

Argument over Information

There's no sign of a letup in books and articles deploring the declining literacy of Americans, particularly of American youth. The latest just this year is *The Dumbest Generation*, by Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein, whose subtitle asserts that "the digital age stupefies young Americans and jeopardizes our future" and warns, "Don't trust anyone under thirty." A *Chicago Tribune* article, inspired by Bauerlein's book, reports that sixty-three percent of Americans between eighteen and twenty-four can't find Iraq on a map (Anderson). And last year, in a National Endowment for the Arts report entitled *To Read or Not to Read*, NEA Director Dana Gioia found a steep falling off in reading by schoolchildren.

I've always been skeptical of this decline scenario. It's not that I fail to see a problem (I did title a book "Clueless in Academe"), but in comparing our time unfavorably with a better past we ignore the fact that many of the same complaints were made in that supposedly better past.¹ Here is the MLA president Charles Hall Grandgent decrying rampant student ignorance in his convention address of 1912:

You are all aware of how dangerous it is to assume, on the part of our college classes, any definite knowledge of any subject. Last year I had occasion to question a good many students about . . . Charlemagne; and one after another unblushingly assigned him to the eighteenth century. A colleague in a "fresh water" college could find no one in his class who knew what event is celebrated on the fourth of July. (1)

Grandgent was so pessimistic about the student body—and he presumably taught the cream of the crop at Harvard—that he titled his jeremiad "The Dark Ages."²

The most serious problem with the decline scenario, however, is not that it idealizes the literacy of the past—or even that it tends to reduce literacy to lists of books and isolated facts like Charlemagne's dates, though that's a problem too. The most serious problem is the failure to consider the *reasons* we fail to learn information or read books, reasons that have to do with the contexts and investments that make knowledge stick in our heads.

My view is that knowledge doesn't stay with us unless it makes sense to us, and to make sense it helps greatly if it's tied to *debates* that we can see a stake in. Had there been a real debate in the media on Iraq, for example, more Americans not only would be able to locate that country on a map but also would have known early on that it had no WMDs and played no role in the 9/11 attacks.

I have just echoed an argument made by my former colleague, the late Christopher Lasch, in a 1990 essay on modern journalism entitled "The Lost Art of Political Argument." Like

Bauerlein, Lasch sought to explain the paradox that increased access to information has failed to produce more informed citizens. Lasch argued more constructively, however, by suggesting that unless information is tied to issues we care about, we retain it only superficially or not at all. The more information we are exposed to, the harder it is to make sense of it all or to decide which of it is worth learning. For Lasch it is public debate that gives information cognitive traction:

Let us begin with a simple proposition. What democracy requires is public debate, not information. Of course it needs information too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by vigorous popular debate. We do not know what we need to know until we ask the right questions, and we can identify the right questions only by subjecting our own ideas about the world to the test of public controversy. Information, usually seen as the precondition of debate, is better understood as its by-product. When we get into arguments that focus and fully engage our attention, we become avid seekers of relevant information. Otherwise we take in information passively—if we take it in at all. (17)

In short, we comprehend and retain information when it is relevant to arguments "that focus and fully engage our attention." When no such arguments are at hand, we drown in the information overload of the media and now the Internet.³

Lasch goes on:

From these considerations it follows that the job of the press is to encourage debate, not to supply the public with information. But as things now stand, the press generates information in abundance, and nobody pays any attention. It is no secret that the public knows less about public affairs than it used to know. Millions of Americans cannot begin to tell you what is in the Bill of Rights, what Congress does, what the Constitution says about the powers of the presidency, how the party system emerged or how it operates. Ignorance of public affairs is commonly attributed to the failure of the public schools, and only secondarily to the failure of the press to inform. But since the public no longer participates in debates on national issues, it has no reason to be better informed. When debate becomes a lost art, information makes no impression. (17)

For Lasch, then, today's literacy crisis is symptomatic of a deeper problem, the absence of the kind of democratic public debate that motivates us to learn information.

