Herkman and Vainikka, *Lukemisen*; Herkman and Vainikka, *Uudet*), an article in Finnish (Herkman and Vainikka, "Revoluutio"), and several articles forthcoming in English (under review). The most striking result of all data collected is that along certain ruptures there are also strong continuities between the young adults studied and the rest of the population. First, the net generation does not seem to be much more active in producing media contents than were the earlier generations. The young adults studied have at their disposal a large variety of devices suitable for individual and collective content production: the media used most by those questioned were the home computer with internet connection and the cellphone. 88% had internet connection on their cellphones, over 2/3 had software to consume music and videos (iTunes, Spotify, Windows Media Player), and 7% had an e-reading device. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, software to produce web and other materials was not that common. 60% had image processing software, but only 10% had desktop publishing or 3D graphic design software, and 20% had sound editing software. Over 50% follow internet groups and blogs, 20% take part in discussions, and 17% have a blog of their own. Most of the internet usage is, however, "passive." The young adults either looked for and viewed ready-made materials or used the internet for personal communication via e-mail and social media. Facebook had appropriated unsurprisingly the role of other virtual communities and environments such as Skype, Messenger, IRC, Second Life.

Although the young adults studied mixed usage of various media in many different forms, print media seemed to have for them a specific value. It is, of course, important to remember that Finland is *a priori* a country of print culture with exceptionally high figures in circulation and reading of newspapers, magazines, and books and thus studies in other cultural contexts might not produce similar results. In any case, it is nevertheless interesting to learn that various forms of print media played a major role in the daily usage of those researched: 50% of those questioned subscribed to newspapers and 42% to periodicals. However, only 6% subscribed to e-newspapers. 15% owned less than ten books and 40% owned more than 50 books. Further, almost 80% borrowed books from the

municipal library, 80% had read books not related to their studies during the last six months, and 42% had read 3–10 such books. Books were mostly read for entertainment and 2/3 preferred fiction over non-fiction, 8% read e-books, and 10% listened to audio books.

The strong inclination towards print media surfaced also in media diaries and various interviews. For example, as one interviewee put it, "I have not wanted to read e-newspapers and ebooks yet. I like proper books and newspapers more" (Herkman and Vainikka, research data). Although practices and devices for e-reading were spreading during the research project, as an additional inquiry in spring 2012 proved print media was still the most valued media form among those studied. Interestingly enough, those who used e-books and other e-materials did so for studying, information retrieval, and following news coverage: hence the somewhat general idea of print media as the serious media form and digital media as the media form used for entertainment proved to be unfounded among those studied in the project. Several interviewees pointed out that they had to read extensively on screen as a part of their studies, which is why they preferred print media while reading for purposes of leisure. All interviewees thought that the book was an excellent user interface for a long text and they believed that books would still be in existence in the future. Some interviewees mentioned that in the future they wanted to collect a shelf filled with their favorite books.

In all, the survey suggests that in Finland the media usage of the net generation does not differ that much from the traditional consumption of media or personal communication by other means. It is clear that the internet is for young adults the main media form used for information retrieval, studying, entertainment, and personal communication. The internet is not, however, the only media form used by young adults and often those studied used various media forms simultaneously. As Herkman and Vainikka mention, "different forms of media complete rather than compete with each other as forms of reading" (Herkman and Vainikka, "Revoluutio" 36). It would, however, be misleading to speak of the net generation as one undifferentiated whole. In the final report of the project, Herkman and Vainikka discern five different types of readers among those studied: 1) "the printers" who value print media and avoid e-publications, 2) "the producers" who actively produce and publish various media contents in blogs, net pages and forums, 3) "the book hi-fi'ists" who have internalized the textual practices of the internet but still think highly of books, 4) "the communicators" who use media mainly to keep in touch with their friends, and 5) "the mixers" who combine the features of "producers" and "communicators." The last, "the mixers" were the most common type in the research materials.

Following the above, I propose the following:

1) there is no "crisis of the book" at least not in Finland. Instead, there is, for example, a crisis of print capitalism, that is, a crisis of customary ways of producing and distributing books and a crisis of educational systems based on print. Instead of flattening literacy and reading to *tabulae rasae*, there is a need for such research that would illuminate them as contextual human practices. There is a need for further studies concerning media generations: the changes outlined above take place differently depending on to what generations the readers belong (generation is not necessarily equivalent to age group; rather, it refers to similar reading habits which can spring up not only because of shared age but also because of mutual socio-economic background, place of residence, education, situation in life, or hobbies). In order to discern actual ruptures and continuities, it is useful to picture them on a generational basis. A fruitful hypothesis here might be that such generations are succeeding each other with accelerating pace. This hypothesis must, however, be tested in quantitative and qualitative research.

2) There is a need for studying reading in its multimodal and intermedial settings (see Lehtonen, "Media"). As reading of the so called google generation is not characterized by attachment to only one form of media, it is important to study the simultaneities of reading. Instead of taking the printed word as an un-problematized starting point, also the reading of printed texts must be looked at in their multimodal contexts: why is something read rather in printed than in other forms? What functions has such reading for the readers? How does the simultaneous reading of various media forms alter the ways printed texts are read?

3) There is a need for studying affordances of various textual forms, including the printed texts. The concept of affordance (see Gibson) refers to how people perceive the value and meaning of

various entities as well as what physical qualities such entities have for their users. In the case of reading, the concept of affordance could be used to analyze what readers aspire to do with each textual form: why people use some textual forms for certain purposes and other forms for other purposes. Such an approach might facilitate seeing reading of printed texts as one important dimension in contemporary multimodal textual encounters and finding out what is the actual value of printed texts in the current media landscape.

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Author's profile: Mikko Lehtonen teaches media culture at the University of Tampere. In addition to numerous articles in Finnish and English, his book publications include several monographs on cultural theory in Finnish and in English *The Cultural Analysis of Texts* (2000). E-mail: <mikko.s.lehtonen@uta.fi>