

Reading for empowerment: Intertextuality offers creative possibilities for enlightened citizenry

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Julia Kristeva coined the term 'intertextuality' to explain her utter belief in the mutability and movement of texts, in contradistinction to the time-honoured popular idea that a text is an autonomous and self-evident object. For Kristeva, any text implies the existence and embedding of other texts, also known as sub-texts, within it. This has far-reaching implications for the way we read, engage with, and interpret various texts. This article describes the concept of intertextuality as a model of reading which puts the reader at the centre of the reading process. It goes on to link intertextuality to other domains of literacy, notably the notion of 'spheres of literacy'. Central to intertextuality and spheres of literacy is their privileging of the reader, as opposed to the author, in the reading process. Finally, the article explores the ways in which our awareness and use of intertextuality can help to develop a literate and free-thinking citizenry who derive utmost autonomy and empowerment from various cultural texts accessible to them.

Understanding textuality

Reading (or literacy in general) is something that calls out for attention in our society today, because the reading process invariably opens up worlds and expands one's horizons. If one cannot read, one's life effectively becomes a dead end, a cul-de-sac, in a manner of speaking. The compelling force of Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, this article argues, provides profound insights into the concept of reading that leads to enhanced literacy and empowerment for the reader. For the 21st century citizen the notion of reading for empowerment denotes one's ability to experience the world in its diversity and multiplicity as a result of exposure to various forms of literacies and proficiencies. In other words, to fulfil one's destiny one must learn to adapt and translate one's life to broader functions and applications through reading and literacy. To that end, this article foregrounds the ideas of Kristeva, Gagostino and Carifio in an attempt to answer, amongst other things, the following questions: What is a text? What is reading? What is literacy? What reading (and literacy) approaches can we put in place in our societies in order to deliver the kind of empowerment the people need at all levels?

Let us start by defining the term 'text' or 'textuality' in a rather conservative, restricted and limited sense to mean a word. Thus when we encounter a word such as 'mother', for instance, the underlying assumption is that the meaning of the word is consistent with what the word's symbols denote, that the word stands still and refers, that what it says is what it refers to, that as a signifier 'mother' gestures towards some self-contained totality, which as a formation will stand for the same thing in all places and at all times. The same could be said about other related texts such as a sentence, a picture, a drawing, a paragraph, a chapter, a book, and so forth.

However, Kristeva's theory of intertextuality calls into question the existence of such a hermetically closed and autonomous text or narrative by proposing that, by its very nature, a text is in fact 'a network of fragments that refer to still other narrative texts' (Boje 2001:74). Put another way, the theory of intertextuality maintains that a text is an embodiment or the coalescence of disparate, intertwined stories, voices, or discourses which are knit together in ways that often imply or suggest that the narrative is singularly coherent and homogeneous; and yet, this seeming coherence veils or masks a whole range of intertexts or layers of other stories that lie beneath the original. Such a text is nothing less than a web of complex, sometimes interlacing discourses in which the text becomes the centre of the creative process of reading, with its author having no last word on his or her text. The nature of discourse in this case is such that whilst much information in the text is obviously stated in most explicit terms (through information dissemination, persuasion or as offering an opinion about the world), other bits of information remain unstated, or understated even. In such cases it is the reader's active stock of knowledge of the world that comes in handy if any full comprehension of the text is to be realised.

Allen (2000) explains the process of reading succinctly, as follows:

Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext. (p. 1)

At this point it is important to point out that, understood in a wider context, Kristeva's expansive idea or principle of intertextuality is not her brainchild per se, for the concept (and its application) was not uncommon in classical times, particularly amongst the Greeks and the Romans, who are famed to have told stories which had built-in dynamics of interconnected and intersecting stories. In the twentieth century intertextuality gained currency in the 1960s, initially being associated with a number of philosophers, notably Bakhtin (1957), who came up with the concept of the carnival, and Barthes (1977), who made a rather unsettling announcement about the death of the all-knowing author in any text, or indeed Jacques Derrida's memorable notion that it is difficult to tally or fit language to the world. This was expressed in his famous statement that 'there is nothing outside the text', which paradoxically suggests that that there *is* something outside the text. Other linguists and philosophers, such as Saussure and Foucault, have contributed to the debate about textuality in various ways and degrees.

