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Fostering Literacy within a Multi-Media, Multi-Tasking Educational World

The Evolution of Literacy

As widely discussed in the literature, the ascendance of print in the Western world was accompanied by dramatic changes in the range of our language, learning, and modes of thought (e.g., Havelock, 1963; Ong, 2002). Some would argue that the latter shifts were as much the consequence of schooling as of the written medium per se. Yet, it was significantly the growing availability of print that fueled and enabled wide-scale schooling in the Western world and, in turn, it was through print that the products and advances of education were principally explicated and disseminated—with each successive layer of print bootstrapping the depth and breadth of our collective language, thought, and knowledge, and each wave of readers and writers enriching and expanding the language, thought, and knowledge offered by print.

One of more provocative themes of Alberto Manguel's book, *The History of Reading* (1996) centers on the historical elusiveness of these affordances of print. Written language, in one form or another, has been around for thousands of years; alphabetic scripts for more than 3000. Nevertheless, the notion that written language was to be read for pleasure or understanding, much less as a starting point for reflection or learning *beyond* the print, was hardly appreciated much less accepted by Europeans until the early Renaissance.

In Manguel's tracing of the history of reading, reflective, thoughtful reading arose only as readers developed the skill of reading silently. Although, there were exceptions—the later Greek scholars, the aristocracy of ancient Rome, and a few heretics and saints across the dark ages and medieval eras—silent reading was a rare and even mysterious act until the 16th century. Only in the last 150 years, with the proliferation

and variety of affordable print brought by the industrial revolution, did silent reading become the norm among the literati, and only in the 20th century did educators deem it the expected mode of reading for students.

Manguel tells the story of St. Augustine's bewilderment on watching St. Ambrose's strange practice of reading silently. Manguel then tells of St. Augustine's surprise and elation when, many reading-filled years later, he discovers himself—for the first time and without any intention of so doing— silently grasping a single line of print. It was a line that St. Augustine had read aloud many times before and yet, at that moment of silent apprehension, he finds his mind lending new meaning and significance to the verse, connecting it to events and concerns beyond the text. This was the 4th century A.D. St. Augustine was at once a convert to silent reading and reflection, but it would be a thousand years before there were many others.

A major reason for the long predominance of reading aloud was that few realized there could or should be anything else. The value of written text was principally seen as a support system – a crib sheet—for what had always been the primary, well-established, and broadly revered communication technology of the educated: oral rhetoric. Written text was meant to archive and support oral rhetoric. It was a memory aid with which true scholars were to do without. The language transcribed in written text was meant to be learned by heart. It was meant to be delivered orally to others. Even when reading alone, it was meant to be read "loud enough for the reader to hear it himself." People, even the readers themselves, were to "lend their ears" to the messages and stories archived in print.

But there was another factor in play, too. Reading was openly acknowledged to be *very* difficult. As explained by a Roman doctor, "those who have never learned verses by heart and must instead resort to reading them in books sometimes have great pains in eliminating, through abundant perspiration, the noxious fluids" that result (Manguel, 1996, p. 60). So rare and special was the ability to read in medieval Europe, that those who could do so were broadly exempted from secular authority and imprisonment. Bundles of birch switches became emblematic of schoolmasters, for learning to read was

understood to be a challenge requiring far more discipline and perseverance than most students could muster without such special encouragement.

It was oft reminded, then as now, that it was truly possible to read only such text as one knew already. What we mean by that today, of course, is that the understanding of a text depends on the language and background knowledge with which the reader meets it. In scholastic tradition of auld, by contrast, this kind of understanding was not even a goal of instruction. Rather, the prior knowledge of concern was verbatim knowledge: Except to the extent that the reader was already familiar with the language on the page, its reading was expected to be so arduous and fallible as to be pointless.

