

Books, Teachers and the Internet: striking a balance

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One of the permanent hallmarks of excellent education, especially later when the specifics of what has been learned may have lost precision or faded from memory, is the capacity for good judgment. This is a crucial characteristic – part experience, part intuition, part instinct – which prevents people, and subsequently the organizations they lead, from making stupid mistakes.

The advent and increasing ubiquity of electronic communication, the internet and social media presents parents and teachers with a variety of issues that call for good judgment. South Africa may be somewhat behind when it comes to 4IR (the Fourth Industrial Revolution) but, make no mistake, these associated phenomena will arrive in full force and signs are already here.

We are all having to upgrade our computer skills, master new aspects of the internet, and get used to delivering education and administration online as well as in person. The as yet unknown impact of Mark Zuckerberg's Metaverse is just round the corner. This welter of electronic information, skills, advice and entertainment, available 'at the touch of a button', as the saying goes, challenges us all to keep our ethical, intellectual and psychic balance. Even more so, it challenges teachers to inculcate understanding and 'good judgment' in their learners concerning how to conduct themselves safely and fruitfully in the abstract, seemingly limitless electronic universe available to them as they sit in front of cell phone and computer screens.

Not only that, but teachers are also called upon to understand, and get their learners to appreciate, significant differences between what today's electronic communication delivers and the traditional educational dispensation of books, critical discussion, and writing, and then help them to find an appropriate balance between the two.

One of the challenges teachers face is the implicit downgrading of the importance of books. When you want to know something, it has become the easiest thing in the world to tap into your favourite search engine and get the answer – in seconds. Whereas before, when learners needed to find something out, they had to ask parents or teachers, consult a particular book, visit the school library to see whether a reference encyclopedia might help, or telephone someone else, a family friend, who possibly might know the answer. All this took determination and persistence. Today, Professor Google and his friends have the answers instantly. Sure, you have to be able to read, but beyond that skill, what seems the whole world of knowledge is open to you. Why bother with books? They are old-fashioned, clumsy, an outmoded educational medium. Too much effort. Too slow.

This is where the teacher's self-knowledge and educational 'good judgment' come in.

Books are a vital means of encouraging and exercising development of the learner's own good judgment. Imbibing succinct information from a screen takes only minutes and seconds. There is little need for reflection or assessment, small need to ponder what has been gained instantly, and no possibility of placing it in the context of the author's habit of mind, relating the information to his or her way of seeing the world. This is particularly the case when the learner looks online for bald facts or simple 'factoids' (pieces of information, true or not, real or invented, taken out of context and repeated endlessly and uncritically). Most people acknowledge that the internet is a morass of information, uncheckable by lay people, some of it contradictory, much of it partial and biased, unknown swathes of it deliberately misleading. How is the learner meant to sift the wheat from the chaff, what is true from what is bogus or skewed? The universe of 'fake news' grows from just this dilemma, and one of the central challenges of today's education must be to help learners cope. They

need to become discerning users of the internet: naturally silly only when they mean to be silly, but discerning when it comes to important matters.

This is where good judgment comes in, and books are an immense help in training learners to develop it.

Books have many advantages. Once you have read a page of text in a book, that page is still there to return to. You don't have to scroll back to check. You can ponder the structure of a sentence or paragraph and explore how it relates to those that precede and follow it. Well, you may say, surely you can do that online, too? Yes, you can, but probably only if you have already gained the habit of judging the quality and validity of printed prose, which is unlikely to happen if you have not gained the steady, reflective powers engendered by working with printed books. People who have these powers can assess online texts relatively easily, transferring the requisite skills with little difficulty. Those who have skipped the discipline of book learning are likely to succumb to the quicksilver immediacy of the internet, straining out gnats of detail while swallowing camels of unlikelihood.

Of course, it can be cogently argued that electronic information technology is merely reading in a different mode, as Caroline Hamilton argues:

Because the print format of the book has seemed so stable for the last few hundred years it's easy to leap to the conclusion that the new ways of reading that have developed in the last ten years (on phones, on e-readers, on tablets and laptops) represent a complete break with tradition. But the truth of the matter is that, joy and magic aside, books are a *communication technology* and have been subject to the same changes and upgrades as any other media.¹

Certainly, the new electronic media do not represent a complete break with tradition, but they do herald a less reflective, less critically responsive mode of reading, particularly in the realm of formative education. They create the illusion that knowledge and wisdom are effortless.

