Preface

This textbook was commissioned to accompany ‘Children’s Reading on and with Screens’, a short professional development course co-developed by UCL and the National Literacy Trust. The course was designed for UK primary school teachers and includes face-to-face training and online learning content. Although completion of the course requires students’ engagement with this textbook, the book is also a standalone resource for an international audience. It will be of particular interest to existing or aspiring teachers (student or trainee teachers) and educational professionals. Librarians and policy-makers, educational researchers, and developers and providers of digital reading content for children may also find the book a helpful resource.

The textbook is published electronically, as well as in print, and therefore has some features characteristic of electronic format. For example, self-directed content exploration is encouraged with embedded hyperlinks to cited resources. To ensure the textbook is suitable for an international audience, it was important to ensure that the text was written in a straightforward style without complex or rare vocabulary and that technical terms or acronyms were defined and exemplified. Thanks are due to my publisher and reviewers in helping me format the content according to these requirements.

Throughout the textbook, I recommend various online resources. Researchers need to be cautious about translating findings into practice given the amount of replication and verification necessary to make claims of efficacy and effectiveness. At the same time, researchers who work closely at the intersection of practice and design – as I have done over the past years – recognise that parents, teachers, educational professionals and community workers seek solutions and practical ideas, rather than statements of complexity. Digital books and apps are already in children’s hands, the genie is out of the bottle, so to speak, and practitioners want to guide children’s choices. In light of this reality, I make several suggestions in relation to approaches and resources that
practitioners might find suitable. There are two big caveats that I invite all readers to consider before adopting a resource or approach. First, the digital books and apps on the current educational market have not been evaluated by a body of work that can prove their effectiveness. It is very unlikely that a straightforward use of an application or a reading program will significantly improve the complicated and complex process that is a child’s learning. Similarly, my examples of other teachers’ approaches may be suitable for the context of these teachers, but they may not fit another learning environment. It is only the combination of a measured approach with suitable components that can, over time and consistent application, bring about noticeable positive changes. Therefore, I emphasise again: at this stage of research, it is difficult to say which particular approaches, let alone which particular resources, may be considered effective. My aim with all the recommendations I make in this book is to provide useful suggestions that could be considered appropriate. My choices were guided by the socio-cultural theoretical framework, which emphasises the role of adults in mediating children’s learning experiences with tools and technologies. You, the reader, make a significant difference to how a recommended resource might be used or designed with the children.

The second caveat regarding my recommendations is that many digital media are commercially produced and behind a paywall. I have no financial or commercial interest in any digital books, apps, web services or other products mentioned in this book. (I was actively involved in the development of the Our Story app, which has always been offered for free.) In selecting the recommended resources, I drew on my experience of using them with children, teachers and parents in my work, as well as their personal recommendations. The world of digital content is dynamic and products appear and disappear on a daily basis. It is plausible that by the time this book reaches you, more and newer resources will be available. It is also possible that you will come across more suitable story-making applications or digital library systems that work better in your context than the ones I recommend. If you believe the resources you use in your classroom may be relevant for other people please let me know and I would be happy to review them for future iterations of this book. It is also possible that over time some of the hyperlinks that I have included in this book will no longer lead to the intended resources. If this is the case please let me know and try searching for the resource with its name. If the resource is still available but associated with a different hyperlink, the online search should bring you to the right place. If when reading this book you discover some important omissions or oversights, again please
let me know. The big advantage of digital books is that they can be revised more easily and make use of collaborative and pooled knowledge. I can be contacted via email at n.kucirkova@ucl.ac.uk or Twitter @NKucirkova.

The power of stories

The stories we tell each other reflect an astonishing richness of individual and shared histories and anticipated futures. Digital technologies have changed the ways in which these stories are communicated and received. Children respond to these changes with curiosity and without judgement. They grow up surrounded by stories represented in films, books, games, and their friends’ and family’s words, body movements, facial expressions. These different representations feed off and feed into each other. I approach reading for pleasure in the broadest sense, which includes making meaning of written words, and pictures, manipulating the printed or digital book, and using all one’s senses to interpret the story.

Children’s reading on and with screens can involve reading comments from their Minecraft co-players, practising phonics skills with literacy apps or enjoying Harry Potter on an iPad. Unlike adults, today’s children are unconstrained by a history of being limited to printed books and the habits that have developed as a result. So long as the story interests them, children enjoy engaging with the story characters in paperbacks or hardbacks, in an augmented-reality app version or via a Kindle e-book.

The role of teachers/educators and caring parents is crucial in this age of technological change. We all carry the responsibility to ensure that children are exposed in their reading to diverse formats as well as content. Reading on screen offers unprecedented access to diversity but also unprecedented means of reducing this diversity through targeted algorithms. Children’s discernment in navigating the reading landscape is essential. Cultivating this discernment is a lifelong journey for communities of readers. I suggest one way of starting this journey: positioning children, teachers and families as co-creators of the texts they engage with. I conceptualise such reading in terms of agency and reciprocity.

