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U No What I Meen: Technology and Illiteracy

by R. Clay Reynolds

MOST COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS know that even though students may successfully complete remedial courses and even a full slate of freshman and sophomore classes, many will still be unable to use proper language mechanics or to work with complex math formulas at an advanced level. It's an observable fact that many graduate students, some with master's degrees from highly reputable, even scholastically celebrated universities, also have no knowledge of rules of punctuation or word usage; worse, there are some active college faculty who will admit, privately, that they never use a semicolon because they have no idea how to do so correctly.

Two decades ago, this problem was seen as symptomatic of a significant failure in the American educational system. It wasn't taken too seriously, all the same. When challenged with the question *Why can't Johnny read?*—even when he's in college—more than one administrator countered that the current generation is always perceived as dumber than the last. Still, attempts were made to fix what was wrong.

Blue-ribbon panels, government-appointed task forces, and expert committees were assembled to deliberate and hand down recommendations such as smaller classes, better pay for teachers, *etc.* By and large, however, what emerged was a system of standardized testing that assumed that learning could be quantified and measured on some sort of numeric scale. Of course, virtually none of the people who would ultimately authorize and oversee these systems of accountability were educators. Many didn't even hold advanced degrees; some held no degrees at all. They were corporate-minded, politically beholden, and fundamentally partisan individuals whose principal goals were to address a highly complex problem immediately and pose a comprehensive solution that could be assessed on bar graphs and charts.

To force compliance, they tied government funding to the demand for measurable improvement. But no one was particularly interested in finding out what students knew or what they would be able to do. No one was concerned about improving instructional quality or classroom environments

and inadequacies in infrastructure. Instead, institutions—from the bottom up—were suddenly saddled with a slew of assessment devices, a mountain of paperwork, and a new level of bureaucracy, none of which addressed the real and growing problem, and some of which made it worse. Ultimately, the evaluative instruments were “dumbed down” to a level where it was assumed that even those absent and sound asleep could pass. And students still failed.

But they were promoted and graduated anyway. What else was there to do?

Human nature being what it is, most school boards, trustees, regents, administrators, and teachers immediately figured out what the minimum criteria were in order for their schools to meet the assessment mark and sustain their funding. Those minimums became the target. How to get students to hit it was calibrated and programmed, giving rise to bushels of short-cut advice and informational seminars advising both faculty and students how to “beat the test,” get the degree, and move on out of the way of any academic value that might have been offered otherwise. Teachers and administrators who refused to play the game found themselves under fire, for no matter how well or poorly their students might be doing in actual classrooms, what mattered was the final assessment, which was based on standardized exams that might or might not have anything to do with the material being taught.

Back at the university, grade inflation increased, academic freedom shrank, and a symptom of a problem became systemic. And while all this was going on, words such as *retention* crept into administrative language, a further preventative to enforcing standards or demanding academic minimums. Statistics ruled.

Not all attempts to improve the situation failed. A couple of decades ago, many states discarded the old bachelor’s degree in education—a “teaching degree,” as it was known, replete with three-hour courses in overhead-projector use and bulletin-board design (no kidding)—in favor of area-specific degrees in subject matter; but M.A.’s and doctorates in education remain. They have become virtual requirements for public-school administrators—all of whom insist on being called doctor. “No pass/no play” regulations also helped—although these rules were quickly watered down or eliminated in schools where raw grade inflation wasn’t accommodating—as have proactive programs in tutorial assistance for weaker students and community-based initiatives to reduce the number of high-school dropouts. But these are spotty and all too few in number to have much national effect.

Additionally, high-school students were suddenly en-

couraged to think more about college than ever before; whereas they may not be taught what they need to know in order to perform when they get there, they are often cautioned that they are going to need to know far more than the minimum to do well when they arrive. They also have been led to believe that a college degree is the only road to a decent vocation and reasonable earning potential, thereby increasing the emphasis on coursework that would have been regarded as “vo-tech” in the past. But such accomplishments are dim lights against the growing darkness of ignorance that is overwhelming even the better students who have figured out, somehow, how to learn what they need to know on their own.

