
The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age

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Wayne Otto's Proposal

The cover of Barry Sanders's (1994) book *A Is For Ox* carries this chilling subtitle: *The Collapse of Literacy and the Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age*. And the chill deepens as he develops, quite convincingly, his argument that "the idea of critical, self-directed human being we take for granted as the working foundation of our humanness" is in the process "of deconstructing and falling away entirely from the human repertoire" (p. xi). The fundamental problem, he says, is that the way to orality—the essential foundation for reading and writing, for literacy—has been blocked by electronic machinery. Movies, records, video games, TVs, CDs, and PCs all combine to replace children's verbal interactions with parents and peers, which lie at the heart of orality. The electronic media allow no interruptions; hence, there is no practice with language, no preparation for understanding words and sentences and meanings.

Sanders offers no easy solution to the problems that surround the breakdown in orality. "The solution," he suggests, "can come only if teachers and parents and administrators first hold a vision of what life should look like, and then be willing to work to realize it" (p. 240).

Much as I'd like to see us tackle it, I'm afraid that developing a definitive vision of what life should be like is a far bigger task than we can handle in a Problems Court session. On the other hand, it seems to me that such a session is a legitimate forum for thinking together about

ways in which we reading people—not reading teachers, mind you, but people who read—continue to develop our own personal vision of what life should be like.

No less a personage than Nicholas Negroponte offers what I take to be some words of encouragement for such a pursuit. He gives the following as one of his reasons for offering *Being Digital* (1995) as an old-fashioned book rather than in a digital format:

Interpretive multimedia leaves very little to the imagination. Like a Hollywood film, multimedia narrative includes such specific representations that less and less is left to the mind's eye. By contrast, the written word sparks images and evokes metaphors that get much of their meaning from the reader's imagination and experiences. When you read a novel, much of the color, sound, and motion comes from you. I think the same kind of personal extension is needed to feel and understand what 'being digital' might mean to your life. (p. 8)

In this brief passage, it seems to me, Negroponte acknowledges not only a major culprit in the ravaging of orality, but also a promising champion to effect its renewal. That champion is us. Reading people. People who read.

Sven Birkerts gives us many insights into one person's notions of what life should be like in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994). I particularly like this passage, where he looks to the future, and, like Barry Sanders, he looks for ways to save his self from the ravagement of electronic machines:

I stare at the textual field on my friend's screen and I am unpersuaded. Indeed, this glimpse of the future—if it is the future—has me clinging all the more tightly to my books, the very idea of them. If I ever took them for granted, I do no longer. I now see each one as a portable enclosure, a place I can repair to release the private, unsocialized, dreaming self. A book is solitude, privacy; it is a way of holding the self apart from the crush of the outer world. (p. 164)

The subtitle of Birkerts's book *The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* is an appropriate title for this Problems Court. In keeping with the theme of the 1996 Annual Conference—Promises, Progress, and Possibilities—the purpose is to provide an opportunity for people who read to examine the evolution of their personal definition of what it means "to read," to reflect on how (or whether) that definition relates to a

personal vision of what life should be like, and to look ahead to how that definition may be affected in the electronic age.

The Problems Court Discussion

About 25 participants, including the presenters, attended the session and presented an array of opinions and experiences about the fate of reading in this electronic age. The papers that follow express some of these personal views and provide a range of viewpoints, insights, and cautions.

Wayne Otto said, "Listen to Vonnegut"

About the time that I began to reflect on what it means to me "to read" and how my personal definition of "to read" has evolved, I came across an interview with Kurt Vonnegut that had been reprinted in *Harper's Magazine* (September, 1996; originally in *Inc. Technology*, November, 1995). Vonnegut had been asked to discuss his feelings about living in an increasingly computerized world. His response, titled "Technology and Me," sums up my thoughts much more eloquently than I could.