What is relevant, even groundbreaking, about Kristeva's understanding and use of the global idea of intertextuality is that the concept challenges conventional, hypothetical ideas about what constitutes a text – if one thinks of the time-honoured idea of a text as being a string of words and sentences, and the punctuation that goes with it. It is this rather conventional, if conservative, conceptualisation of text that Kristeva's notion of intertextuality calls into question. As Cohen puts it (1997:xvi): '[n]ow texts may be verbal or nonverbal or a mixture of both, and forms are not restricted on marks on paper'. Thus the meaning of a text is distended to include semiotics, that is, signs and symbols and how they relate to meaning and interpretation. In short, contemporary thinking and scholarship about textuality, which (for Kristeva) is both linguistic and semiotic, considers a text as unstable and multiple, and therefore meaning is always a fluid and shifty entity.

Textuality is linguistic to the extent that any word (such as 'mother', as opposed to a no smoking symbol) is essentially a text in the sense that it has been fashioned out of the signs (or letters) of language. The story does not end there, for cultural symbols, shapes and patterns and representations of all kinds, such the Highway Code symbols or a no smoking sign, are also genuine texts. For Kristeva a text is multiple, and thus its meaning ever shifting, because it is entangled in a web of several other texts going back to the past or stretching into the future. This is often possible because sometimes texts are products of power or power relations in society, and this power could be political, ideological, or institutional. What is

crucially important to bear in mind with regard to Kristeva's idea of intertextuality is her conviction that every text has associations and cross-references with other related or different texts. In short, every text is not as original as readers often deem it to be, since it alludes to and is a commentary on various extant texts.

In his essay titled 'Readers as Authors', linguist Courts (1991) echoes Kristeva's idea of intertextuality by making a strong link between reading and writing, arguing that being involved in one implies active participation in the other at the same time. Crucially, Courts situates the reader at the core of the reading and meaning-making process – a process whereby the distinction between author and reader has been levelled down, consigning the reader more prerogative in decoding the symbols and representations inscribed into the text. Courts (1991) says that:

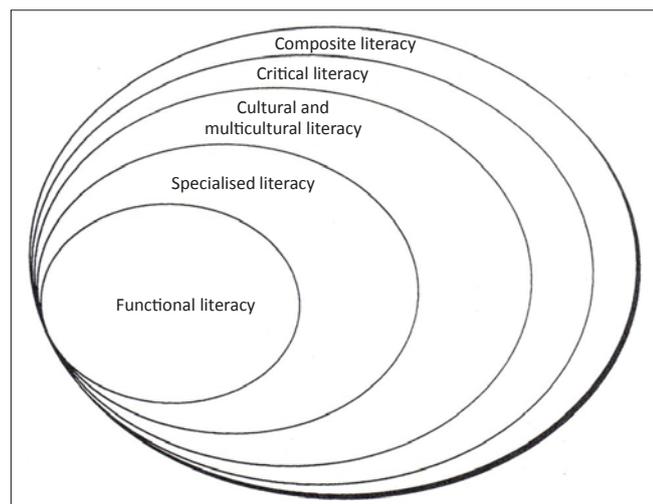
[i]n the moment of reading, the reader is re-writing the text that the author has previously written. Using the totality of his non-visual information (background knowledge, past experience, cognitive schemata, mental theory of the world, or the 'all' that is), the reader makes meaning of 'that which is there' (texts) from 'that which is there' (reader). (p. 110)

In short, Courts argues that the reader makes use of intertextual signposts of his or her entire life to make sense of the world through the signals available on the printed page. This sense-making process blurs the boundary between reading and writing in such a way that the reader takes control of the reading process by not treating either in isolation.

Reading and literacy

If texts are so complex, it is important to consider the implications for reading. Immediately two questions are pertinent here: 'What is reading?' and 'Why read at all?'. Conventional wisdom tells us that we read for various reasons, the most fundamental of which is to obtain vital information. However, this is not all there is to reading since beyond this basic need there are other reasons why we engage with texts of various nature, such as the need to expand and reinforce one's vocabulary and grammar, or develop one's reading skills and generally achieve the kind of literacy levels that ensure full citizen empowerment. It is precisely the imperative of reading or, to put it broadly, literacy for empowerment, that calls attention to the notion of 'spheres of literacy', as expressed by Dagostino and Carifio in the diagram below. In *Evaluative Reading and Literacy: A Cognitive View* Dagostino and Carifio (1994) use the model (Figure 1) to explain diagrammatically their understanding of the dynamic of literacy in its multiple constituencies, stating that it 'represents the different kinds of environments, or spheres, that the reader must master and function in to participate fully in the modern, or composite, world' (1994:2).

Dagostino and Carifio's diagram, a schema spelling out the different spheres of literacy, is premised on the idea of natural progression (of an individual) as he or she moves



Source: Dagostino, L. & Carifio, J., 1994, *Evaluative Reading and Literacy: A Cognitive View*, Allyn & Bacon, London.

