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Can one speak of an “information transliteracy”?

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Summary of paper:

The issue of transliteracy in general and particularly informational transliteracy is increasingly being debated worldwide and from extremely varying perspectives. These concepts refer to highly varied cultural and professional realities and contexts.

In this paper we will discuss three dimensions and issues.

First, we will attempt to delineate the scope and range of current thinking by researchers in information and communication sciences in France with regard to informational transliteracy, and present its four main components.

Second, we will lay the claim that the informational transliteracy approach goes beyond the “Media and Information Literacies (MIL)” approach, in particular by giving all due importance to issues related to learning with computers, i. e. “computation”.

Finally, we will present some new thinking that is currently being implemented in the French education system and will present some research projects involving informational transliteracy (LIMIN-R project, Translit project, etc.).

Key words:

Transliteracy / Information culture / French educative system / Informational practice /Competencie /

Forward

For twenty years now, the notions of information *literacy* and thereafter *Translitteracy* have been the subject of a wide range of definitions and an extensive scientific literature, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. We will attempt during this presentation to demonstrate some of the main dimensions in terms of skills and attitudes in the various literacies that are giving rise to the new forms of training and support required in the future.

1- The stance of the researcher with regard to transliteracy :

In our opinion, researchers interested in this theme have suffered from not always sufficiently incorporating the issue of "Zeitgeist" in their analysis. Our approach seeks too often to find what is absolutely new: for example, Generation X and Generation Y for some: the new "cultural" model for others. Or the inevitability of Facebook or Twitter. So we sometimes find ourselves on the technological bandwagon where we are always waiting for the new technology to be available, without necessarily always grasping the situations we observe and seek to analyze. Yet, as Jacques Perriault (1989) reminds us, any technical



situation should be considered in its historical dimension¹. Moreover, we cannot conceive of the digital information culture in the singular. The most rigorous research conducted worldwide shows a division and even a fragmentation of the social practices of digital and information practices. Our stance here will be to consider such practices in their plural dimension.

Moreover, in our view, we believe it is essential to take the digital practices as a starting point in order to try to understand the new emerging skills. Indeed, the digital cultures are clearly one aspect of a major change in the modes of organization and access to knowledge. For example, in the history of societies, the library model of Alexandria heralded a transition with the move from rhetoric to documentation. We are probably currently experiencing a new transition from social memories through and around the document to the constitution of collective digital memories distributed via digital networks and information flows.

Furthermore, until recently, any reference to information was always associated with the notion of a public space. However, in the digital world, the touchstone is the close or even the intimate, where digital information formats range from the personal to the highly public. Therefore, how does one move from the close and intimate practices to the massive ones? The digital era involves the opposite of what happened in the past, namely moving from the more personal towards a progressive generalization. Our purpose today is based on a dual investigation that we have been pursuing for several years. First, we are seeking to identify the best practices of digital information in school and peri-school settings, particularly through the research project called LIMIN-R ("*Littératies : médias, information, numérique : recherche* », 2010-2012", 2010-2012²) and the beginning of the project known as Trans.I. (*Translittératie Informationnelle*, 2012-2013, funding from ISCC-CNRS³). There is also a second research project called GCCPA (*Gestion de la Connaissance dans des Contextes Professionnels d'Apprentissage*, 2012-2014, funding from the Aquitaine Regional Government⁴) where we try to identify shared practices and ways of organizing knowledge in a professional context, with architects and stakeholders of the eco-construction industry and more broadly those involved in sustainable development. Through these two separate and different fields, we aim to identify the converging skills and information practices in an information transliteracy.

2- Defining the concept of Transliteracy :

Transliteracy seeks, in our opinion, to identify skills and abilities common to three areas of information-communication: education in the mass media, computation (referring to the issue of programming, displays, and reading on screens) and learning from information-documentation (work on documents, forms and analysis of documentary content, assessment information, etc..). The Anglo-Saxon perspective is in our opinion more open and wider than ours, as suggested by Susan Thomas in 2007: "*Transliteracy is the Ability to read,*

¹ For example, Perriault recalls that the first train resembled in form and sophistication to its forerunner, the stagecoach.