From Lasch's perspective, our tendency to define literacy in terms of decontextualized information—as seen particularly in the testing culture of today's schools—reflects the trivialization of the nineteenth-century idea of citizenship, which stressed democratic participation in public debate. This classical vision of the citizen underlay the central place accorded to rhetoric in education, where the aim was to teach not only information but how to use it to persuade one's fellow citizens. This rhetorical view of the citizen has come to seem unreal, as the center of power has shifted from the small town to the city and as the citizen has given way to the consumer. If even successful adults find it hard to picture themselves swaying the community with their argumentative eloquence, it's easy to see why young people find it all the more difficult to imagine themselves in such public roles and why they end up turning cynical. Instead of ritualistically complaining about what our students haven't learned or read,

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we should be working on reviving a public sphere of debate that would give meaning to learning and reading.

Which is where educators come in. If the press is not likely to be moved by Lasch's argument that its job "is to encourage debate, not to supply the public with information," educational institutions could jump into the breach. Lasch's observation that "we become avid seekers of relevant information" when "we get into arguments that focus and fully engage our attention" should speak to teachers and curriculum makers, especially at a time when a consensus may have emerged that students need "critical thinking skills" more than they need memorized information. With apologies for once more repeating an argument I made in *Beyond the Culture Wars* and elsewhere, organizing high school and college courses around compelling debates could make information and books more meaningful—and worth looking up—than they now often are to many students. That's my reply to those who will ask, "But how can my students debate when they don't know anything?"

Grouping courses in one discipline or more around controversial issues could give coherence and point to a curriculum that too often simply mirrors the surrounding fragmentation of information. In the humanities, as Patricia Bizzell has argued (167), a curriculum organized around arguments rather than inert chronological periods would do much to "focus and fully engage" the attention of students. Such a curriculum could take a page from "learning community" colleges, where instructors from different disciplines team-teach courses on provocative themes and problems. Pairing existing courses around common topics and reading lists, a tactic I advocated in an earlier column ("Bringing" 4), offers another way to use controversy as a means of curricular connection. Such a change may be easier to propose than to implement, but if we manage (sometimes) to argue with one another productively at academic conferences and in our books and journals, it's not clear why we couldn't find ways to do so within the curriculum.

Such curricular engagement has been made more logistically feasible by the same digital technology whose misuses Bauerlein dissects, which enables conversations across courses to take place more readily and makes it not so far-fetched to picture the curriculum as an arena of public debate. Though the Internet deepens the problem of information overload, it also, if used creatively, offers a means of overcoming the problem. If colleges fail to seize this opportunity, we may end up lagging behind the blogosphere in reviving civic debate.

Gerald Graff

NOTES

1. On the tendency to exaggerate earlier levels of school achievement, see Rothstein.

2. Grandgent's low estimate of student literacy in his day was widely shared by his contemporaries. One commentator, anticipating a famous *Doonesbury* comic strip by more than half a century, wrote in 1910 of passive college students who mechanically take down whatever the instructor says with no engagement or interest: "The instructor tries to provoke them into a semblance of life by extravagant and absurd statements, by insults, by dazzling paradoxes, by extraneous jokes. No use; they just take it down" (Slosson 520). A Penn State English professor of

this period complained of the typical student who "comes to me now and says: 'Lissun, Prof, how is this dope going to help a guy get a job and pull down a good salary? See?'" (Pattee 183). A German professor who taught at Wisconsin and Ohio State from 1910 to 1919 described looking out at "dull faces, vacant faces. . . . I look about me again and watch for one face that betrays a troubled soul, a yearning of the mind, a touch of the flame. There is none" (Lewisohn 155–56).

Further challenging idealized views of student prowess in the past, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's account in *Campus Life* suggests that it is only relatively recently—since World War II—that college instructors have expected that most students in their courses would do the assigned reading, much less engage with it in any serious way. The students who took their studies seriously were so marginal that they were called "outsiders." Perhaps the most telling observation on college's lack of intellectual impact on most undergraduates was made by Robert Maynard Hutchins, who wrote in 1936 that the average liberal arts degree "seems to certify that the student has passed an uneventful period without violating any local, state, or federal law, and that he has a fair, if temporary, recollection of what his teachers have said to him" (90).

3. Another writer who argues that we need mental "schemata" to organize and retain information is E. D. Hirsch, whose excellent discussion of cognitive research on schemata in chapter 2 of *Cultural Literacy* (33–69) has been overshadowed by his better-known emphasis on background information. My impression from hearsay about the Hirsch-inspired Core Knowledge K–8 Schools and a look at their Web site (<http://www.coreknowledge.org/CK/schools/index.htm>) is that they often organize information around provocative issues and themes, much the way many progressive schools do.

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