FIGURE 1: The spheres of literacy.

from functional literacy, whose byword is the ability to survive in the infinitely harsh world, through various spheres which call for, amongst other things, the special expertise, cultural knowledge or critical acumen that come with a good command of the language, to the composite domain of literacy where the individual's thorough and comprehensive understanding of the world enables them to master and play a meaningful role in it. Of interest in these stages is how the notion of intertextuality is built into the above model. As the reader moves across these spheres of life (from functional literacy to the composite world), he or she is exposed to various functions that reading or literacy plays. For example, there is no doubt that functional literacy is the nominal or minimum level of reading proficiency for any citizen anywhere, to enable him or her to make sense of the world in which he or she lives. In other words, the writers place special emphasis on the importance of empowering readers or citizens, who are made to go through the various spheres of literacy in order to function optimally in the world. In fact, the various spheres are the multiple texts and sub-texts located in the domains spelt out above, namely functionality, knowledge specialisation, culture and meaning, critical thinking and, finally, (adopting) a mature view of the world that takes into account and fuses all of the spheres into one.

All of this calls for radical rethinking of our pedagogical practices. Theories of methodologies need to be revisited, particularly traditional theories in which a text is seen as a self-standing unit with a stable meaning or meanings, to communicate. Such a rethinking would entail introducing in our teaching a combination of both verbal and non-verbal forms of texts, instead of the usual heavy reliance on the traditional method where a text is invariably a written document which is seen as a unitary and self-contained entity. Thus a text is anything and everything that one sees around in one's vicinity and which has a life of its own, is a voice to be listened to, can be described, and so forth. Other

pedagogical changes have to do with transformation of curricula to reflect the concomitant changes in the modern globalised and globalising world. Living in the 21st century with its deluge of technological advances makes it imperative that we make use of technology (such as mobile phones, computers, television, and so forth) as the starting point. Of course, knowledge of the principles of how the language works is vitally important. It is important to realise that built into a sentence are often other texts which can be analysed.

Clearly, reading at the very basic level of functionality will involve imparting specific mechanical skills which do not put demands on the students' critical thinking skills. Dagostino and Carifio (1994) make the following observation about the nature of the skills:

Students will be able to read street signs, newspapers, and instruction manuals as well as follow directions. Students will be able to comprehend the basic messages of straightforward writing. This is a world of minimal competence, a world of survival, a world of plugging along with a minimum of intellectual stimulation or pleasure. (p. 4)

Utilising multiple literacies

The argument of this article is that such limitations (as pointed out in the above quote) can be circumvented if our education systems are prepared to promote and foster all five domains of literacies as laid out by Dagostino and Carifio. In the final analysis the learner or reader has to shoulder some of the responsibility for appreciating some of the spheres, especially those that are coterminous with life, notably reading for pleasure. It is suggested in this article that the reader be exposed to a combination of reading or literacy spheres even at this early stage. This means rethinking the idea of a text beyond the written word to include 'other texts'. Anything that a teacher can see in her or his vicinity as having a life of its own, and can be described, is a text. Thus the teacher could bring into class and introduce various symbols and signs (traffic signs, anti-smoking symbols, etc.) for the students to describe and analyse. By working individually or in groups the students could be asked to take different positions in their responses as they examine and describe the symbols and signs. Such an exercise could be useful in helping the students to begin to make meaning in and of the world, by being able to perceive the different layers of interrelating texts in the texts (in this case, the symbols and signs). In a very practical way, the students would be encountering texts as intertexts, both semiotically and linguistically.

Other than using symbols and signs, introducing local knowledge in the form of fiction (such as short stories which have been handed down the generations) would be ideal at this stage. The most important thing is for the teacher always to get the students involved in some kind of problem-solving, say by explaining the moral of a story. Getting the students to write as they read helps them to make sense of the text.

Such activities are critical in that they deepen the students' comprehension of the texts they are grappling with.

There is a need to rethink and move away from traditional, text-bound comprehension with all its assumptions of textual explicitness and literalness. The goals of this type of comprehension were, amongst other things, searching for the most important idea, vital details and related cause-and-effect patterns, often followed by an inferential question or two. Of course it is an important skill, but reading that is directed towards achieving literacy looks at meaning as being secondary. What is of the essence is to perceive the text as being open, rather than closed. This entails a kind of thinking that is at odds with conventional reasoning often associated with the traditional type of comprehension. As Dagostino and Carifio (1994:46) put it, '[o]pen, divergent thinking is a style of processing text that multiplies the directions the reader takes in drawing conclusions or establishing explanations and interpretations of a text'.

