
Books, Reading, and Undergraduate Education

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ABSTRACT

FORECASTS OF THE DEMISE OF THE printed book or codex and the associated changes in the academic library foster valid questions about the continuing place of reading and print media in American colleges. This article cites the increasing interest paid to information technologies by higher education, particularly college libraries, and the corresponding competition from radio, television, motion pictures, video, and a changing campus culture characterized by separation rather than unity, isolation rather than community. The author recognizes a nearly universal expectation for immediate gratification of a need for answers rather than understanding. He suggests that reading remains a fundamental building block for a liberal education, providing a broad basis for knowledge and understanding. The essay concludes with an advocacy for reinforcing student critical reading skills and habits giving them a contextual framework for a lifetime of self-directed learning. The book remains at the center of a critical reading program.

INTRODUCTION

This article offers a consideration of the place of books and reading in American undergraduate education. In it, the author considers the current popularity of reading in American culture and how this is reflected among undergraduates. Some key contributing factors which influence the current popularity of reading are identified. The significance of books in the teaching and learning of undergraduates is discussed, especially in contrast to the significance of other communications media.

The author also theorizes on the role of college libraries in affecting this significance. Finally, the article ends with a discussion of the relationship between reading and lifelong critical thinking skills.

During the past fifteen years, the author has observed an increasing discordance between the scholarly habits and readiness for learning of undergraduates and their college instructors. This discordance includes college librarians, who frequently measure increasing student preference for the convenience of periodical literature and the growing variety of electronic media rather than for books.

THE FUTURE OF BOOKS IN AMERICAN COLLEGES

Carl Kaestle et al. (1991) have observed that "even books may be more necessary than discretionary for many people in a society that has become very print-oriented . . ." (p. 178). Recent reports from various governmental and educational agencies indicate that the nation's adult literacy, reading comprehension, and verbal skills are at disturbingly low levels. Furthermore, I wonder about the future of "necessary communication" being affected by "the substitution of electronic media for print media."

Thus far, and despite the direst predictions, Kaestle et al. report that the portion of the public that reads books has remained roughly constant during this age of electronic communication (p. 165). In fact, according to annual book sale statistics, the percentage of people that buys books has actually increased. But what is being read in greater numbers is less often the material upon which critical thinking depends.

A book's positive qualities are readily apparent in the college environment. They can be easily produced in multiple inexpensive and identical copies, thereby enabling groups of students to acquire and use them independently of each other. They are compact, easy to transport, and require no additional equipment to use them, supporting a variety of teaching and learning styles and environments.

Critics of the printed book point out their limited capacity for true interaction with readers. They attack the book's linear sequential organization, arguing that it makes either the deliberate or random access to selected portions of the text cumbersome. As this argument goes, the book's singular advantage—an unalterable text—actually poses negative constraints for those who crave an unfettered interaction (reorganization of its contents, additions to, and revisions of the author's ideas and statements).

All of these concerns ignore the book's nearly infinite flexibility for reader interaction, largely dependent on the reader's active imagination and capacity for critical thought. In this sense, no format is more flexible, less linear in format, than the book, controlled by the reader's mind. The arguments in the preceding paragraph suggest that the passive mind set of many today may be encouraged by the nonprint formats which are

used not only to entertain but to teach and inform. Reading books, ultimately, excites and engages the imagination of the reader, fostering an active attitude toward learning.

Are books, in fact, already "obsolete?" This is the conclusion of Ted Nelson (who coined the term "hypertext"). Perhaps the union of print and words is not essential. College students as scholars in growing numbers are burdened with complex social concerns, very high costs for education, and time-consuming jobs to meet these costs. Their successful scholarship is further hampered by a decline in the amount and variety of reading at the secondary school level, fostering a lack of contextual understanding with which to appreciate the variety and extent of college reading assignments. And, therefore, Nelson concludes that, with the advent of electronic communications, this information age "is really the age of information lost" (Max, 1994, p. 71).

Hypertext and multimedia formats represent the most critical immediate challenges to printed text. These new communications formats challenge the present prominence of books, newspapers, journals, and even video through the variety of choices they allow for interaction with their content. College libraries are increasingly offering reference tools like dictionaries, encyclopedias, and indexes in electronic form. Conjectures like those of Donald Norman, founder of the University of California, San Diego's cognitive science department, that "within 10 years, dictionaries will essentially all be electronic" are not that radical (Lyll, 1991, p. 3). Already, their print counterparts are seldom the first choice of undergraduates.

By no means has the permanence of the printed book and its organization and preservation by libraries been mortally impaired. Although a growing number of printed works have been fully transferred to digitized texts on, for example, the Internet, the most successful electronic and multimedia "publishing" ventures are very specialized with content and form well suited to the new technologies.

Some observers of American higher education have forecast a fundamental revolution, inspired by technology, in the organization of, and access to, information. Richard Lanham, a retired UCLA English professor, believes that the computer "is smashing the ordered, rational requirements [of] Western scholarship...epitomized in the printed book" (Wilson, 1994b, p. A22). Lanham and others foresee a new way that college students will learn and think. It is possible that information technologies will reinforce the importance of the written (although not always printed) word, and that the "life of the mind as pursued in the arts and letters . . .[will] be reaffirmed and enriched" (p. A22).