I work at home, and if I wanted to, I could have a computer right by my bed, and I'd never have to leave it. But I use a typewriter, and afterward I mark up the pages with a pencil. Then I call up this woman named Carol out in Woodstock and say, "Are you still doing typing?" Sure she is, and her husband is trying to track bluebirds out there and not having much luck, and so we chitchat back and forth, and I say, "Okay, I'll send you the pages." Then I go down the steps and my wife calls, "Where are you going?" "Well," I say, "I'm going to buy an envelope." And she says, "You're not a poor man. Why don't you buy a thousand envelopes? They'll deliver them and you can put them in the closet." And I say, "Hush." So I go to this news stand across the street where they sell magazines and lottery tickets and stationery. I have to get in line because there are people buying candy and all that sort of thing, and I talk to them. The woman behind the counter has a jewel between her eyes, and when it's my turn, I ask her if there have been any big winners lately. I get my envelope and seal it up and go to the postal convenience center down the block at the corner of Forty-seventh Street and Second Avenue, where I'm secretly in love with the woman behind the counter. I keep absolutely poker-faced; I never let her know how I feel about her. One time I had my pocket picked in there and got to meet a cop and tell him about it. Anyway, I address the envelope to Carol in Woodstock. I stamp the envelope and mail it in a mailbox in front of the post office, and I go home. And I've

had a hell of a good time. I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different.

That pretty much sums up what "to read" has come to mean to me. Now that I'm retired, I no longer feel compelled to spend most of my reading hours perusing professional books and journals. (In retrospect, I'm convinced that all that perusing never did a thing to enhance my grasp of what it means "to read." To the contrary. But that's another story.) After years of compulsive, guilt-driven reading, I'm free at last to fart around. So when *Snow Falling on Cedars* makes me wonder about the Japanese internment during WWII, I find another book and read it. And when a whimsical little book titled *The Death of Napoleon* makes me wonder about Napoleon, I read a bunch of big, serious books about Napoleon. And so on and so forth. And do you know what? I know that if I had caught on a lot sooner about what it really means "to read" I'd have been one whole hell of a lot better reading teacher.

Rick Erickson's To Read Is To Play

Earlier this year I read David Lodge's novel, *Nice Work*. In the story, a manufacturing plant manager's work is viewed through the eyes of a bright and lively female English professor. Likewise, her university work is seen through the eyes of the equally sharp plant manager. The clash created by this arrangement makes the book both funny and illuminating. For example, after a few days on campus the manager, appalled at the university's easy-going work arrangements, confronts the professor with, "Reading at work is a waste of time—it doesn't produce anything." Her quick and intense reply is, "Here, reading is serious work. Work that produces meaning." That phrase was so appealing that I remember saying it over and over to myself for several days. Rolling in it like a pig in cool mud on a hot day . . . reading is work that produces meaning, reading is work that produces . . . , and so on. But later in the year when I read Barry Sanders book *A is for Ox*, I had to change my chant.

Instead of thinking "to read" means "to work," Sanders convincingly tells how "play" is a much better way to think about storytelling, reading, and writing. Sanders describes how pre-literate people realized that language, especially sacred stories told over and over by wise priests, is not to be confused with reality. For example, in Zuni storytelling sessions, clowns called Koyemshi or Mudheads stand at one end of the pueblo parodying with grotesque and exaggerated gestures every word of the priest storyteller who occupies the opposite end. Dressed in costumes, often as women, the Koyemshi make very clear to everyone that information, even the most important information, can always be read in an entirely different way—even in an opposite way. Through these tricksters, nonliterate people make it graphically

clear that language always casts a distorted shadow of itself. Through the Mudheads, a reassuring laugh goes out to warn the entire community: Do not take this stuff so seriously!

Sanders says that today literate cultures have forgotten this ancient wisdom. Instead, we literates rely on language as if every utterance corresponded absolutely with reality. That is, we invest our sentences—spoken or written—with so much importance that we dupe ourselves into mistaking sentences for reality itself.

When I read this I vaguely recalled a scene in Tony Hillerman's book *Sacred Clowns*. I found my copy and sure enough, there it was.