Thus there is room for imagination and creativity. What this means is that teachers need not be enslaved by the texts in terms of what type of questions to ask the students. Comprehension ought to promote the spirit of curiosity and inquiry amongst students. In order to sustain such a mindset amongst the students, teachers need to move away from the age-old practice of asking questions that simply require the students to merely *explain* towards those that *explore*, or from those that are *factual* and *explicit* towards those that are *tentative*, questions that invite reflection. In addition, comprehension need not be limited to a passage that is given to students to read. Literacy now includes interactive technologies which could be made use of in a classroom situation so that students are given opportunities to participate in contemporary culture. Digital literacies such as mobile phones provide an intersection between the local and the global, and can thus be used as texts in a classroom situation to develop communication skills and opportunities that enhance literacy.

There is also a need for a marked shift regarding our understanding of the theoretical structure of literacy, which has traditionally been used to mean the ability to read (a language). The new structure would have to take the form of what Dagostino and Carifio call 'spheres of literacy' – the kind of framework that fuses the two concepts of reading and literacy into one integrated model of tackling texts. Perhaps personal experience is in order here. Those involved in higher education in South Africa will agree that most young people enter South African universities with their proficiency in English way below the minimum standard required for university entrance. At the University of South Africa, for instance, many students spend a year doing what are known as 'access modules' in English. These are students who would have failed English language at matriculation level. In order for these students to register for their degrees, they are

expected to obtain a grade of 50% in the access modules they do. Some of these are English for Science language modules, Reading and Writing Skills, and Thinking Skills. Incidentally, the provision of access modules at the University of South Africa is not limited to the discipline of English; many other disciplines have developed such modules for students who are ill-equipped to start their studies.

What all of this means is that, in terms of Dagostino's and Carifio's 'spheres of literacy', most of the students seem to have been stuck in the realm of functional literacy. What is suggested here is the introduction of a broad-based, integrated discipline taught from the foundational phase of schooling all the way to university, with every sphere of life incorporated into the discipline every step of the way. Thus, whilst fiction may be encouraged during formative years of schooling, other proficiencies and competencies (especially in the realm of Mathematics and Science) need special emphasis and attention. This would entail broadening of instruction in English education to subsume or include the broad field generally referred to as academic literacy – the ability to read and respond appropriately to all information on any subject. Over and above the process of acquiring skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, learners would be exposed to topics such as Mathematics proficiency or literacy, where the language of Mathematics would be fully dealt with. The same would apply to various content subjects on offer in higher education. At the same time, genres should be extended to include biographies, sociology, geography, history, astronomy and science, newspapers, and so forth.

In a scenario where teachers decide to teach literature, getting the students to write responses to a particular novel or text constitutes dealing with intertexts. In other words, what the students produce are intertexts and thus the students become authors in their own right as they express their various opinions. This process is essentially empowering; once the students have had the opportunity to proffer their personal responses, they should always listen to other responses (other texts) from other students. This process promotes full literacy and empowerment because the students get to appreciate positions different from theirs.

Conclusion

In closing, it is only by acknowledging the intrinsic instability of texts – in this case as posited by Kristeva and expounded by various literary and literacy scholars and philosophers – that we can begin to imagine various ways to empower our citizenry, who have to confront and grapple with thorny issues of what constitutes truth or reality in a modern world awash with all sorts of texts. To that end, the concept of textuality gives the modern citizen (and reader) some latitude or leeway to think of a text in ways that allow for empowerment, given that the concept now transcends the rather restricted and conservative understanding of the term – an understanding which hitherto privileged the author and his intentions as far as the meaning of a text is concerned.

The concept of intertextuality challenges the notion of the author's authority, and hence the text's autonomy, allowing the reader to become an active participant in the meaning-making process, thereby opening up possibilities for productive empowerment. Thus, Kristeva's notion of textuality ties in with Dagostino and Carifio's broadened and integrated view of literacy as exemplified in the schema of 'spheres of literacy'. In short, what can shape the imagination of the modern citizen is the realisation that textual production is often bound up with conflicting realities, notably ideology or institutional imperatives which are located within power, and often render texts liable to gaps and hiatuses in knowledge. The concept of intertextuality, as a dynamic textual system, takes care of such gaps, in that citizens or readers are accorded the context in which to creatively and productively engage with the gaps or other layers of the text which are communicated in all forms of echoes and resonances. Such an engagement is a veritable and sure-fire way of empowering citizens.

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Competing interests

I declare that I have no significant competing financial, professional or personal interest that might have influenced the performance of the work described in this manuscript.

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