

Chapter I

Scanners and Readers: Digital Literacy and the Experience of Reading

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Abstract

While heralding the positive learning outcomes of computer-aided instruction, rigorous assessment must also monitor the changes in literacy that accompany it and qualify the benefits of technical content delivery. A decline in literary reading, recently documented by a National Endowment for the Arts study, is a case in point. This chapter inquires as to whether the cognitive and cultural changes incurred by reading fewer books are significant relative to the overall gains yielded by technological change in the classroom learning environment. It argues that the impressive focus on multimodal literacy in classrooms from elementary levels through college, which seems to favor diversity of content, is prone to exclude the analytic challenges that literary reading and the growth of historical consciousness demand. This chapter presents evidence that suggests the indispensability of literary reading experience alongside technologically enabled or enhanced modes of learning.

Introduction

It is increasingly the case that to speak of “technological education” is to commit a tautology, like saying “green grass” or “the salty ocean.” A recent headline says it all: “Arizona School Trades Textbooks for Laptops.” This is not to say that all classrooms, especially those in less-privileged school settings, have reached the cutting edge. Even for fairly advanced or tech-savvy instructors in well-funded programs, their practical relationship to innovational methods and machines is asymptotic, always out of reach just as they purchase the most recent version of software. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the technological transfiguration of education as such is the rule, not the exception, and with it the rise of digital literacy, and that the only variable to be noted in this evolution is the specific timing of its institutionalization, with some schools or sectors lagging others due to geographic and socio-economic factors.

Regardless of whether some schools have fully computerized learning environments, most administrators, teachers and students desire to have computers and Internet capability. Try to imagine a situation in which new computer equipment is offered by the administration to faculty to upgrade their classroom, and a teacher replies, “I would prefer not to. Just give us more books.” Such a preference seems almost unimaginable. In this regard, it is not an aberration but a general trend signified in the title of the following article: *Packing Up the Books: University of Texas Becomes the Latest Institution to Clear Out a Main Library to Make Room for Computers* (Mangan, 2005). This trend, which we will have occasion to call, tongue-in-cheek, stealth *Fahrenheit 451*, evinces the usurpation of literary space by digital media and, as such, poses a challenge to educational diversity insofar as infrastructure becomes pervasively technical and students themselves become “scanners” and “Web hounds” as opposed to “readers.” These are no longer labels, but identities, with specific cognitive styles and moral dispositions. No in-depth study has yet been written that describes and evaluates the differences between these forms of subjectivity. This chapter will highlight problems and raise questions in preparation for such a study. It will also argue for the value of literary reading as a necessary counterbalance to technical content delivery.

Other than Information

That there are positive educational aspects of technical instruction and media is not in question here. To be sure, a book such as Steven Johnson’s *Everything Bad is Good for You* goes too far in heralding the cognitive advantages associated with using new digital media such as video games, downplaying the fact that the cultural content of video games is still largely based on male combat or arcade scenarios narrow in moral and intellectual scope compared to the rich diversity of world literature. It has been argued that playing intricate computer games mimics the experience of reading great literature. But anyone who has seen an avid gamer hurry to “beat” a new game and then trade it in for another knows that such games cannot be compared to unbeatable novels like *Moby-Dick* or *Middlemarch*, which invite repeated and remarkably different readings over the course of a lifetime from the same reader.

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