The Koshare, you know about them, I used to know a Hopi man who was a koshare at Moenkopi. He would say to me: 'compared to what our Creator wanted us to be, all men are clowns. And that's what we koshare do. We act funny to remind the people. To make the people laugh at themselves. We are the sacred clowns,' he said. (p. 164)

When I returned to read *A is for Ox*, I tried to find where I had left off. As I scanned the text, my silent chant of reading is work that produces . . . started up again but stopped when I read:

The majority of teachers, however, ignore the risible, absolutely playful nature of language. Exactness and precision dominate their approach. Almost everyone demands the same exactness from language as he or she has come to expect from computer programs. (p. 88)

Even though I don't want to, I have to agree with Sanders. We school types tell students that reading and writing are their work. We have invented thousands of teaching strategies to get students to take this "work" seriously, to do it "right." We closely supervise reading and writing watching for miscues and a host of "errors." We have a thousand ways to evaluate, provide feedback, assign grades so that seven degrees below "perfect" is a 93 or a B. In school, we labor under the illusion that through hard work, not play, we can eliminate all but a few stammers, miscues, grammar and spelling mistakes. Our seriousness about reading and writing sends a clear but mistaken message that we must, through hard work, turn the imperfect processes of speech, reading, and writing into precise behaviors.

The illusion that speech, reading, and writing must be "correct" more than 93 out of 100 times is further supported today by the use of personal computers. Sanders says we fool ourselves by believing that

through technology we will "get it right" because PC programs admit no ambiguity and incongruity. We expect to "get it right" because the wonderful machine makes our written work look so perfect. So we believe technology and hard work will enable our students to achieve perfection in literacy.

But both *A is for Ox* and Hillerman's character in *Sacred Clowns* remind us of how language and humans always fall short of being perfect, exact, or right. Sanders reminds us of the need to laugh at ourselves and keep a perspective of playfulness because "the standard of linguistic precision is only an illusion. Ambiguity best characterizes the nature of language" (p. 89).

As I think about all of this it occurs to me that as a life-long-school-type-book-lover, it is only natural I coveted the words of Lodge's professor and chanted over and over, reading is work that produces meaning. But now, as I see what is happening in our schools and our culture, I'm convinced we have become far too serious about reading and writing. So I've decided to put on a mask and a clown suit. I think it's time to begin to listen to some clowns in our own pueblos. Here is what happens when you think like a Mudhead clown.

In September this year, I read an editorial by Mortimer Zuckerman, editor-in-chief, *U. S. News & World Report*, entitled "Why Schools Need Standards." Zuckerman wrote that 78% of the public favors standards for students in K-3 and by a 2-1 margin they want to require students to pass standardized national examinations for promotion from grade to grade. Zuckerman said a reason for student lackluster performance is the lack of national standards. He said everyone knows science, two plus two, and grammar is the same in Oregon, Florida, Detroit, San Diego. He called for higher standards to induce performance-based innovation in schools and performance-based assessment of teachers and administrators. He ended his pitch with the warning that if we don't do this now, before we are inundated with millions of new students, we will suffer further decline in the school system and fall further behind a competitive world. If we don't get it right he warns, we are doomed.

As I finished his editorial, I imagined Zuckerman wanting us to chant, standards will work to induce excellence, standards will work to . . . and I daydreamed the following scene. We are in a cool, dimly lit pueblo. At one end, editor-in-chief Zuckerman is telling his story "Why Schools Need Standards." At the other end of the room a Zuni Mudhead and a Hopi koshare are heckling Zuckerman. They hoot and dance to remind us, the audience, that standards and testing are merely

language—they are not precise and they do not truly reflect or represent reality. The clowns poke fun at Zuckerman to remind us not to take his language, his story, his warning, so seriously. The clowns tell us that he is confused. Standards, testing, surveillance, and competitive testing where our children outperform others—are not reality. He is confusing the language of tests and standards for reality and is concluding that teachers are unprepared, schools are in decline, and the country is falling behind in a competitive world. As Zuckerman tells his story, he is interrupted as the Mudhead and the koshare dance and sing an off-beat, out-of-tune laughing chant that sounds like, “reading is play that implies meaning, reading is play that implies meaning.” When one clown kneels to write in the sand floor the other one joyfully kicks the symbols into dust to show how writing is frail, temporary.

