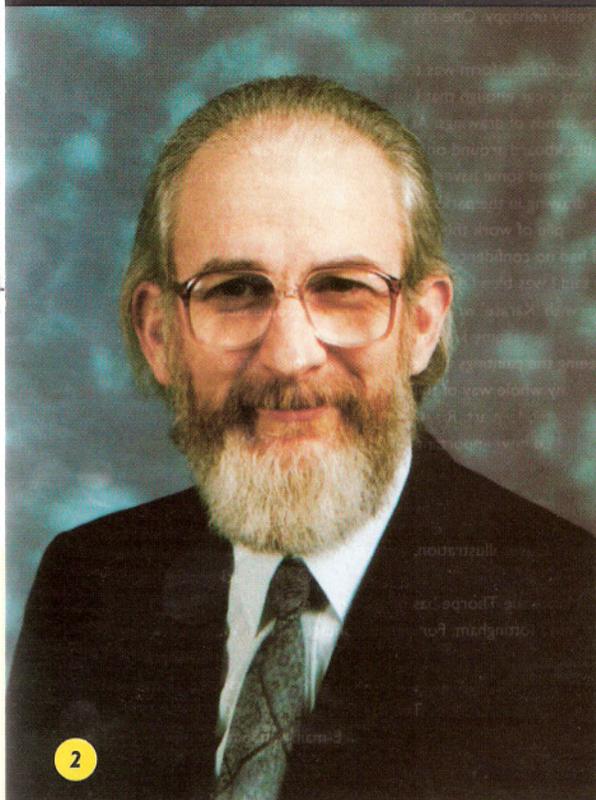


Literacy in the next millennium... in the next century

Professor David Crystal reflects on the changing nature of literacy as we approach a new millennium.



Millennium has always been one of the most mis-spelled words, with its unusual doubling up of letters, and if there has been an unlooked-for benefit of the current mania for the year 2000 it is the unprecedented exposure which this word has received. I could never remember how many n's it had, and always had to look it up – but not any more. It now spills onto my screen without a second thought. And even if I did have second thoughts, a spelling-checker would sort it out for me.

Screens and spelling-checkers. Routine today, for many people, compared with a decade ago. All the indications are that the dramatic growth of the new electronic medium, in all its communicative versatility, is set to continue. But the implications for literacy have only recently begun to be explored.

We have all heard a lot about how demands of literacy have grown. Notions such as 'functional literacy' have become increasingly complex to operationalise. People have encountered more graphic variation on the physical page than ever before, and have found themselves in more settings where they need to respond to it.

Now a new range of graphic varieties is emerging, with even more variations, and introducing new constraints on perception and intelligibility. The VDU screen, and the software that feeds it, is taking literacy in new – and little analysed – directions. Consider the problems for memory and comprehension of scrolling – the sideways or downwards movement of text on the screen. Consider the cognitive demands of superimposed windows or of split screens. Consider what is involved when we process highlighted, coloured or animated text. And, above all, consider how we are to assimilate the novel features introduced by the new medium, such as the use in e-mail messages of special graphic conventions to capture spoken tones of voice, or the flouting of the standard conventions of spelling and punctuation.

It is unclear just how much of a challenge this new perspective will be for children. The screen, and whatever is on it, has an intrinsic appeal to a generation brought up in an electronic world. But for the screen to be put to the service of literacy education, the link has to be perspicuously introduced. Children – or, for that matter adults – have to be formally shown that the facilities of the new medium can be used to develop a

powerful and sophisticated literacy. Already we see this happening, in the form of new equipment and techniques in special-needs settings, but there is an urgent need for information about what the medium can legitimately be expected to do – which is why the Docklands Learning Acceleration Project, being carried out on behalf of the National Literacy Association, is so important.

Fresh possibilities

The electronic revolution has often been hailed as the end of the book – but this can be taken with a large pinch of salt, for every communication revolution has been heralded as the end of something. The printing press was condemned as the machine of the devil. People thought film would displace novels. They thought TV would displace film. What actually happens is that a new medium settles down and takes its place alongside the others, offering fresh possibilities. In the case of electronic media, the strength is undoubtedly information retrieval – you can look more things up more quickly than ever before. This was always the weakness of a book, notwithstanding the power of a good index.

The strength of the book, by contrast, is in presentation and organisation. No screen is ever likely to offer the visual possibilities that are routinely available on a large printed page. No amount of windows manipulation can replace what we do when we are working on a project, and see our thoughts usefully littered across the desk scribbled on bits of paper. Nor is the screen likely to replace the physical presence of the book. Maybe one day we shall curl up in bed with a VDU, or take one in the bath – but not for a while yet.

This special issue gives us an opportunity to take stock of where we are, in relation to literacy, and to think about the future. Its focus enables us to focus on the great axiom of literacy – that literacy underpins livelihood. Literacy educators have known this for years, but the message still needs to be brought to the attention of a larger public, and in particular to those controlling government purses. Literacy is at the heart of educational progress. Support for literacy is the best way a government can invest in the future of its people. And the message of the millennium is simple: the future is now.

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