

Welcome to the second annual meeting of the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators. And happy birthday to our organization! In one year, we have accomplished a lot:

- We have completed the initial phases of development for the *Research in Online Literacy Education*, or *ROLE*, journal. It's set to launch in January 2018, and we're seeking journal contributions at this time.
- The *Online Literacy Open Resource*, or *OLOR*, is online and accepting contributions on a rolling basis.
- We had a successful "founding member" membership drive, ending 2016 with more than 50 members.
- We have sponsored two webinars, "Multimodal Classrooms" and "Reading NOW: Adapting Offline Strategies to Improve Students' Reading Online" with more than 25 participants each. Our next webinar is in April.
- GSOLE is actively recruiting international members with our International Liaison Kirk St.Amant.
- We have become an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Writing Centers Association, and the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication.
- We have a Research Fellowship award to make today, the first of many sponsored research projects.
- We are planning an annual award series for research and teaching in online literacy education.
- We are in the middle phases of developing certifications in online literacy teaching and tutoring with a possible partnership with UALR and Drexel University and a pilot launch planned for September 2017.

I want to challenge all of you here to think differently about how little we know about teaching reading, alphabetic writing, and digital composition—three core literacies—in online settings at the postsecondary levels.

["think, write, pair, share" exercise] [slide]

In just a moment, when I say “go,” I want you to take out a pen and the blank index card you received when you came into the meeting. Think about two ways that learning a literacy skill in an online setting is different from learning the same skill in a traditional, onsite setting like this meeting that we’re having today. After thinking, write them on the index card. I will give you 45 seconds. Let me repeat. When I say “go,” think about and write two ways that learning a literacy skill in an online setting is different from learning the same skill in a traditional, onsite setting. Go!

[bell]

Now, in just a moment, when I say “go,” please choose a partner, preferably someone you don’t know, and share those two differences with each other. I will give you 1 minute total. Go!

[bell]

Let’s call this activity the “think, write, pair, share” exercise.

What we have just done in this exercise is to tap into our own schemas to think about a problem, use the scribal act to record that thinking and thereby inscribe it from short-term into working memory, and then orally articulate those differences to another person whose experiences and thoughts both mirror *and differ from* our own as online literacy educators. In this process, we have physically reinforced in our brains any new learning about the differences between online and onsite literacy education. We have made new learning connections in the white matter, or myelin, of our brains. [slide]

Myelin is like the rings of a tree trunk. Good connections, like growing years where there is plenty of water and nutrition, grow thick myelin rings. Just a few minutes ago, we used such multiple sensory perceptions as touch, sight, hearing, and speaking to learn something about ourselves and about someone else’s thinking regarding online literacy education.

When we first learn new material, we struggle with it. That is an appropriate reaction to something new. Our struggle comes out in a beautiful sort of

dysfluency that all of us recognize in our students who are trying to write about a subject they don't understand using a genre with which they are unfamiliar. In a best-case scenario learning situation, students—and we—struggle, and we engage in practice with the new skill or knowledge. Then, we experience transformation, or learning, and the skill or knowledge becomes our own. We know it and own it at a core, or base, level. We can take it out and use it again. We can make new things from it. We have formed myelin around that skill or knowledge, thickening the neurological connections, and the skill or knowledge has begun the process of moving from our working memories into our long-term memories for retrieval. We can now use it for repeated—and potentially deeper—uses. *How can we best make use of these basic learning realities in online literacy education?*

Did you know that the scribal act is one of the most important ways that people learn? [slide] The physical act of writing is a single-brain activity. That means we can't fool ourselves into thinking we multitask when we are writing. [Multitasking is a subject for another day, by the way.] Writing by hand is a powerful learning act. By extension, we should wonder: *How powerful is the act of writing by keyboard? How powerful is the act of typing an unfamiliar idea versus the act of copying and pasting it from an original source to our own material? What different kinds of learning happen from these two different acts? We need to study such questions.*

And, while we do, we need to remember that we benefit from holding a neutral view that the movement from the physical scribal act to that of keyboarding is one of difference and not of *better* or *worse*. In other words, learning in traditional onsite settings and online settings is a matter of difference and not of one being better than the other, which is a bias we frequently confront in colleagues and students.

