

## **Il-literate or Wel-literate: Teaching Islands of Information or Continents of Knowledge and Wisdom?**

by  
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I confess to being an indiscriminate reader. I will read anything from Mills & Boon (aka 'Chicklit') to dictionaries and am only prevented from emptying the library each fortnight by the carrying capacity of my wicker basket. On work trips abroad I was very happy to gradually work my way through the Gideon Bibles thoughtfully provided for reading addicts, and was always amazed that the half-remembered stories covered all of the categories that exist on library shelves, from "absurdist fiction" to "workplace tell-all".

My mother, who left school at twelve, read to me from babyhood, and my first memory (before starting school) of a Library, was being ticked off by a librarian for having in my possession "a book for big children". The book was children's version of "Treasure Island" and I did not enlighten her that I was bringing it back, having read it. Stories for children are an essential part of the practicing for life that Freud labeled "playing", and reading them yourself starts the long transition to adulthood's tasks of "loving and working". My formally uneducated mother intuitively knew that, and come rain or shine, we walked to the Library on a Thursday evening after Mum had finished work, and in turn, as they arrived, I took my children and grandchildren, usually on a Thursday, to the Library.

At secondary school, despite it being South London Dockland/Gangland, I found that reading was valued and that the School Library was well-endowed and staffed, and that the librarian would often point you to books at the local London County Council Area Library which had miles of treasure-filled shelves. The headmistress was a descendant of the Bloomsbury writing circle and was not afraid to expose us to DH Lawrence and Henry Miller. The headmaster was a Classicist, WWII hero, whose favourite put-down was "If you don't read and think more, you'll all end up as teachers and doctors". Despite my reading I did end up as a doctor and was well trained at my Medical School, but was educated, and continue to be educated, by the books I read.

Good writing is a pleasure to devour, whatever its' subject. I will never forget the pleasure of reading George Gamow's "Matter Earth and Sky" and realising that the science I was being taught at school, had some simple, overarching principles which allowed you to work out for yourself what was happening in Chemistry and Physics. Similarly D'Arcy Thompson's "On Growth and Form" allowed me to see that Biology and Anatomy had an underlying structure, which allowed understanding, without the need for remembering lots of apparently isolated facts. These books, and many others that I cherish, contained the distillation of wise peoples' whole lifetime of expertise and thought, rather than being just a collection of information. They take on the character of a good story and stories are memorable and make sense because they have a theme, direction, beginning, middle and end. Conversely what I was taught as a medical student on psychology were mostly unconnected 'slices', and I found that these 'slices' of people's lives, were only two-dimensional, and did not make me understand or be able to empathise with patients. What gave me an understanding of behaviour, a feel for people and their problems, were the great stories of literature which showed people in a four dimensional world. My favourite writers of my late teens, Chaucer, Dickens, Austen, Maugham and Greene were far more important in explaining people's lives, loves and losses than any of the formal teaching I had had. When I came to instigate courses in Love, Grief, Death and Deformity for medical students, I allowed students who could demonstrate to me that they had read the complete works of Dickens, to forgo the course, as I believed that my didactic teaching could not provide as good a grounding. Now I might suggest Sandy McCall Smith instead of Dickens.

Real expertise is the ability to take information, process it into a structured form (knowledge) and using others' and one's own stories (experience), develop the wisdom to interpret and practically apply the expertise developed. In skilled trades such as craft furniture making, glassblowing and postgraduate medicine it is said you need at least 10,000 hours of working in a particular area before you make enough consistent and cohesive sense of your 'trade' to be able to practice expertly. Authors who can convey a consistent and cohesive story, whether factual or fictional, allow the reader to absorb and apply this secondhand wisdom. Fictional or factual writings that allow this distilled wisdom to be transmitted are often indivisible wholes and need to be read as a whole work in order to grasp, feel and understand the real story. Reading one chapter of D'Arcy Thompson's masterpiece on Growth and Form does not tell the greater story or transmit his wisdom anymore than reading one chapter of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* gives you the feel for human foibles that the whole book does. In order to really enjoy and benefit from reading or studying a particular work one needs to appreciate its totality. Real literacy is therefore not just the ability to associate letters and words with meanings, but is the ability to recognise that the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts and that picking out parts of writings whose message requires a whole overview, will not fully inform, educate or give pleasure. This greater literacy of context requires that children and students are aware that they may need to persist and work through the stories and texts that they are reading so as to achieve knowledge and pleasure.