Caught in the middle, we in the audience are left alone when Zuckerman and the clowns stop. I walk out of the pueblo and as I squint in the bright sunlight I almost bump into one of the clowns, a Zuni Mudhead who is taking off her mask. I ask her, “Do you think we take standards, testing, competition too seriously?” She doesn’t look me in the eyes, she busies herself packing up her mask and costume and quietly asks, “Do I think it is vain, naive, stupid to believe that language standards and tests can force teachers to make our children smarter—smarter than children in other countries? No, speaking as a clown, I think it’s funny,” and she turns and strides away, laughing to herself.

Suddenly my daydream was interrupted by the bong and the “You have new mail” window on my PC screen. I sat up, clicked on the window, checked my e-mail, and saw a message from Harry at American University in Cairo, Egypt. It’s a silly piece called *Hunting an Elephant*. I chuckled when I read, “Lawyers don’t hunt elephants, they follow herds around arguing about who owns the droppings.” Deciding to print a copy to share with my lawyer friend, Tom, I stood at the printer waiting, thinking about reading and writing as play. Then I remember other “fun” e-mail. With Harry’s hard copy in hand I return to my PC, look at my mail box, and scroll through four months of 204 messages to see that since July 1996, there are 37 or 18% fun and joke messages from guess who—Gus, Harry, Norm, Wayne. The rest I classify as either one-way (112 or 55%) or two-way (55 or 27%) messages.

I’m pleased that almost 20% of my e-mail consists of clowning around on the Internet. It looks like my rough e-mail tally lends some support for the ancients’ practice of keeping a playful or “fun” flavor to reading and writing. Even professor types using the latest communication technology can’t help but “play” on e-mail. If the clowns are right

the chances are about 1:5 that my next e-mail will be a funny "playful" message.

As I consider all of this I confess it still feels right to chant, reading and writing is work that produces meaning. But I also must confess that I had a lot of fun writing this, and I'm having a lot of fun "playing" as I tell this story. I'm convinced that "to read" and "to write" and "to speak," must always have a flavor of "to play." Today, more than ever before, we need wise clowns to warn us not to take reading and writing, especially language testing and standards, so seriously.

This warning is especially important today. The speed and ease of electronic language is marvelous, but we must not be tricked into thinking that hard work plus technology will automatically lead to perfection in writing and reading. The clown at the other end of the pueblo is there to remind us that we'll never eliminate the natural inexactness of human speaking, writing, reading, and listening.

Ken Smith's Literacy and Wisdom in Cyberspace

While eating some breakfast in the Atlanta airport before catching the last leg of my flight to the American Reading Forum last December, I overheard two young, well-dressed business men talking. The conversation involved keeping current on stock market listings and went something like this:

"As soon as I get to work, I bring them up on the computer. They're current, organized, and easy to use. I can print out what I need. It's great!" said one while sipping his coffee.

"You know, I'm not so comfortable with that," replied the other. "I'm in the habit of sitting at my table at home, having some coffee and reading the listings each morning in the paper. There's something about seeing them there in print, that . . . well, I just seem to trust it more. I've been reading the paper since I was a kid, and I guess it just feels right."

This conversation certainly seemed to foreshadow our discussion of "The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age" prompted by the writings of Birkerts (1994), Negroponte (1995), and Sanders (1994).

The increasing use and extraordinary role of technology is causing us, both in our personal and professional lives to make dramatic changes and deal introspectively with emotions, interactions with others, ways of organizing our intellectual base for "prior knowledge," ways of learning and factoring knowledge in useful and productive

ways, and especially how we develop competence in our use of literacy. In short, I agree with Birkerts (1995, p. 228) when he states:

My core fear is that we are, as a culture, as a species, becoming shallower; that we have turned from depth—from the Judeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery—and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness. That we are giving up on wisdom, the struggle for which has for millennia been central to the very idea of culture, and that we are pledging instead to a faith in the web. What *is* our idea, our ideal, of wisdom these days? Who represents it? Who even evokes it? Our postmodern culture is a vast fabric of competing isms; we are leaderless and subject to terror, masked as the freedoms, of an absolute relativism. It would be wrong to lay all the blame at the feet of technology, but more wrong to ignore the great transformative impact of the new technological systems—to act as if it's all just business as usual.

