

Chapter 9

Reading in the Humanities in the Mobile Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This speculative submission tries to delineate the possible existence of a clash between fulfilling a mission towards developing the cognitive and intellectual abilities of learners via reading and the introduction of mobile technology or M-Learning techniques into university education along with a survey of the possible forces that act to bring this about and how these trends follow the general tendency of intellectual and habitual behaviour in modern society. Whether they are in harmony or whether they run against them.

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate focus of this article is on the place of reading in the academic lives of university students in the face of widespread adoption of digital and M-learning. Reading, accompanied by discussion and writing, has long been the staple of a humanist education. It is felt that exposure to and the process of trying to understand other thinkers and their ideas enriches and trains the human mind to comprehend and evaluate their existences, world, and values and to use this knowledge to live a richer and better life whatever they judge that to be. It could be said to be the core of a classical humanist education. The word classical implying that it is no longer the only form of humanist education available. The changes brought about by the advance of science have altered our perceptions and needs so much that there has been a change in what people seek and expect to achieve when they attend university. However, it is not yet clear how much continuity will be exhibited and in which direction our relationship with technology will evolve.

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WHAT IS “READING”

“Over time a crucial part of basic reading and literacy skills has come to be so-called “deep reading”, that is, reading of long and potentially complex, linear texts requiring sustained mental focus over an extended period of time (e.g., essays; novels and short stories; articles; expository texts). Due to digitization, reading is becoming more intermittent and fragmented, and long-form reading is in decline” (Mangen, 2014).

Reading in this context is taken to mean extended engagement with a longer text containing information that is offered as material for further thought or to be in some way related to other concepts or data. Examples would be the reading of literary works such as a novels, biographies, histories, journals, philosophical works, treatises etc. These works need not be exclusively of an artistic nature. Engagement with these types of work has been seen as providing both information and intellectual exercise for all of the faculties including those of reasoning, memory, analysis, and comparison. This provides material for expression and discussion based on experiences and opinions other than our own which we can evaluate in the light of what we know about ourselves and our world. The reverse is also true in that we can perceive our own world in the light of what we have read. While much literary work is of a subjective nature and sometimes can appear limited in scope; juxtaposed with other and our own interpretations it can provide a more objectively informed position to evaluate the choices we and others make or have made in our lives. Central to this activity is sustained engagement.

In contrast what comes to our attention online especially on mobile platforms is more likely to have been chosen for us by algorithms on the basis of our own previously expressed preferences. Whether that expression was given consciously or not. Overwhelmingly the material is of a current, personalised, immediate and usually directly informative or entertaining nature. The algorithm’s processes are opaque and we cannot be sure as to whether they align with our values rather than our tastes. If a person wants to read about great people. Then perhaps the algorithm can deduce that the person is a pale pink or orange male of a certain age and so provides material that deals with such people to the exclusion of other genders and colours. The purpose of the algorithm not being to educate and empower but to return a profit to its shareholders. This is not to belittle the sensitivity of algorithms which can be adjusted to suit the most exquisite of ethical outlooks. At present however, it remains that the material read online is that which will ensure our continued use of the site, app, or platform.

THE UNIVERSITY AND ITS MEMBERS

What then is the place of reading in this new age? While it will be a while before we know exactly. It can be said to have already suffered a drastic decline in the university sphere. Ken Robinson in his noted TED talk decrying the over cerebralisation of Education, said the world’s education systems are geared towards the production of University Professors. People who live mostly inside one side of their heads and that in the future such focus will be less important and we should focus more on creative rather than intellectual ability. While this has great truth, he admits we cannot be sure what qualities will actually be needed.

If we look to the past, it was in the 13th century that the universities supplanted the monasteries as the centres of culture, guardians of knowledge and drivers of change (Johnson, 1990). They themselves were then transformed by the increasing availability of printed works from the 15th century onward.

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