Within living memory, reading was the only way to make contact with, and understand, the world outside of one's immediate environment and was therefore valued by all groups in society. It provided entertainment, education and hope, and was rightly valued as being the way that, whatever your background, you could (if you wanted to) improve your knowledge of the world, its people and yourself. Whether you aspired to be a physicist, poet or punter on the horses, you obtained your information by reading at length, and organising material in your head (particularly the punter), to achieve mastery of your subject. Reading a novel, short story, magazine or newspaper similarly required an active engagement with the material over a significant period of time and caused changes in one's perception of the world as well as enjoyment or some other emotion. The almost universality of true literacy in the Western World in the Twentieth Century resulted in societies which were educated in the broadest sense of the word, and in which the average citizen could access sufficient material to make valid judgements (if they wished) about the world around them. This 'Wel-literacy' was the result of being able to look at a whole piece of writing and see not only the trees, but the wood and the landscape that contained them. Like many skills 'Wel-literacy' is only established initially by being 'apprenticed' to somebody who has the skill, and then practiced and being given incentives and critique to ensure that the full and deep story, and not just the component words, is read.

Conversely, 'Il-literacy' is a failure to have learnt the skills to be able concentrate long enough or deeply enough to understand the real story that a piece of writing should convey if it were read fully and deeply. Such 'Il-literacy' is becoming increasingly common in all sectors of society. Recently it was reported in one Faculty (History), that up to a quarter of graduating University of London Students had never read a complete book. The average American teenager only spends four minutes a day reading, other than on social media. Schools and Universities all over the world now encourage students to look at study subjects by researching 'micro-topics' on the Internet or by identifying subsets of topics via indexes. Even English Literature students are often set only parts of Shakespeare's plays and other classic or modern writings to study, rather than to gain the insights that the whole story gives. Such education programmes in their approach to reading epitomise the title of the old TV farce "Never mind the quality, Feel the width".

This devaluing of the pleasures and rewards of proper reading result partly from some parents and

teachers never having acquired 'Wel-literacy' skills themselves, partly from a reduction in concentration spans engendered by the entertainment media's attempt to encapsulate everything in a two minute sound-bite and partly by a misuse and misunderstanding of electronic media. The debate about the decline of deep and sustained reading is confused by those who attempt to categorise physical print media as “good” and electronic media as “bad”, or vice versa. Both can engender the necessary “Wel-reading” skills, if the educational aim and assessment is clearly defined and includes absorbing and analysing the overall and underlying messages of a whole piece of writing. Electronic access has the advantage of ease of accessibility, whereas print access allows more ease of 'turning back and reviewing', and in the case of text-books, coming upon whole areas of knowledge that would otherwise not be known to exist. I knew immediately what the much derided Donald Rumsfeld meant, when he said “But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know”, as all of my life I have found that by looking at material outside of my knowledge areas, I would come across whole continents of knowledge and thought that I never knew existed. Any visit to a general library produces similar revelations, and although electronic searches may throw up similar “unknown unknowns”, sorting out the gold from the dross is often prohibitive in terms of time. Finding the gold on the internet, in a subject in which you are inexpert, is also a much more difficult task as much of the 'expertise' available is nonsense, partly engendered by the post-modernists' mantra “that everyone's opinion is as good as anybody else's”.

However electronic media may allow people to be exposed to a greater range of quality material, if they are pointed in the right direction, than they would have otherwise have been exposed to by print. Unfortunately many educationalists have given students the impression that the value of information comes from the number of pieces of information that can be obtained rather than its quality. This is partly due to the fact that educational institutions can save money by not investing in books, or electronic books, if students can graze the Internet and come up with free, but not necessarily informed or complete information. Such grazing, human nature being what it is, is likely to only extend to condensations of material consisting of superficial factoids, which can be quickly obtained. There is no reason why students cannot be asked to access and read complete original material, other than that much of the original material (both print and electronic) is copyright and that many educational institutions are not prepared to pay to access it.

We should be changing our approach to how we ensure that children and students develop 'Wel-literacy' so that they have the potential to be truly educated. Information is akin to islands sticking out of the ocean. Those islands rest on continental shelves of Knowledge, which support and link those islands. Underneath the continental shelf are the great tectonic plates of Wisdom that stabilize, and are the foundation of all that is above them. Our children and students deserve better than just to know 'Islands of Information' and it should be our job as parents and educators to ensure that ignorance, parsimony or educational theories or politics, do not prevent them becoming Wel-literate, and developing the potential for true wisdom.

## Coda

I have used reading as an example of the way in which the use of a logical approach to written material may improve education. The principles however apply to most modalities for transmitting information, including oral storytelling, pictorial and film/video education for those who are not comfortable with written material.