

BRIDGING THE GAPS: TRANSLITERACY AS EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY

LANE WILKINSON

INTRODUCTION

“Transliteracy.” The library buzzword of the year. The *enfant terrible* of the blogosphere. What is this term that so many librarians are throwing around these days? Despite the confusion about the relative merits and demerits of the word, transliteracy is a simple, familiar, and instructive way of approaching how our students interact with information. As a pedagogical approach, transliteracy is about understanding the complex relationships between multiple literacy types, harnessing and directing students’ preexisting research skills, and integrating academic research into students’ existing web of literacies.

WHAT IS TRANSLITERACY?

Transliteracy is a concept adopted from outside the library world. The most common working definition comes from the Production and Research in Transliteracy (PART) group at De Montfort University, which defines transliteracy as

the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks. (Thomas, et al., 2007)

In and of itself, this definition is both intuitive and ambiguous. Intuitive because with the ever-increasing proliferation of communication media over the previous 150 years, most educators already understand that information is

available through a wildly divergent set of channels, and solely focusing on print is anachronistic at best. Yet, the definition is ambiguous because it is not altogether clear what interacting “across” literacies means. Is it mere facility with different media? Or is it something else? Perhaps the best way to understand transliteracy is by analogy.

Consider the means by which conference attendees get to a desired conference. The process begins by identifying a need to attend the conference and it continues by evaluating travel options, funding, and choices in lodging, culminating in the trip itself. Attendees may drive, fly, take a train, or create some combination of the three. They may apply for a grant, reach into travel funds, or pay out of pocket. The particulars can take many different forms, but the overall process of creating a travel itinerary is the unifying feature: start with a defined need, evaluate options to get from point A to point B, and travel accordingly.

However, despite the evaluative skills required in crafting a travel itinerary, there are still the very real practicalities of writing the travel grant, navigating the airport, understanding the train schedules, or checking-in to the hotel. For a seasoned road-warrior, these are second nature, but to a first-time traveler finding the way from airport parking to the gate is a maze of complex interactions, unfamiliar protocols, and strange jargon. (Imagine dropping Melvil Dewey off in front of the Dallas/Fort Worth airport and expecting him to catch his plane on time!)

This distinction between the ability to create a travel itinerary to take us from an initial need to its resolution and the skills involved in navigating a complex interaction of transportation methods, is analogous to the distinction between information literacy and transliteracy. Information literacy allows us to identify a need, access appropriate sources,

Wilkinson (Reference and Instruction Librarian)
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga [Chattanooga, TN]

evaluate those sources, and determine the best way to satisfy the initial need. Transliteracy, on the other hand, focuses on how to move between discrete information sources and literacies on the path from need to resolution. It is analogous to the cognitive processes that allow us to transfer from plane to train, so to speak. As Tom Ipri (2010) explains, “transliteracy is...about understanding the ways various means of communication interact and understanding the skills necessary to move effortlessly from one medium to another” (p. 533).

A TRANSLITERATE APPROACH TO LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

Library curricula are often tied to ACRL Information Literacy Standards, with access and evaluation taking center stage. But, just as there is a distinction between evaluating a travel itinerary and catching a train, there is a difference between evaluating information and using the various media in which information manifests itself. Where transliteracy comes into play is in the acknowledgement that in addition to understanding evaluative tactics, students must also have the means to navigate information sources, understand how these sources interact to satisfy an information need, and use information sources in such a way that they create a natural progression from start to finish in the research process.

To achieve these goals, four guidelines for transliterate instructional design are appropriate:

1. They already know how to do it
2. Break down the divisions
3. Teach by analogy
4. Teach the fit and the finish

THEY ALREADY KNOW HOW TO DO IT

Incorporating transliteracy into library instruction starts before the students even enter the classroom. Whether it’s looking up a favorite pop singer’s influences in Wikipedia, following international protests on Twitter, or scouring textbook previews in Google Books, students have a vast array of preexisting research skills before they ever come to the library. A transliterate pedagogy begins by acknowledging and appreciating these skills.

