



IS IT TIME TO LOOK BACK IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD?

Pedagogical considerations for 21st century educators

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Introduction

I sit in a Brisbane coffee shop with my fourteen-year-old granddaughter, Charlotte. She is not interested in watching the passing parade and chatting to me; instead, she takes out her phone. She has been 'snapchatting' intermittently all day. I think of the slim volume tucked away in my handbag: C.S. Lewis's (1947) *The Abolition of Man*. Perhaps this is *not* the moment to bring it out.

Fifty years separate me from my granddaughter, but it is not the years that worry me. Today I apprehend that a great chasm has opened up between my generation and hers: how we read and how we write. Because our humanness has developed in the crucible of reading and writing – our literacy – fundamental changes in this literacy warrant critical attention. According to Professors Lankshear and Knobel's research (2015), the very definition of 'literacy' has changed; its semantic reach now means the ability to understand information however it is presented. My proposition is that 'Generation Net' (Carr, 2008) to which my granddaughter belongs has been absorbed into a literacy that is fundamentally different to mine in four key areas: orality, reading, writing, and thinking. My purpose in this essay is to examine the landscape of these changes and to ask whether a return to the precepts of classical education can compensate for the deficiencies that such an examination must expose. After refuting arguments that have been mounted against the classical education of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I will claim that a careful new adoption from a metacognitive level down to practical strategies will close the gap. I will also argue for a deeper intellectual ethic for those who have been born in the 21st century that might push them past the shallows of the digital literacy that is shaping them.

Orality: where the journey towards literacy begins

Barry Sanders (1984), in his book *A is for Ox*, builds a case for the importance of orality in the formation of a literate human being. His investigation is anthropological, making reference to primary orality among the ancient Phoenicians, to Native Americans, and the poetic compositions of Homer in ancient Greece. Sanders maintains that orality supports literacy, that 'every person or group of persons who move into literacy first build a foundation for reading and writing in the world of orality. Orality supports literacy, provides the impetus for shaping it' (p. xii). He is supported in this view by Maryanne Wolf (2013), a developmental psychologist at Tufts University. In her article, *How the Reading Brain Resolves the Reading Wars*, she writes:

Some children come from linguistically rich environments with ample exposure to words and letters, while other children come from impoverished linguistic environments with insufficient input for language development, which is critical for reading ... There is no one unfolding reading circuit; rather, it has to be built up out of a great many component parts that are influenced by the oral and written language environment of the child (p. 3).

Sanders decries the rise of electronic machinery that mushroomed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, claiming that it stunted the development of the very young as creatures of orality. Images that flash across the screen in 3.5 seconds move too fast for a developing brain to process (Postman, 1985, pp. 86-87); a rush of excitement is produced, but the interactive dynamic of pre-literate orality has been hijacked. Alarming, by the time these children reach 18, they will have logged more hours with media than in the classroom or with their parents (Sanders, 1984, p. 140).

IS IT TIME TO LOOK BACK IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD?

In the 21st century, the movement away from orality has gained momentum as three-year-olds are given their parents' phones to keep them out of mischief. Their instincts to interact with the concrete world through play are overridden by a screen. They are thus distanced from their storyteller-carer by digital technology that renders them passive receptors of a culture that privileges images over reality. As Postman (1985) argues, this is not good preparation for the focused pursuit of the skills of reading and writing in the classroom (pp. 142–143).

Orality's children: Memorisation and Conversation

Memorisation has always been a feature of language development in cultures where a strong oral tradition is practised. The two great well-springs of Western thought – the Greeks and the ancient Hebrews – educated their young through the memorisation of Homer and the Pentateuch (Signorelli, 2010). The oral tradition persisted in our culture until very recently: the chanting of jingles, the recitation of poetry and the multiplication tables, and the singing of songs could be heard in every classroom in Australia until the 1970s when new pedagogical orthodoxies de-emphasised the value of memorisation. This change, though it has its rationale, entails loss (McEntyre, 2009). Norman Doidge (2008), a research psychiatrist, laments this trend:

Up through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a classical education often included rote memorization of long poems in foreign languages, which strengthened the auditory memory (hence thinking in language), and an almost fanatical attention to handwriting, which probably helped strengthen motor capacities and thus ... added speed and fluency to reading and speaking (p. 41).

