



Speaking on the record: A theory of composition

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Abstract

This article explores ways in which some of what has been achieved through the use of writing can be achieved in the domain of the oral and ways in which the use of oral forms might be revalued as literate composition. Toward these ends, I introduce a new word and practice to provide a counterpart to writing in a spoken modality: *Spriting* in its general form is the activity of speaking “on the record” that yields a technologically supported representation of oral speech with essential properties of writing, such as permanence, and offers possibilities of editing, indexing, and scanning but without the difficult transition to a deeply different form of representation such as writing itself. *Literacy* is defined here as the sophisticated structures and elements that characterize linguistic stories and ideas, largely but not completely independent of the material ways in which these structures are realized. That is, this article distinguishes literacy from *letteracy*, which refers to textual decoding and encoding abilities, and I introduce another new term, *prosodacy*, which refers to oral decoding and encoding abilities. Based on outcomes from two years of exploratory empirical work with adult learners and young children using novel spriting software I designed and developed for them, I discuss four areas in which spriting-like activities and technology can have a positive impact on literacy development and education.

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1. Introduction

Six thousand years or so after the advent of writing, we can observe a well-developed hierarchical relationship between written and spoken forms. Reading and writing have become the predominant way of acquiring and expressing intellect in Western culture. And, somewhere along the way, the ability to write has become completely identified with intellectual power, creating a graphocentric myopia concerning the very nature and transfer of knowledge. One of the effects of graphocentrism is a conflation of concepts more proper to knowledge in general with concepts specific to written expression. The words *literate* and *literacy* are examples of this conflation: Their connotations more often focus on reading and writing processes and less

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often on the kinds of knowledge that happen to be associated in our culture with people who read books. The emergence of technologies that support oral and aural processes in writerly and readerly ways lay bare this graphocentric bias and require us to reformulate explanations of literacy and learning processes.

Even though we have barely begun to see the effects, in principle the computer challenges the hegemonic position of texts and writing in society because of the flexible way in which it encodes and decodes heterogeneous information. Writing is a very narrow window on human modalities for knowing, communicating, and expressing. As soon as people are released from writing in even small ways, they want to do more. Certainly the future of literacy and composition will not be writing or the technologies I discuss, but some very rich sensory combination of modalities. Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1982) predicted that a “new mode that is gaining strength at the expense of literacy will enable us to communicate more beautifully and forcefully with one another than can be envisioned now” (p. 257). But the values and politics for what constitutes literacy are deeply set in Western culture. Their cessation will not happen quickly or easily.

But even to observe the changes happening now, we need new concepts and new terms for referring to new phenomena. Words such as writing, speaking, and talking are complex and polysemous, leaving no clear way to describe related—but new—activities. The goal of this article is to develop a conceptual framework for arguing how and why new speech technologies might replace writing, particularly as a tool for general learning, and additionally, how and why they expand the epistemological field of what can be learned. While this article represents a theoretical position, it is heavily informed by practice: I spent several years researching and designing software and another two years teaching adults and children and observing the interesting effects of its use. I refer often to these experimental explorations to ground my points about the efficacy of oral/aural technologies for learning and literacy, but a detailed chronicle of technology design and use is not my focus here.

In this article I explore ways in which some of what has been achieved through reading and writing can be achieved in the oral and aural domains, how new kinds of knowledge and skills are required to use these emergent speech tools, and ways in which the use of oral forms might be revalued as literate composition. As a first step, I introduce a new word to provide a counterpart to writing in a spoken modality: *Spriting*, in its general form, is the activity of speaking *on the record* that yields a technologically supported representation of oral speech with essential properties of writing, such as permanence of record, possibilities of editing, indexing, and scanning but without the difficult transition to a deeply different form of representation such as writing itself. The product of spriting is a kind of “spoken” document, or *talkument*. As one reads a text, one may likewise *aud* a talkument—a term intended to imply the many interpretative levels of reading an extended book-like discourse, levels not usually implied by the simple perceptual act of hearing.

Making these distinctions is a small step toward envisioning a deep change in the world that might go beyond graphocentrism and come to appreciate spriting as the first step—but just the first—towards developing ways of manipulating spoken language as exemplified by turning it into a permanent record permitting editing, indexing, searching, and more. The major points developed here are suggestive about how things might be in a very different world and also about what things we don’t have to wait for: I introduce a new way to realize literacy

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