Many recent studies corroborate the claim that students come to class with a set of pre-existing research skills. For example, Head and Eisenberg (2010) have found that college students are surprisingly good at evaluating the material in Wikipedia and, moreover, they tend to use Wikipedia only as a source for background information, not for substantive research. Likewise, Badge, Johnson, Moseley and Cann (2011) have found that Twitter is rapidly becoming an informal peer-review service for many students. Again and again, students are using new services to find information, and library instructors need to look for ways to tap into students’ existing skills, rather than separate them out.

Moreover, as Holman (2011) explains, this preexisting skill-set extends beyond specific media to include more conceptual abilities. Holman’s research shows that library instructors would do well to pay attention to students’ preexisting competencies, or “mental models” of search. These mental models are the figurative and metaphorical understandings students have of search behavior; they are the means by which students explain how a search engine, a wiki, or a blog fit into their information ecosystems. Appealing to mental models is a core aspect of successful information literacy, yet, as Holman’s research suggests, the most common approaches to information literacy instruction are rooted in a print-based mental model of online searching that is at odds with “millennials’ own mental models of Internet-based information retrieval with engines that more accurately and effectively parse a simpler, more natural language query” (pp. 25-26). In sum, research shows that students have pre-existing research skills and concepts, but that library instruction often fails to incorporate these skills effectively.

BREAK DOWN THE DIVISIONS

Even as library instructors acknowledge that college students can be surprisingly adept using Google, blogs, Twitter, and other services to find information, they realize that students still are often completely lost and unable to comprehend the complexities of “library” research. Indexes, keywords, abstracts, OpenURL resolvers and other library-centric concepts are often a barrier to classroom communication. By emphasizing the skills that transfer *across* or *between* separate information resources, transliteracy breaks down artificial distinctions between popular and scholarly, and thereby serves as an excellent foil to student apprehensions.

The following chart may be familiar to many library instructors:

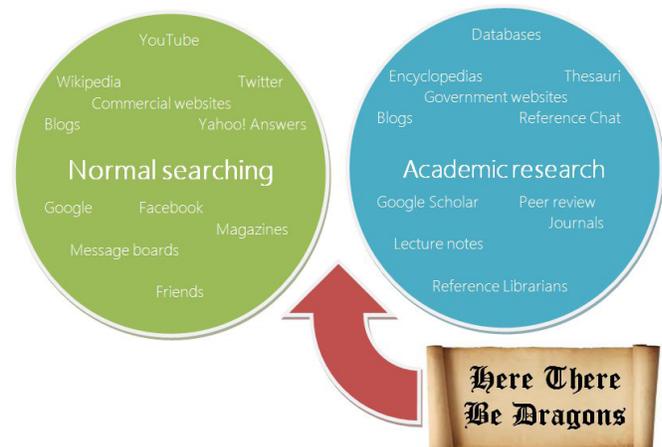


Figure 1: Normal vs. Academic research

This segmenting of research types is common in both student attitudes towards the library as well as in library instruction. The obscure jargon of library research keeps students away, and library instruction classes tend to reinforce the division insofar as they focus on library skills rather than

more general concepts. Transliteracy offers a way out by encouraging instructors to think less about the differences between information sources, and more about the similarities. As Ipri (2010) explains, “transliteracy is unique in combining democratizing communication formats, expressing no preference of one over the other, with emphasizing the social construction of meaning via diverse media” (p. 567). The transliterate approach is about breaking down divisions between information types, and approaching information sources from a neutral perspective.

TEACH BY ANALOGY

Unfortunately, merely appreciating students’ existing skills and making library resources familiar is not enough to harness transliteracy. By looking to students’ existing skill sets for guidance, and by treating library resources as functionally equivalent to more familiar services, the transliterate curriculum is best served by appeal to analogy. Library instructors can, and should, adopt analogy as a primary means for discussing unfamiliar concepts.