Let's try something. In just a moment, when I say "go," place your pen on the top right corner of your index card. Close your eyes and sign your name in cursive. Go!

Now, in just a moment, when I say "go," place your pen on the bottom left corner of your index card. Close your eyes and sign your name in cursive using your non-

dominant hand. Got that? If you are right handed, use your left hand to sign your name. If you are left handed, use your right hand to sign your name. Write your signature with your eyes closed. Go!

How does your non-dominant-hand signature compare to the one created with your dominant hand? What did it feel like to write with the non-dominant hand? Your dominant-hand signature is well-practiced. It is fully myelinated in your brain. Your non-dominant-hand signature lurches a bit. That's okay. It's okay to lurch when practicing a new skill. The inherent plasticity of the brain means that if you practice with the non-dominant hand, it eventually will become stronger at such scribal acts.

Now, think about what happens when that physical scribal skill of a signature with either hand is never taught and, therefore, never learned. *How is the replacement skill of keyboarding a signature or copying and pasting an image of one's signature the same? How is it different?*

Some of you know that my mother suffered a severe traumatic brain injury, or TBI, a year and a half before she died. She experienced profound brain damage, which neurosurgeons euphemistically call *an insult to the brain*. Among other deficits, Mom lost most language use in a phenomenon called *aphasia*. She could still read and think and desire to communicate; she knew what she wanted to say; but she couldn't make the right words and sounds come out of her mouth. When asked what she had for breakfast, for example, she once said: "eggs and fried eucalyptus."

[slide] Interestingly, with written expression, she struggled to write sentences that expressed original thinking, *but she could sign her name*, a skill learned by rote many years earlier and deeply myelinated in her damaged brain. Her letters were formed in the same manner as before her TBI, but they were teeny-tiny. This type of agraphia is called micrographia. The myelination in her brain was so thick around the scribal act of a signature—in other words, the act was so deeply embedded in her long-term memory—that even though her brain couldn't make her hands form *normal-sized letters*, it could convey to her hands *how to form the letters* and in the unique handwriting style that had been particularly her own for

more than 70 years. Her long-term memory held this language-based information for more-or-less automatic use when other knowledges and abilities were too damaged for retrieval.

[slide] I share all these ideas with you in order to ask some questions about online literacy education.

- The first exercise we did—the *think, write, pair, share*—was intended to demonstrate something about learning when more than one sense and activity is used. Particularly the physical writing and oral sharing of our own thoughts emerged as helpful. *How can we replicate that work in online settings?* Simple, you may say—use synchronous software and both oral and chat features. Ah, but *how do we do it asynchronously, using a modality in which much, much, much of online literacy education is taught? [and, I must add, a modality in which some students learn their best]*
- *How can we help students to use the scribal act of writing to practice new literacy skills and move those skills to long-term memory and knowledge when the scribal act is no longer emphasized? To that end, in what ways can we engage keyboarding to accomplish similar literacy-based goals?*
- *What do online literacy educators need to ask of neuroscience, e-learning, adult learning, and other disciplines in order to best teach such online literacies as reading, alphabetic writing, and digital composition at the post-secondary, adult-learning level?*
- *How do the answers to any and all of these questions potentially change when the online literacy learning occurs in a language other than English and in a country other than the United States of America? What can we learn globally about online literacy education across languages and cultures?*
- *Finally, think about all these questions in two contexts: that of online tutoring and online teaching.*

These are only some of the many questions about one small area of online literacy education that I hope are now running through your very good, very active brains. I will pause for 30 seconds while you write some of your thoughts

Beth L. Hewett  
2017 GSOLE President's Address at CCCC, Portland, Oregon

down. In just a moment, when I say "go," write what you are thinking about online literacy education. Go!

[bell]

What you now are asking of yourselves is a base agenda for our future work in GSOLE.

Please be looking for GSOLE Board members both here at the conference and online to share your research questions, possible research agendas, and needs.

Thank you!