As silent reading displaced reading aloud, the places of reading changed alongside. Where the scriptorium had traditionally been a noisy place where the scribes recited aloud the manuscripts that they copied, systems of gestures were now enforced so as not to disrupt the work of others. Where the Roman aristocracy had once built special rooms—auditoriums—for the social act of reading, the Renaissance aristocracy now built (and showed off) fancy beds to boast their love of the private act of reading. Writers wrote of stealing away with their books, of yearning for those private times and places where they could read without interruption. Reading for understanding, they found, required prolonged concentration. It required the time and solitude to release one's mind and thoughts to the ideas and events raised by the text.

The Development of Literacy

Manguel's story of how literacy evolved over the ages aligns closely with how literacy today develops within individuals. Learning how to read is very hard for most children: Just watch their body language. Further, learning how to read is only the beginning of the literacy journey set out for them. Once having basically learned *how* to read, much time and practice are required to strengthen and integrate the underlying skills to the level at which thought and attention can be freed from the process of reading and turned to its products and profit. Nor is reading a challenge that is ever fully mastered,

plus-perfect. Regardless of one's overall reading proficiency and no matter the topic, those texts that offer new information and new insight (and in their service, new language) require concentrated time and mind. And bear in mind: If good reading is hard, good writing is far, far harder even as it depends, itself, on good reading.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (2007) has reported a significant decline in the amount of reading undertaken by American adolescents and, alongside, in their reading ability. At issue, however, is not merely *how much* people read but also *what* they read. In 2006, ACT, Inc., reported that among students who took its college-entrance exam, the reading scores of 51% -- more than half -- fell below the minimum cut-off for college or workplace readiness. Follow-up analyses indicated that the major difficulty for the students was less an inability to read *per se* than their inability to understand linguistically and conceptually more complex texts. In turn, students' struggles with complex texts have repeatedly been tied to reductions in the difficulty of the texts that are assigned and instructionally supported in middle- and secondary-school (see Adams, 2009).

Research has shown that the amount and kinds of reading experience that a student has accumulated are strongly predictive of her or his language development, knowledge, and reasoning facility, and that this is so over and above differences in entry abilities (see Stanovich, 2000). Conversely, analyses of poor reading comprehension among older students points to weaknesses in language development, background knowledge, and reasoning abilities as the underlying causes (e.g., Schatschneider et al, 2004; O'Reilly & McNamara, 2007). The relationship is reciprocal.

In his book, *The Gutenberg Elegies* (2006), Sven Birkerts struggles with the same set of issues. Proud and happy with himself for having assembled so enriching, engaging, and accessible a set of stories for an undergraduate literature course, Birkerts tells of his deep disappointment at the students' roundly negative response to each story in turn. More closely probing their reactions leads Birkherts to conclude, in line with researchers, that discomfort with the vocabulary and syntax of the literature was part of the students' problem. But only part. "What [the students] really could not abide was what the

vocabulary, the syntax, and so forth were communicating. What is at issue is not diction, not syntax, but everything that diction and syntax serve" (p. 18).

Summarizing his take on the situation, Birkerts writes:

> Chip and screen have … put single-track concentration, the discipline of reading, under great pressure. In its place we find the restless, grazing behavior of clicking and scrolling. Attention spans have shrunk and fragmented – the dawning of the age of ADD…Who has the time or will to read books the way people used to?
>
> What will be the fate of… the age-old practice of addressing the world by way of this inward faculty of imagination? (Birkerts, 2006, p. xiv).

The Question for Us

It may be argued that the technological possibilities we entertain today are themselves very much the product of our cumulative and collective literary heritage. It may also be argued that our excitement as we imagine the information and learning opportunities that this technology potentially offers is equally the product of our own literacy experiences.

It may be argued that even in the future, the sorts of cognition and communication afforded by reading and writing will be necessarily *at least* for the creators of such technology and of its content and dynamics. If so, then don't we want to endow *all* students with the knowledge and skills to engage in these activities?

Reminding again the intense and prolonged practice on which becoming a good reader and writer depends, my question for this group is how can we design educational technologies and their use so as ever to promote and enrich this sort of learning and thought, both individually and collectively. Unless we give this question earnest address, there is the real possibility that the technologies to be offered may, instead, unintentionally diminish it.

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