I'm not harking back to books out of some obscure sentimental reverence, what Hamilton calls 'joy and magic': revelling in their smell, their design, their feel and congenial presence, though all these factors may be important for some people. No, I'm pointing to a habit of mind, of studied mental apprehension, of critical assessment and aesthetic appreciation, of merited comparison and contrast, which prolonged engagement with books tends to inculcate. This intellectual capacity is generated by means of thoughtful interaction with the technology of the book, that amazing invention which more than any other has created the modern cultural world. As a famous literary critic from the middle of the last century put it, 'A book is a machine to think with'.² But books 'think' only when readers engage with them diligently, thoughtfully and reflectively. Then the magic happens. Books do nothing on their own. Word-processors likewise do not themselves 'think'. They merely process words. Computers process information and deliver it instantly. They are not machines 'to think with', in the way books are. They do not invite immediate criticism or judgment. Even when they process raw masses of information – so-called 'big data' – the interpretation, assessment and implementation of their findings is in the hands of human intellects which have been taught to think and to judge, most often through the agency of books.

The internet is short on quality control, as most sensible people know. Our learners have to find their intellectual, ethical, moral and religious feet in this swamp. To help them attain some intellectual composure effectively, when they are young and naïve, can seem an almost hopeless endeavour. But here again a knowledge of the older technologies of books, libraries and book-

publishing can be an advantage; not an absolute answer to the problem but something of a backstop.

'You can't judge a book by its cover' goes the old saying, but to some extent you *can* judge it by its publisher. Qualified librarians will only (or should only) admit to their shelves works produced by reputable publishers. If the book is from an unknown publisher, the librarian will take especial care to assess its worth. In this age of self-publishing, where predatory journals, e-books and vanity publishers are thriving, this becomes very important. Similarly, the reputations of online publishers, and internet pages associated with well-respected societies, publishing companies or special interest groups, become useful indices by which to measure the likely soundness and trustworthiness of both print and online publications. Reputable sites will only post work by reputable authors. This is not censorship, merely an effort to ensure quality.

The preference for quality is something to which learners need to be systematically alerted.

The electronic information age is inescapable. The internet will educate and mold our young people in its intricacies, its virtues and vices, a powerful resource influencing their hearts, minds and souls. Its impact is unstoppable. Educationists should strive to achieve some balance between the disciplines of traditional book-based learning and the untrammelled resources available on the internet. The latter will hold sway unchecked unless learners are inducted into the treasures of book learning. In many countries, a crucial variable in the array of factors influencing learners' success in later life is the number of books found in the family home. Successful children (exceptions excluded) generally come from homes where books are present in quantity, are assessed, valued and used. This finding is internationally valid. However, for many children in South Africa, especially in rural areas, the influence and impact of books outside the school is slight.³ This impoverishment should be corrected urgently. The power of cell phones and the internet needs an effective counterbalance.

In this effort, teachers are the front line. Through exemplifying a love of books themselves, reading aloud to their classes, promoting evidence-based discussion and writing about texts, they will bring books centrally into the lives of their learners. School libraries, cherished and properly used, become very important. Too many South African schools are still text poor. All the more reason for teachers to strive to pass on to their learners their own passion for books and nurture some implicit knowledge of the intellectual and spiritual resources they represent.⁴ By encouraging discussion and written argument about narratives, plays and poems, about science, history and geography, conveyed in books, learners can begin to form the basis for sound judgment, an utterly needful asset in their future lives.

Notes

¹ Hamilton, Caroline. 'Books: machines to think with,' <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2012/03/books-machines-to-think-with> Accessed 25 February 2022.

² Richards, I.A. *Practical Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929), 1.

³ McBride, Sindi-Leigh. 'Why are South African children struggling to read properly?' <https://africasacountry.com/2019/04/why-are-south-african-children-struggling-to-read-properly> Accessed 25 February 2022.

⁴ Wright, Laurence. 'Rural Teachers, Reading and the Social Imagination,' *South Africa's Education Crisis* (Grahamstown: NISC, 2012), 72-85.

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