² http://www.univ-paris3.fr/1304601907979/0/fiche_cours/

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⁴ <http://gccpa.u-bordeaux4.fr/>



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. "

3- What we understand by the prefix "Trans":

In our view, the prefix "Trans" refers to three main ideas:

- Transliteracy involves the "transversality" of the approaches and skills at stake. This means examining a set of skills and abilities common to all media contexts and techniques observed;
- Also the process involves transforming situations and information content by the practices and procedures undertaken by the stakeholders themselves;
- There is also a "transition" in time: in recent years, our observations tend to show that individuals begin their work on information by a phase of collective exchange and by comparing ideas. Then they move to a more personal phase of reflection, writing production and ownership.

Finally, transliteracy covers a range of notions to be considered, namely, digital literacy, network literacy, Internet literacy, computer literacy, news literacy, library literacy, media literacy, visual literacy... to name but a few.

Another view is that transliteracy constitutes three models of contemporary adaptation: "professional" adaptation where we comply with the workplace and its constant changes, 'cultural' adaptation where we identify trends and significant changes in access to the consumption of various cultural objects, and finally "formative" adaptation where we try to gradually reach a level of autonomy in relation to knowledge and knowledge construction.

4- Transliteracy: a unique culture

It seems particularly difficult at present to define models of cultural practices involved in transliteracy. On the other hand, we would like to propose what these practices are not, or are no longer, by calling upon counter principles. We propose three of them:

- 1: Transliteracy it is not the culture of information, the latter being more critical and operative in incorporating the critical and civic dimensions of stakeholders with regard to information.
- 2: Nor is it a culture in the anthropological sense, as the digital world takes little stock of the issues of sharing, modes of affiliation and ritual forms, yet it is central to understanding a culture under construction. In fact, the digital cultures are more oriented to describing what they offer than what they actually do.
- 3: Finally, it is not a culture of the "literate" which places at the center of a process the notions of progressive learning, the arts to be created, paths to be built, research approaches and the construction of knowledge⁵. Transliteracy allows an element of choice in social practices that are spontaneous. It allows individuals to create their own digital information solutions on networks.

This means that the transliteracy approach is a form of resistance to documentation and

⁵ The so-called "good" practice, "reference" practice or "expert" practice.



library standards that are still very strongly rooted. There are at least three aspects to this:

- On one hand, transliteracy reasoning no longer resembles that of the literature and library science world, with its still very recent emphasis on learning activities centered on piles of data, documents and an ability to find them in physical and digital environments, while reproducing this learning.
- Furthermore, transliteracy questioning attempts to focus on content present on networks and digital spaces, and to exert less control on modes of management and organizing access to information⁶.
- Finally, the transliteracy modes underline the *just in time* looking for information *approach* rather than hazardous regular navigation in environments disseminating content and information resources⁷.

5- The emergence of new forms of transliteracy-oriented skills:

By combining a set of data collected during our investigations in university, school and architectural settings separating us in our discussion, skills that seem to be progressively implemented by the stakeholders themselves, positions that concern both the user and the information professionals called upon to implement devices and methods of organizing information favorable to transliteracy.

5.1- The four positions to be considered:

The first concerns "assessment" which involves not only the nature of the information, content and results, but also the entire process of content production and the chain of activities that lead to the content in question. More and more as individuals, professionals and citizens, we have to know how to evaluate the very processes of scientific, professional, cultural production and thus identify the real processes at work⁸. The second position is to be able to evaluate the overall potential of the socio-technical informational environments at our disposal, particularly in the field of learning and the professional world. Most of the individuals we observed during our investigations did not even apprehend everything that the digital work environments (ENT) offer them in terms of content and technical features. The third position is to become familiar with the operative procedures, going beyond the simple stage of reacting to a stimulus. Indeed, the "Digital Cultures" are dependent on digital objects and tools available. The fears we have about the manipulative nature of visual information reveal the emergence of new ways of doing things⁹, forcing people to reconsider their informational gestures and adopt an analytical stance to the technical features available. The final posture is to maintain a "cognitive distance" from the immediate results offered by information systems (engines, ENT, ...). The digital cultures teach us that there is always a response to our questions ... but what

⁶ Such as storage, indexing and archiving of documents.