When educators decided to drop practices like the memorisation of written text as well as the elocution that walked hand-in-hand with it, the cost was far-reaching. Doidge (2008) records its impact:

The loss of these drills has been costly; they may have been the only opportunity that many students had to systematically exercise the brain function that gives

us fluency and grace with symbols. For the rest of us, their disappearance may have contributed to the general decline of eloquence, which requires memory and a level of auditory brain-power unfamiliar to us now (p. 42).

Mobile phones with their platforms for social media pervade the lives of teenagers in the 21st century. Although they can be seen reading or writing on their phones all day, questions need to be asked about the quality of this new literacy. A Facebook 'conversation' or a Snapchat 'story' you read in 2017 bears no relation to the 'Great Conversation' of which Mortimer Adler spoke (Wise Bauer, 2003) and that Thomas Jefferson demonstrated in 1841 in his letters to John Adams (cited in Wise Bauer, 2003, p. 47). My granddaughter tells me that her story on Snapchat will disappear after 24 hours; the trajectory of Darcy's growth in self-knowledge brought about through honest, eloquent conversations with Elizabeth Bennett has been traced for posterity by Jane Austen's perceptive pen (*Pride and Prejudice*).

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre (2009) weighs in with more evidence about the value of well-considered conversation (pp. 87–110). She alludes to conversation groups such as Samuel Johnson's gatherings in London pubs, Madame de Stael's and Gertrude Stein's weekly salons, the meetings of the Inklings in Oxford and the Parnassiens in Paris (p. 107). The creative output of such groups cannot be disputed. Although, as Christine Rosen (2009) argues, the new technologies are 'transformative and democratic,' she admits that digital conversations are essentially narcissistic:

Judging by the evidence so far, the content we find most compelling is what we produce about ourselves: our tastes, opinions and habits. This has made us better interpreters of our own experience, but it has not made us better readers or more empathetic human beings (p. 53).

Close Cousins: Reading, Writing and Thinking

Scholars in the twenty-first century are issuing warnings about the effects of our interaction with technology: readers and writers who are immersed in Internet technology confess that

IS IT TIME TO LOOK BACK IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD?

their brains are not functioning the way they used to (Carr, 2008). The term 'information obesity' has been coined (Whitworth cited in Thornton, 2012, p. 214); as we bounce from one site to another, we skim texts rather than deeply reading them. Nicholas Carr (2011) in his book *The Shallows* constructs an apt metaphor: 'Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski' (pp. 7–8). And he is not alone. He refers to an essay written by the playwright, Richard Foreman, who fears we are being drained of our 'inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance'; we risk being turned into "pancake people" – spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button' (Carr, 2008).

If this reflects the struggle of clever, well-educated intellectuals, how are the paper-thin minds of my granddaughter's generation coping with the onslaught? Not very well, according to Stephen Thornton (2012), a researcher from Cardiff University, who reports findings from University College London on the learning processes of the Google generation:

Although cautious not to over-generalise, the report suggests that a growing proportion of students entering higher education face the problem identified by Whitworth and Carr: an inability to develop a deep and critical relationship with information. In particular, the speed of young people's web searching means that little time is spent in evaluating information, either for relevance, accuracy or authority ... Young people ... often print off pages with no more than a perfunctory glance at them (p. 214).

Another study, the Committee of Inquiry into the Changing Learner Experience (CLEX), confirms this lack of critical engagement with information, noting that 'many learners display an "uncritical trust in branded search engines"' (Thornton, 2012, p. 215). Thornton goes on to recount the tree octopus hoax conducted by Donald Leu at the University of Connecticut whose team created a website about a supposedly endangered species and asked students to research the topic. Leu's study found that students accepted the hoax at face value, even refusing to discount the existence of

this fictional creature after the hoax had been revealed (Thornton, 2012, p. 215).

Problems in the area of digital literacy are compounded for my granddaughter's generation who are now being dubbed 'generation M' because of their media multi-tasking habits. Professor Paul Dux from the School of Psychology at The University of Queensland reported in 2016 on the effects of media multi-tasking in adolescents, supplying statistics about the habits of the 8 – 18 year olds. His research proves that students who are heavy multi-taskers perform much more poorly on tests of cognitive function than light media multi-taskers. The more media multi-tasking, the lower the GPA for high school and college students. Professor Dux also observed that students themselves are poor judges of how multi-tasking impairs performance (Dux & McMahon, 2016).