The sad and simple truth is that reading and writing, math and science are disappearing from the arsenal of abilities of the average student—on all levels. Many graduate degrees are in areas that wouldn’t have previously been regarded as second cousins to academic disciplines. A few are awarded to people who have had only the most fundamental courses in basic areas and who have demonstrable incompetence in reading and writing and the capacity to state or understand abstract concepts. Ultimately, we are approaching a point where we will be awarding Ph.D.’s to people who know less, who can actually do less, than a high-school graduate knew and could do 40 years ago.

Such dilution and devaluation of education should be a cause for serious alarm. It should make us all worry about matters ranging from national security and the economic well-being of the country down to who’s running the local animal shelter or landfill. But somehow, it doesn’t. The graveyard echoes with whistling melodies as we jog past in fear of conjured phantoms, blithely ignorant to the real dangers that lie beyond the light.

THERE MAY BE ANOTHER REASON for the decline of learning and shrinkage of knowledge, and it’s everywhere, not just in the schools. In a sense, it’s come to the academic scene only lately. Fifty years ago, most all Americans learned everything they knew—not just about academic matters, but in general—either from reading or from listening. Indeed, that is the way most information was obtained and shared for most of the history of civilization. These two faculties are closely aligned, for it is from reading that we develop the mental acumen to create the visualizations evoked by what we hear detailed or described. Conversely, to render an effective description vocally requires the speaker to have a full vocabulary, a sensitivity to language forms, figurative expression, and allusion that will evoke those mental images.

Television, when it became commonly accessible, offered no real change to this method of acquiring knowledge, in spite of great worries to the contrary; there were only three networks, for the most part, limited broadcast hours, and most of the material broadcast—particularly news and information—was read by someone sitting at a desk in front of a camera. Visual programming was black and white, and cameras—clunky, clumsy machines—were limited in range. Lens fields were fixed and narrow. Reading and listening were still the primary methods of information transmission and reception.

Today, however, technology brings us vivid, nearly life-like, high-definition images and sound that virtually (the operative word here) put the viewer into the scene, whatever and wherever it may be, nearly rendering redundant voice-over commentary. Satellite technology provides timeliness, and enhanced digital photography creates a sense of immediacy. The kinetic effect of viewing anything—hard news broadcasts to sports to adaptations of literary creations to artistic renderings to musical compositions to historical recreations of recent and antique events—all the time, not only on a computer or television screen, but also on telephones and hand-held entertainment devices, is mesmerizing. It is addictive and has overwhelmed print media. Books, newspapers, and magazines have been reduced to digitalized text, downloadable and readable on a handheld, battery-operated screen that doesn't even require the reader to turn the pages or use a mark to recall where reading left off. Sound effects, musical scores, and animation—all in high-definition surround-sound stereo—may be added for enhancement. All that seems to be missing is the taste or smell.

In his recent book *The Great American University*, former Columbia University Chancellor Jonathan Cole opines that the more dependent we become on technology, the less literate we are. In many ways, students (and faculty, particularly younger faculty) are becoming increasingly reliant on technical communication devices rather than on their own personal pedagogical abilities. Many take an aggressive posture, condemning the printed word and personal discourse as antiquated forms. "The printed word is dead," one of my technophilic junior colleagues regularly announces; it's time "to burn the books." Others openly advocate—and celebrate—the death of knowledge and art and, for that matter, genuine experience in favor of what, at bottom, is sometimes nothing more than animated amusement.

In 30 years or less, we have moved from a time when faculty were told they could not require class papers to be typed because so many students didn't know how to a point

where students prefer not to hand in any hard copy at all. They would rather submit their papers electronically, where they will be evaluated and corrected on screen, then returned *via* e-mail. Of course, the classroom itself is rapidly being obviated as a necessary forum, as entire university degree programs can now be obtained online, with classes for faceless students being taught by anonymous professors, all of whom, presumably, are peering at computer screens located in a wide variety of ZIP codes. It's a technological marvel, to be sure; but is it an educational innovation or only a clever gimmick designed to sustain enrollments and make money, no matter what the cost to the overall quality of instruction?