An example of Birkerts' concern of the lack of deep reading over time and need for wisdom came to mind as I ran across the following in a high school literature textbook preface used by my father (Cross, Smith, & Stauffer, 1931, p. iii):

The editors, furthermore, have constantly kept in mind the fascination of reading—the presentation of literature not as a task, or as an analysis, but as a delight, as an invitation into the best, the happiest, and the wisest moments of the best, happiest, and wisest of men Emotional enjoyment is conditioned on intellectual insight; or, to put it more simply, in order to appreciate, one must first understand.

What bothered me about Birkerts' (1994) writing was his apparent premise that everyone does or should have the same, and obviously his, intense, unique belief and value system about the primary role reading plays in shaping one's life. Most of his examples seemed to focus on the role of reading fiction, a novel, a "really good book" and the intellectual activity, intensely held emotions, introspection, and satisfaction that one gets, and uses, in his or her personal and intellectual life from the process. In what might be called one person's love affair with reading itself, he appeared to present a view that represented the literati or intelligentsia. It might follow that all our free time, our personal development and all that we should come primarily from intense involvement in reading books to the exclusion of most other factors. With this last point, I disagree. Yet, as a reading teacher educator for over 25 years, I agree fully with the primary importance of developing

excitement about effective use of literacy (reading, writing, listening, speaking) as well as critical thinking/problem-solving in our lives. I agree with the importance of imparting this love of reading and learning in all areas and aspects of literature to students of all ages. The balance among recreational reading, reading for information, reading for work, assigned school reading, reading to solve problems, using reading as a base for new learning in all content areas, finding and exploring written and visual information about all manner of topics and contents—all these should be left to the individual learner and not be totally controlled by some outside person's belief system. I suggest that all of these types and purposes of reading, and writing for that matter, as well as related study skills, can be found and learned with books in hand and expanded through computer exploration of the evolving Internet/www and other multimedia resources.

Certainly, there is useful information for all students on the Internet. For those following our debate regarding Birkerts' writing, one might follow Stephenson's (1995-96) on-line response to *The Gutenberg Elegies*, and Birkerts' (1996) response to Stephenson. Another interesting link to schools using cyberspace as part of their curriculum is McKenzie's (1996) "The post modern school in the new information landscape," found in the on-line journal *From Now On*. Tolva's (1995) on-line article "The heresy of hypertext: Fear and anxiety in the late age of print" contributes another interesting response to Birkerts.

Finally, the most important use of cyberspace for students is the interactivity they have with others. This may include working together with expert mentors on projects, sharing information they have found, sharing their writing with someone, talking about all manner of things related to their interests, whether they are in the same class or school, or another district, state, or country. My students at Eastern this year continued their on-line discussions with students at many other universities who were also taking secondary/content reading classes and continued to be actively involved in considerable cyberspace searching (Otto et al., 1996). This year, 38 pairs of students were matched with pairs of teachers from around the state of Oregon to work through a series of assignments designed to make them familiar with the Internet, use of the www resources including search engines and browsers, and work together through e-mail to meet common goals. Their beginning literacy related to the use of computers, the Internet, and cyberspace educational activities increased dramatically.

Museum visits, space walks, every word written by Shakespeare, art from major galleries, pictures and writing from the Civil War, The Oregon Trail, the holocaust, works from the Middle Ages, books,

poems, book reviews, plays, music, newspapers, current network news, weather, lesson plans, teacher listservers/chat groups, professional organizations, links to mentors and experts, libraries, research articles, journals—it's all out there in cyberspace. Some of it is "junk" while there are some diamonds; some is reliable while some is not. It is not a panacea for society's ills or all the problems we face as "reading people" or as reading teacher educators, but it is a useful tool if we apply some needed historic wisdom along with our knowledge of what literacy and the love of reading is all about.

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