It goes without saying that digital media have introduced a range of new competencies required for successful information literacy. The neat part is that, in many cases, these new technologies can be conceptually tied to other domains. For example, instructors are encouraged to make analogies between different formats: hyperlinks are like footnotes, hashtags are like words in the index, Wikipedia is like an encyclopedia, JSTOR is like a file-cabinet, etc.

Granted, this is nothing new; appealing to mental models by way of analogy has a long history in information literacy. For example, Brandt (1997) advocated a now-common constructivist approach of “connecting students’ existing mental models (for example, use of a telephone directory) to that of an online index” (p. 20). The key is simply in reinforcing these analogies so that library resources are grounded in a familiar vocabulary.

TEACH THE FIT AND THE FINISH

Finally, transliteracy asks that instructors treat non-library sources from a standpoint of interaction, rather than simply evaluation. On the one hand, instructors can separate out information sources and focus on them from a purely evaluative perspective. For example, we may choose to introduce Wikipedia to the extent that we focus on its positives and its negatives. On the other hand, in establishing that information resources are all of potentially equal value, instructors can focus instead on the interactions *between* resources. The latter approach is the transliterate approach.

Consider the case of Wikipedia. Instead of focusing on how students should evaluate the information in Wikipedia, a transliterate approach focuses on how students might use Wikipedia as a source for the keywords required in a more structured academic database. Another example is presenting Twitter as a means for identifying current topics. Bobish

(2011) provides at least one example activity for each ACRL performance indicator. For example, to meet the performance indicator I.1.e (the student identifies key-concepts and terms that describe the information need), instructors might have students run blog-posts, articles, or wiki-pages through Wordle to find the best keywords. To meet performance indicator II.2.c (selects controlled vocabulary specific to the discipline or information retrieval source), we might use social bookmarking sites like Delicious or CiteULike as a parallel to subject headings. As Bobish explains, social media and related technologies

present a golden opportunity, not generally available previously, for students to see the real world relevance of the skills that they learn through information literacy instruction and to learn how information is created and shared by doing it themselves rather than hearing about it. (p. 63)

Again, the transliterate approach asks instructors to embrace non-library sources and demonstrate to students how those sources can be used to enhance library research. Rather than simply teach how to evaluate a Web 2.0 service (the finish), instruction can demonstrate how that service interrelates with other resources (the fit).

WRAPPING UP

Here, it should be noted that as a skill-based approach to library instruction transliteracy is not meant to replace information literacy. Information evaluation should still be a primary goal in library instruction. Unfortunately, striking the balance between teaching abstract information literacy skills and teaching concrete “where to click” skills is easier said than done. As Johnson, Spole, and Reynolds (2009) have shown, library instruction is moving away from teaching skills and towards evaluative concepts. However, the proliferation of new information technologies makes skill-based instruction a continuing concern. What transliteracy offers is simply a means of addressing concrete search skills and behaviors by appealing to pre-existing competencies and emphasizing the interaction between distinct information sources.

Transliteracy is rooted in the ability to interact across or between tools and media, so it makes sense that a transliterate approach would begin by looking to students’ native search behaviors for guidance. Moreover, by treating all information sources equally, students are more willing to interact with the unfamiliar, rather than treat academic research as a “higher level” of research. Finally, the interaction between information sources is best approached via analogy, to the extent that students are shown how to fit familiar resources into academic research rather than replace the familiar with the academic.

To illustrate these transliterate concepts in practice, the lesson plans for the Freshman Composition program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga are available through the library’s instruction website at <http://guides.lib.utc.edu/eng11010> and <http://guides.lib.utc.edu/eng11020>. The lesson plans are markedly transliterate by way of a pre-class activity

that requires students to pull keywords from Wikipedia, interactive quizzes that allow discussion of pre-existing search behaviors, analogous reasoning exercises, and videos that draw parallels between familiar and academic search strategies. In sum, students are reminded continually that their existing search behaviors are paralleled in library research and that no aspect of academic research is necessarily specific just to library resources—research is research no matter what form it takes.

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