As I observe the dismal results of yet another set of error-filled essays from an upper-level literature class or one more set of badly written prose from a graduate writing class, I have to ask myself if all this technological enhancement hasn't done more harm than good.

I AM ALREADY CONVINCED that we read differently on screen from how we read on the page. I am sure that there is a difference in levels of comprehension and retention. I am also confident that we write and compose differently on computer from how we write and compose in longhand or even on a typewriter. The ability to correct and revise as we go provides a different approach to composition; the awareness that on a computer our words appear instantly in true-type fonts on a digitalized blank sheet of typing paper as soon as they are keyed in creates a different attitude from that which exists when one sits down and writes out in cursive or types out on a mechanical typewriter words that will, later on, be edited and printed.

As I use a computer in all my writing, I am only marginally chary of the method; but the awareness that I can instantly revise, change, delete, insert, or completely alter the order of what I'm saying invites carelessness in my composition; if I'm not on my guard, this may extend, ultimately, to carelessness in my thoughts. It could render my work to a level of unimportance tantamount to a tweet, a Facebook status update, or a YouTube clip. There's a possibility that maybe I didn't have anything worthwhile to say anyway. But following Aristotle's maxim that if a thing can be done well without forethought and effort, it can be done better with forethought and effort, at least some of what is written might require at least some forethought and effort before it is consigned to someone else to read.

Of course, most of my students and some of my colleagues have never read Aristotle; many of those have never heard of him. One of my more estimable professorial peers

recently declared that Aristotle was “all shit.” Who am I to argue with such eloquence?

Apart from the possible psychological effects of digital composition on reading and writing, there is the issue of proofreading and correction of one’s own prose. This goes directly to the heart of pedagogical issues regarding composition, whether the class is English 1301 or an advanced course in sociology or philosophy. I am utterly convinced that one cannot accurately proofread or edit on screen. I write daily—often for money—and have been doing so for about 40 years. I am a clean and fast typist; I also pride myself on my awareness of both grammatical and rhetorical forms. After composing on the computer, I proofread on screen—multiple times, usually. And I then run off a hard copy and sit down with it to give it a good going over, sometimes several. I have never—not once—failed to find mistakes and errors when I read over the hard copy. One might aver that this is a failure in myself. But as many of the errors are not of the “mechanical variety,” such as punctuation and grammar, but rather involve repetition or redundancy, errors in diction, agreement or parallelism, dangling modifiers, or more egregious mistakes in organization of sentences, paragraphs, or whole sections of an essay, I have to wonder: If I, as a well-educated and degreed professional writer and veteran teacher of writing, make unconscious mistakes after four decades of experience, what can I expect from a sleepy undergraduate or harried graduate student who lacks both a quality educational background and any practical experience in writing at all?

Students today have come to rely utterly on spell-checkers, grammar-checkers, online proofreading programs, word processors with an “auto-correct” feature, as well as digitalized dictionaries, thesauruses, and other reference works that make easier the job of writing. The problem is that no machine can think creatively, and I have discovered that about a third of the “suggestions” made by my word processor’s grammar-check program are, in fact, incorrect. If students are not taught how to write correctly in the first place, how can they determine that the artificial intelligence behind their virtual proofreader knows what’s what? (My grammar checker just flagged “what’s what.”)

The result of such reliance, though, may well be the development of a complete lack of awareness as to when something is simply wrong. Students find themselves unable to tell the difference between *It’s time to eat, Mom* and *It’s time to eat Mom*. The absence of a comma changes the entire meaning of the sentence, but an entire class of graduate writing students could see nothing wrong with the second one. (One suggested that *It’s* was possibly misspelled, “since

it’s not a plural.”) Similarly, I found myself confronted with the following passage, also from a paper: “She was made as a mama, bare protracting in front of her cubes.” When I asked the student how she could write such nonsense, she confessed that she had relied on a spelling and grammar checker and their auto-correct functions only, that she hadn’t taken the time to proofread, not even on screen. The excuse was plausible but unlikely.