Carr (2011) argues that every intellectual technology embodies an intellectual ethic or set of assumptions, which has a profound effect on its users. Postman (2011) agrees: 'Every technology ... is a metaphor waiting to unfold' (p. 84). The ethic that stands behind Google, which at base is a scientific enterprise, pushes our minds towards functioning like fast, data-processing machines. It is all about speed and efficiency. Carr (2008) harkens back to the 'deep reading' that is facilitated by the 'chasms of time not otherwise appropriated' (Jefferson cited in Wise Bauer, 2003, p. 15) spent in the pages of a book. He maintains that this experience opens up quiet spaces for contemplation, for making associations, for drawing inferences and analogies and for fostering ideas. He connects deep reading with deep thinking (Carr, 2008).

Literature – a skylight for the mind

Thomas Gradgrind, the soulless schoolmaster in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, expounds his philosophy of education, which reflects the values of the Industrial Revolution:

"Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals

IS IT TIME TO LOOK BACK IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD?

upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!" (Dickens 353)

He may just as easily be a spokesman for our Google-obsessed world. If what you want is efficient management of flat, unimaginative 'Facts', and if the ultimate purpose of human beings is that they be cogs and gears in the information machine, then Gradgrind's vision has surely been realised in the 21st century. Having explored the shortcomings of a literacy that favours the reading of facts over the deep reading that is facilitated by true Literature, I argue that for the young to be intellectually well nourished they must feed upon the canon of our culture. As Francis Bacon (2001) taught, the literate should 'read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider' (np). Literature does not record clear-cut facts, but creates spaces for ambiguities and complexities. It invites contemplation. It stimulates the human brain to function at its highest level, to transfer learning to a new context, to gain insight into a dilemma, to differently engage a conflict (Fogarty 199). It is the mother of innovative thought.

Is it time to look back in order to move forward?

In her brilliant speech delivered at Oxford in 1947, Dorothy Sayers audaciously called for a return to the educational practice of Shakespeare's day, a system that imparted what she called 'the lost tools of learning'. Reminding her audience that the proportion of literacy in Western Europe was higher in 1947 than it had ever been at a time when people had become more susceptible to the influence of advertisement and propaganda, she asked the question, 'Do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?' (Sayers, 1948, p. 2) Her words resound now as a prescient warning of what was to come. Having established the serious flaws in the educative process of her day, Sayers builds her thesis: that the syllabus of the Middle Ages, which rested

upon the structure known as the 'Trivium': Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric, should be our guide (p. 5).

An ocean away and half a century later, North American educator, Susan Wise Bauer, sounds the call for a return to classical education. She declares war on the fast, efficient, fact-finding ethos of the Internet:

The idea that fast reading is good reading is a twentieth-century weed, springing out of the stony farmland cultivated by the computer manufacturers ... The pursuit of knowledge is centered around a different ethic. The serious reader is not attempting to assimilate a huge quantity of information as quickly as possible, but to understand a few many-sided and elusive ideas. The speed ethic shouldn't be transplanted into an endeavour that is governed by very different ideals (pp. 26–27).

Like Sayers before her, Wise Bauer (2003) asserts that the structure of the medieval trivium will equip and edify learners far better than allowing them to be propelled through a sea of infinite data. They will not be rushed to the opinion stage of an investigation until they have command of the 'grammar' of their subject. Wise Bauer articulates the classical approach to learning:

The classical schoolmaster divides learning into three stages, generally known as the *trivium*. The first stage of education is called the *grammar* stage (in this case, "grammar" means the building blocks, the foundational knowledge of each academic subject). In elementary school, children are asked to absorb information – not to evaluate it, but simply to learn it. Memorization and repetition are the primary methods of teaching; children are expected to become familiar with a certain body of knowledge, but they aren't yet asked to analyse it. Critical thinking comes into play during the second stage of education, the *logic* stage. Once a foundation of information is laid, students begin to exercise their analytical skills; they decide whether information is correct or incorrect, and make connections between cause and effect, historical events, scientific phenomena, words, and their meanings.

IS IT TIME TO LOOK BACK IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD?