Before considering the practice of reading in the undergraduate culture, what do the preceding references contribute to the determination of the place of the book in collegiate life and learning today? This

author suggests that the book in printed form has already been joined by various textual alternatives to the printed word. Campus information networks provide easy access to electronic media (audio, video, and data) at a growing number of colleges. College libraries, formerly centers for the (printed) book, have been transformed in a matter of only a few years into information service centers. However, at the center of the library's purpose remains the book (in all its forms). The professional responsibilities for the acquisition, organization, preservation, and distribution of information continue, in my opinion, as the college library's central mission.

LITERACY AND THE UNDERGRADUATE

Kaestle et al. (p. 150) describe a well informed "reading elite" who are at the top of the Western literacy hierarchy. Members of an expanding "aliterate" group who can read but depend by choice on the media for information and entertainment feel that reading is beneath them. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the poorly educated and uninformed "functional illiterates." Undoubtedly, a formal liberal education is intended to prepare graduates to join the ranks of the "reading elite." Unfortunately, a by-product of the technology revolution has been the keener realization that a literacy hierarchy already exists. The college faculty confronts the annual reality of first-year college students who (in increasing numbers) are aliterate. The turn to electronic technologies (particularly multimedia) as college teaching tools may positively enhance undergraduate learning, but I agree with Lynn McKell (Brigham Young University) that "students must analyze printed ideas, and synthesize through written and oral expression and unstructured problem solving. Lacking this [the new technology], it's just TV, at its worst, all over again" (Hofstetter, 1994, p. 6).

The compelling attraction of the new communications technologies is forcefully confirmed by Hofstetter (1994): "People retain only twenty percent of what they see and thirty percent of what they hear. But they remember fifty percent of what they see and hear, and as much as eighty percent of what they see, hear, and do simultaneously" (p. 7). This message has not been lost on undergraduate educators. College teaching has experienced more than two decades of continually advancing instructional uses of nonprint media. Academic libraries, in the same period, have acquired and encouraged the use of an expanding variety of nonprint and electronic media.

The implementation of these new information technologies provides students with the ready means to attain a common contextual framework in various subject areas; I doubt that the depth of understanding attainable from critical reading would also be assured by technology. The common contextual understanding will still be acquired through extensive reading and discussion of the literature. It is specifically the lack of this

common cultural context and understanding in college classrooms (provided to a print-based society through books and other written communication) which I believe is the most tangible indicator of the place of books in the academic lives of undergraduates today.

READING AND A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Reading, according to Birkerts (1994), is a deliberate undertaking, requiring an entire set of constraints and obligations. Although a book always imposes an order for its contents—an order conceived by the writer—the reader may still use an infinite number of subterfuges to read between the lines to subvert the lessons imposed.

The literacy associated with reading books in the college experience may be reinforced by a “multimedia literacy” which makes reading dynamic. Far from ignoring text (words), multimedia expand the text “by bringing it to life with sound, pictures, music, and video” (Hofstetter, 1994, p. 7). Furthermore, the linear indexing of the printed book is replaced and enhanced by multimedia’s automatic searching capacities, referring the reader to internal contents of the title and to other linked electronic documents. Multimedia, potentially, offers compelling support rather than competition for reading in future undergraduate education.

Multimedia is already changing how newspapers are read. Hofstetter reports that *ClariNews*, an electronic newspaper, delivers not only text, but also graphics, audio, and video and already boasts more than 40,000 readers worldwide. An electronic edition of *The Wall Street Journal* and a related customized onscreen service called *Personal Journal* are also available. Other newspapers, including *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, offer online editions.

I believe that reading will continue to be of fundamental importance in undergraduate education and the most critical skill of lifelong learners. Academic libraries, in collaboration with faculty, must increase their efforts to encourage the integration of critical thinking in the curriculum through the supported relevance and expanded requirement of serious reading. As these efforts go forward, it would be advisable to keep in mind these observations by Kirschbaum of Warner Books:

The idea that this next generation is going to start at page 1 and go to page 284 and then close the book is wrong. This is a generation...raised on...multimedia stimuli. They don't think linearly; they think mosaically. And they're much more used to getting their information from talking and listening than from reading books. (Lyall, 1991, p. 20)

Reinforcing this observation is the following statement by Allan Bloom (1987): “[O]ur students have lost the practice of and taste for reading. They have not learned how to read, nor do they have the expectation of delight or improvement from reading” (p. 62).

These observations by Kirshbaum and Bloom are troubling. They suggest that an increasing proportion of adults, including some of today's college students, find reading in breadth and depth to be beyond their capacities for tolerance, much less enlightenment and satisfaction. College teaching increasingly uses electronic technology to bridge the growing gap between an aliterate population of undergraduates and an ever-expanding knowledge base.

Kirshbaum's sobering observation, therefore, provides a challenge to all who participate in undergraduate education. The printed book will likely continue to be at the center of a college student's education, but the "locus of important intellectual communication" will embrace not only books but multimedia; herein lies the territory for a refocused and revitalized mission for college libraries of the future.

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