Agency and reciprocity

Agency is a fundamental characteristic of human beings; it is the volitional choice we all have for thinking and feeling a certain way. Johnston (2004) describes agency in relation to how teachers make the classroom
environment responsive to individual children. In education, agency is about feeling empowered and competent to think and act. My aim with this textbook is to encourage children’s and adults’ agency in authoring their own stories and digital books. Any valuable agency can be asserted only within the framework of reciprocity. Reciprocity is about belonging and the dynamic and ongoing process of negotiating a shared perspective and calibrating responsive relationships. In this textbook, I focus on reciprocity between authors and readers, between adults and children, as well as between reading and writing and between reading on screen and off screen.

Agentic reciprocity connects to the conversational nature of reading and the dialogic self, topics that have been richly theorised and researched by my academic colleagues. I refer to these works throughout this book and provide some specific suggestions for how, within such a theoretical framework, digital books can be used with young children. The reciprocal negotiation between personal agency and shared communities can be illustrated as an ‘ARC’, as captured in Figure 0.1.

Digital books

The primary school is a unique context in which to encourage, strengthen and extend children’s reading on screen and off screen. Children bring to school the stories they have heard, viewed or read in their communities and the reading habits they have observed among their family members and friends. As such, each child is a storyteller in waiting. However, far too often, the richness of children’s personal stories and the diversity of children’s contemporary reading experiences go unnoticed and unrecognised. In large-group school systems, it is up to teachers and other professionals to take up the mantle of modelling and supporting children’s personal stories and children’s expression of stories through reading and writing.

Placed alongside the documented decline in book diversity (Ramdarshan Bold 2018) and some reports of fluctuating motivation in children to read print books (e.g. Common Sense Media [2016] in the US and National Literacy Trust [2016] in the UK) and in students to read long literary texts (Baron 2015), it
may be that story-based digital books enriched with interactive features could invigorate children’s motivation to read for pleasure.

With digital books, children whose first language is not English, and children with language difficulties, can access stories via embedded multimedia and interactive features. Children can also listen to the stories and get immediate feedback or help when they don’t understand. Story apps can be programmed to read to the child, with highlighted text and hotspots that link the story text to specific points of interest. This may be a useful feature in environments where there are not enough teachers for large classrooms or in families where parents are missing because of illness, distance or conflict. What is particularly valuable with digital books is the participatory nature of digital texts. Children can participate in conversations about their reading with other children accessing the same digital library or digital text. Digital books also open up the space for story authorship by offering multimedia options. These spaces need to be enabled and enriched by the expertise of teachers, librarians, parents and researchers. In this textbook, I summarise some key research insights to deliver ideas of practical relevance to educators and other adults who support children’s reading experiences. I focus on digital books created for, with and by individual children and call such books and the reading they support ‘personalised’.

**Personalised reading and me**

Personalised reading and innovative approaches to supporting children’s reading have always fascinated me. I began my research with personalised print books, which we co-created with parents using paper, scissors and cut-out pictures. When tablets and iPads appeared on the market, I was intrigued by the possibility of creating a personalised book in a more seamless and polished way. I have led the development of a smartphone/tablet app called *Our Story* which was designed to support parent–child story-making. To understand how such self-made digital books can be used among diverse populations, I have worked with teachers across the globe (in the UK, US, Spain, Japan, Malta and Slovakia) with typically developing children as well as children with complex educational difficulties.

I continue to explore practical developments in the area of children’s reading on screen and working closely with app developers and children’s publishers in designing new products. There are three guiding principles in my work: that children’s reading needs to be personalised to
intrinsically motivate them; that an optimal reading diet needs to incorporate multiple media, formats and genres; and that children’s reading needs to be reciprocal and mediated by others to be of lasting value. In my design work I call these principles ‘Personalise–Connect–Share’.

There are various ways in which the process of Personalising–Connecting–Sharing can be facilitated in homes and schools. In this book, I focus on story authorship and story-sharing. I explain these processes in a more detailed way in scholarly works concerned with agency and reciprocity in reading (see Further Reading). In my conversations with teachers and families, I explain these processes with the ‘baking metaphor’.

**The baking metaphor**

I love baking and it was when I was making one of my favourite almond cakes that I thought of the analogy between mixing flour, eggs and sugar and mixing text, audio and images in children’s stories. I have been using the baking metaphor with teachers in my workshops for years; I fully describe it in an article for teaching professionals (Kucirkova 2015c: https://www.childcareexchange.com/catalog/magazine/). The metaphor is simple: in terms of ingredients, digital stories are made of images, sounds and text. Stories look and ‘taste’ different depending on how these ingredients are mixed together, in which quantities and who sources them from where. The more the child is involved in ‘baking’ the stories, the more they are likely to appreciate the final result but also the role of the individual ingredients in it. Importantly, cakes are to be shared and recipes are to be tried out and exchanged, which is an important analogy to be considered with children’s multimedia stories. I enjoy baking cakes because they can be shared with others and create a nice moment; similarly, multimedia stories can be used to create a positive atmosphere with our loved ones as well as with people we don’t know.

You could perceive this book as a collection of recipes and ingredients for baking and enjoying children’s digital stories. I have done a lot of work with teachers experimenting and testing and through this process we’ve learnt a lot about our own tastes and others’ preferences. Nevertheless, the suggestions for activities and examples of resources that I share in this book are unlikely to satisfy all tastes. Remember that good bakers are those who can use recipes creatively to satisfy their guests with the ingredients and tools they have available. It is my hope that the insights presented in this book will advance your culinary skills to satisfy the reading habits of children you care about.