In the final stage of secondary education, the *rhetoric* stage, students learn to express their own opinions about the facts they have accumulated and evaluated. So the final years of education focus on elegant, articulate expression of opinion in speech and writing – the study of rhetoric (2003, pp.18–19).

The Counterarguments

This new wave of interest in classical education ushers in an old controversy, however. Wasn't this approach discredited and dismissed more than 100 years ago? The classical educators of the late 1800s and early 1900s were seen as 'calcified, provincial and ornery' by their critics (Perrin, 2017). Some of the charges were indeed justified; they fostered an interest in the past for the past's sake, and mistook drill for discipline. More seriously, they scoffed at their detractors when they suggested that education should meet the needs of a diverse population. When progressive educators suggested a differentiated curriculum, classical educators failed to respectfully engage the debate; rather, they found themselves 'isolated, defensive and increasingly out-of-date' (np). Specifically, when the claim was made that the study of Latin and Greek was of no value, the classicists folded under the weight of new scientific research. They could have countered the argument as Dorothy Sayers (1948) so eloquently did in her discussion of the value of learning the grammatical structure of an inflected language:

I will say at once, quite firmly, that the best grounding for education is the Latin grammar. I say this, not because Latin is traditional and medieval, but simply because even a rudimentary knowledge of Latin cuts down the labour and pains of learning almost any other subject by at least fifty percent. It is the key to the vocabulary and structure of all the Teutonic languages, as well as to the technical vocabulary of all the sciences and to the literature of the entire Mediterranean civilisation, together with all its historical documents (10).

A serious charge against classical education that I have read in a number of blog posts asserts that it is Eurocentric, colonialist and racist, rendering it incapable of meeting the needs of a culturally

diverse population. I argue that this charge stems from a misunderstanding of the classical curriculum. When speaking of the content of her grammar stage for 7–10 year-olds, Dorothy Sayers proposed that children should memorise and recite a wide range of stories of every genre, and she expressed her views on the subject of History:

The grammar of History should consist, I think, of dates, events, anecdotes, and personalities. A set of dates to which one can peg all later historical knowledge is of enormous help later on in establishing the perspective of history. It does not greatly matter which dates: those of the Kings of England will do very nicely, provided that they are accompanied by pictures of costumes, architecture, and other everyday things, so that the mere mention of a date calls up a very strong presentment of the whole period (11).

Clearly, she spoke as an Englishwoman at an English university. Earlier in her speech, she stated that the *Trivium* is not learning, but a preparation for learning; it is the exercise of collecting interesting, relevant facts for the learner who then builds memory muscle that is important here. A teacher in Normanton will teach different historical dates and select different books for her students than one in St Lucia, but the intellectual engagement and verbal linguistic development should be heading in the same direction.

C.S. Lewis has done the homework for us in the area that so often fuels fear and heated debate: value-laden education. What values should we teach our children who come from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds? The secularists insist that the topic be avoided altogether, but this position itself is not neutral. Throughout *The Abolition of Man* lectures, Lewis took the broad view based on his research that all cultures tend to embrace very similar ideals. He proves his point in the Appendix: Illustrations of the Tao (1947, pp. 95–121). In the section devoted to 'The Law of Mercy', for example, he records the wisdom that comes down to us from a range of cultures: Hindu, Babylonian, Ancient Egyptian, Old Norse, Indigenous Australian, Native American, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Ancient Jewish (pp. 115–116). The interesting feature

IS IT TIME TO LOOK BACK IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD?

of this study is that these cultures, which are geographically and historically diverse, all agree about what is good and right. Lewis establishes that such a consensus appears across a broad range of topics. Do we need to be so reticent, then, in developing a curriculum that assumes that values such as honour, courage, integrity and honesty are desirable?

Conclusion

Strategies to ameliorate the negative effects on the literacy of the digital generation need more space than the scope of this paper allows. Renewed efforts to speak to the very young instead of abandoning them to the 'care' of television; setting limits on the media multi-tasking of teenagers; forming 'Shut up and Write' groups (Dux & McMahon, 2016); confirming the place of good literature in reading circles to develop logic and substantiated rhetoric – all these moves will ensure that those educated in the 21st century will not be rendered incoherent by an overwhelming flood of trivial discontinuities, but like Keats' melodist on his famous Grecian urn be 'Forever piping songs forever new.'

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