⁷ In this sense, the wide range of services offered by digital publishers, the service providers, professional offers such as in architecture. We include here the quality of information based on large volumes and archives offered to clients, even if these offers are not necessarily what individual users really require.

⁸ These include political issues, economic and cultural questions, stereotypes and consumerist strategies.

⁹ For example, the "widen" function of a mouse or trackball in order to zoom in on a content or image. Alternately, using the "scroll" function on the right of the screen to visualize the layering of a digital document.



response? The transliteracy position is to get out of the belief "*Ask the system ... and you will find what you are looking for.*" This means that trainers, teachers, mediators and facilitators should help to gradually increase the requirements and capabilities of individuals to analyze and understand the tools at our disposal (Simonnot Gazellot, 2009).

5.2- 8 transliteracy skills:

Finally, beyond the forms and media literacies involved, eight meta-skills (MS) stand out and could be used in future education and vocational training.

MS1: comprehension and understanding of information systems, a sort of "**information understanding**", where the stakeholder is himself able to perceive the various types of information systems, to weigh them up, to identify their value, and to use the right attitudes to them.

MS2: "**information knowledge** ": i.e. working declarative knowledge related to information and the dissemination of existing tools. The challenge of this MS is to possess the vocabulary of expression and representations linked to them. Our work shows that the media, technical devices, tools for processing information etc. are not conceived of in the same way by individuals, undoubtedly causing all sorts of misunderstandings and misconceptions.

MS3: procedural knowledge related to technical issues (Or "**information applications**"), where the goal is basically to be able to use effectively and efficiently the main technical tools in order to meet a need and perform a task.

MS4: the ability to assess the informational potential of the environment or the technique used (or "**information potential**"). It is clear that the individuals interviewed take for granted the potential of a system more than they really test it, and often discover belatedly the offers and features available to them. Strengthening the use and integration of new technological media requires this ability to project oneself and to appraise one's own strengths and weaknesses.

MS5: "**Actional**" strategies oriented to the organization and perpetuation of one's memory of one's work. Transliteracy aims at adopting procedures for processing personal content for later use in new professional and / or learning situations.

MS6: The **ability** to stand back from one's own daily, and sometimes even "mechanical" and systematic, reception of information. Several studies show that media users eventually get locked into multiple repetitions without discerning what could be done differently (an effect called the "tunnel" effect). Stepping back means that information may be received otherwise and new techniques can be used that are flexible and not repetitive.

MS7: The technologies and technical devices are calling more and more on sensory, physical and aptic clues. Alan Liu (2012) points out, for example, the impact of the visual culture in defining and understanding the informational transliteracy. Schools, universities and companies will likely have to reinforce training and help in the identification and control of



the sensory cues and physical media spaces at our disposal.

MS8: The last MS is anthropocentric and consists in the assessment of how to identify and characterize one's own cognitive styles¹⁰. Indeed, to what extent are we dependent or not on the field of technology and media? Do we respond individually by impulsivity or reflectivity? Do we center our gaze or rather scan during reading on the screen, etc.

6-In conclusion:

The transliteracy approach is currently in its infancy. However, it has two major trends. Transliteracy is centered on a radically ecological position, consisting constantly in questioning one's own actions and the influence of environments (technical, organizational, informational) on oneself. Transliteracy basically means questioning one's own activities in the field of information and communication. In addition, it requires an autonomous self-analytic attitude to one's ways of doing things, where one should be ready in principle to "detach oneself" in an attempt to explore unknown technical and info-communicational forms. Hence the interest in the research on literacies and the value of comparing the protocols and results of our respective observations.

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¹⁰ Cf. the researches of H. Witkin, S. Paper, J. Kagan ou J. Bruner.



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