Some students will assure me that my punctiliousness in such matters is curmudgeonly unreasonable. “U new wht I mint,” one student informed me in an e-mail (sent from his iPhone). He was reacting to my objection to his written description “Along the river was a line of well-stacked, industrial whorehouses.” And, of course, I knew what he meant; but I also knew what he wrote. I would have assumed his text message was in internet shorthand, except that most of his paper contained similarly abridged constructions.

EXACERBATING THE PROBLEM is the more recent trend toward social-networking programs that have linked personal computers and telephones in a rapid and severely shortened flow of verbal exchange. Such communications are great for setting up dates, arranging for rides home from the gym, or checking to see who’s bringing the beer to a tailgate party; but relying on them (or worse, incorporating them into the classroom as substitutes for live discussion and an exchange of ideas, where inflection, vocal tone, and body language become part of the rhetorical profile of argument) may be contributing to a decline in awareness of the power and property of language and the importance of form in the service of content. In sum, when writers stop practicing the craft of writing, then the art of it must necessarily disappear; for, as the earliest rhetoricians (Aristotle, again) have averred, the relationship between what is said and how it is said is vital to effective discourse.

There is no stopping or even slowing the technological revolution or the headlong rush into the enhancement of information technology. And, in truth, most of it is a stupendous thing; but seeing it as a substitute for learning and a replacement for meaningful knowledge rather than as an enhancement of the communication of substantive thought and discovery is a mistake. We stand on the brink of an era in which we will, metaphorically, see an entire generation of expert carpenters with state-of-the-art tools in their hands but with no idea of what they might build with them.

Perhaps I am overstating the case, at least where the impact of technology is concerned. At least, I hope I am. But I am convinced that the decline of literacy and the basic ability

to demonstrate rudimentary knowledge of fundamental educational elements such as reading, writing, math, and social and life sciences is very real. Ignorance is the handmaiden of tyranny. Marshall McLuhan be damned: Intellectualism and the wisdom it seeks must exceed the perimeters of the medium and delve somehow into the substance of the message, or civilization stagnates, then erodes.

This is the message that needs to be sent to the political and administrative powers that govern the educational future of the country. We need to stop trying to harness method and strap it to some quantitative plow. We need to seek quality in the matter of education, not in the measure of it or even in its practical application. We need to demand that our students be correct, be able to think creatively and expansively, and teach them to bend the tools of

writing, math, and science to their ideas, rather than merely how to channel them into 140 characters to be read and responded to while waiting for a stoplight to change. And we need to teach them how to discover those ideas, not as a quick scan of a Wikipedia article or fast Google search for a handy quotation, but as points of wisdom to be examined, explored, evaluated, absorbed, and, most importantly, challenged. We need to find a way to celebrate accomplishment more than achievement; our future as a society, as a nation, as a culture, may depend on nothing less.

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Life Bird

by Maryann Corbett

Acadian flycatcher reported at Bass Ponds, June 29

Sightings. Clipped reports of an observation
here or there, an as-it-is-written signal.
Likelier, a voice—like Elijah's: tiny
whistling sounds. The postings begin appearing.
Here. No, *there.* The gatherings start, the eager
greyhead old, binocular-necked, all-knowing.

Huddled on a path in a wetland clearing,
conferencing: Has anyone really heard it?
There again, that call. Do their ears mislead them,
hardened, unaccustomed to visitations?
No, it's there. The life bird, the one they wait for,
silent, rapt (think Fatima, Medjugorje).

*Red-winged blackbird buzzing, with bullfrog accents,
flashing orange shoulders above the cattails;
yellow warblers; barn swallows; iridescent
dragonflies in aquamarine and turquoise;
egrets in the shallows, and great blue herons
fishing, crook-necked: These are behind them, waiting.*

Some maintain, when all of them give up watching,
they could see it clearly. I keep my silence,
knowing legend starts with uncertain visions.
Neither day nor hour is my way of waiting,
not the weary chase after revelation.
Red-winged blackbirds—those I would stake my life on.