The Enculturated Reader

How we engage with text and how we are taught to respond to text is not insignificant. Historically, our engagement with reading and writing have been embedded in social systems, with affordances that represent forms of enculturation. Enculturation may be self-determined, gently encouraged by participation in community norms and practices, or imposed or mandated by the institutions that guide and govern us. In today's societies, our engagements with text involve a constant barrage of material. While some of this material is self-initiated or explored, the rest is directed at us via the platforms of the institutions within which we allow ourselves to be embedded as we increasingly tether ourselves to the media. As shown in the recent elections in various countries, inadvertent or planned forms of enculturation may occur via web-based and social media platforms. The forms may range from marketing to attempts to frame, construe (or misconstrue), or somehow influence the behaviour, cultural beliefs, and behaviour of users, readers, and viewers operating within these digital realms.

Reading as a form of enculturation has occurred across societies for thousands of years. In Australian Aboriginal communities, the world's oldest continuous society, learning to read one's world has historically involved learning about place and one's place in one's community and world through art. Integral to these reading is a mode of learning in the company of elders, who guide one's understanding of symbols as well as one's license and responsibility as a meaning maker alongside members (present and deceased) of communities and place.

In many of the world's faith communities, participation often involves reading or listening to scriptures as guides to moral decision-making and the learning of values—with or without license for interpretation. For Christians and Muslims, key texts are the Bible, the Quran, or other ordained guides. As Martin Luther (1986) stated:

> Above all things, let the scriptures be the chief and most frequently used reading group in both primary and high schools and the very young children should be kept in the gospels. Is it not proper and right that every human being, by the time he has reached his tenth year, should be familiar with the holy gospels, in which the very core and marrow of his life is bound? (pp. 15–17 S. 321)

Likewise, in the interest of shaping communities or a national identity, schools have prioritized some texts and forms of responding to text over others. In her landmark history of American reading, Nila Banton Smith (1934) commented on the important role of reading in nation formation beginning after 1776. She states:

While the greatest concern of the church had been saving souls and making good communicants, the foremost goal of the state was the building of national strength and making good citizens. …To develop loyalty to the new nation, its traditions and institutions, its occupations and resources; and to indicate the high ideals of virtue and moral behaviour which were considered so necessary a part of the general program of building good citizenship. (p. 37)

Looking Back at the Study of Reading over the History of Writing Systems

The history of the study of reading as a vehicle for enculturation can be traced to the advent of writing systems that goes back perhaps over 150,000 years. Reading became integrated in our exchange of goods and ideas. Markings on seashells and the use of tokens were among the earliest forms, as folks enlisted systems for trade and ceremony. Print systems followed and became integrated with cultural, economic, educational, social, and political interchanges. The significance of these systems (as records of negotiations, artistic expressions, everyday practices, historical events, and spiritual guidance) is apparent in the rise of repositories for such records—as evidenced by documentation of the philosophic debates and literary works of antiquity, the creation of the first libraries (e.g., Alexandria, 200 B.C.), and eventually the first universities (e.g., University of Bologna, 1088 A.D., and the University of Timbuktu, circa 1100 A.D.). It was further propelled by various religious developments—especially the rise in Christianity, Buddhism, Muslim, Protestant Christianity—as well as the expansion of empires in the 1600s and the growth of a science of ideas during the Enlightenment. Throughout this development, the role of text as a tool of subjugation or liberation was not without debate, as evidenced in the portrayal by the Greek philosopher Plato of Socrates' concern for the displacement of a dialectic (by the shift to written texts as advocated by the Sophists -see Side Comment II.1a.1). Also attesting to the growing recognition of the power of text as an agent in the enculturation in society was the dismissal, destruction, and appropriation of what was read and written—and how expectations for engagement has evolved from ancient times through to present day.

Side Comment II.1a.1.

Socrates' (469–399 B.C.E.) views arose at the intersection of a network of earlier Greek philosophers that were considered to be the first western philosophers. He was quite adamantly opposed to philosophers labelled sophists, who had positioned themselves as teachers of argumentation without regard for truth and tied to modes of persuasion devoid of the debate or dialectic that Socrates deemed so crucial. It was in this vein that Socrates discussed concern over the displacement of an oral tradition with a written tradition— specifically, the loss of engagement of speakers with their audience (through which arguments could be debated and discussed in a fashion consistent with a search for truth) to a Sophist persuasion supported by writing. Socrates did not write his views, but they were discussed or represented by later Greek philosophers who were his followers/students—as seen in work by Plato, especially in his dialogues that he ascribes to Socrates.

Breakthroughs that occurred in printing, including wood block printing in China (circa 200 A.D.) and, later, the Gutenberg printing press in Europe (circa 1450 A.D.) fueled a rapid rise in the distribution of texts throughout the public sphere but also signalled increased uniformity in thought and ideology, as many religious orders and schools demonstrated an interest in constraining what was read (as well as why, where, and how). Perhaps one of the ironies of the explosion of writing on the planet was the use of print by institutions (e.g., governments, churches, and schools) to inscribe their values, histories, and practices upon individuals and societies. Studied examinations of reading and writing were used as the basis for planned approaches to enculturation, colonization and control by institutions. In many societies, texts were given an elevated role often serving eas a binding record of transactions, in keeping with the notion that "the pen is mightier than the sword."

The printing press thus increased access to print—especially in schools—but also promoted more standardized and prescriptive forms of both lower level (standardized spelling) and higher level (meaning making) processes. The mode of text, as well as its position in relation to authorship and representation, carries consequences. As Socrates debated, written text may suggest more authority than oral text—potentially detracting from a reader's dialectal and critical engagement. Similarly, as research has shown, a text's persona may prompt a certain ethos or truthfulness. In schools especially, texts have not been positioned for multiple interpretations but instead to prepare a citizenry with shared experiences, understandings, and values in a fashion that befits imperialistic, national, or spiritual interests.

Schools as Sites of Enculturation

In schools, reading and writing is aligned with aspirational goals for individuals to advance and become moral citizens. Indeed, for high schoolers, reading and writing is aligned with cultural canons that are in turn tethered to admissions requirements of key universities, curricula set by government authorities, or both. Reading in this model has emerged as a cultural gauntlet, in which selected texts are assigned to be read in a fashion that elevate the status of both the texts themselves as well as the ideologies they represent. In China, for example, the advent of the national examination system over 100 years ago focused upon memory of the writings of Confucius, thereby elevating the Analects. Similarly, throughout the English-speaking world, texts by Shakespeare and other British authors are required. Indeed, in the British Empire during the early 1900s, it was estimated that seventy percent of high schoolers would have read Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Befitting this tendency, world history curricula in English speaking countries has focused largely on Europe, limiting treatment of Eastern and Southern countries primarily to their involvement in the European empires of the last five hundred years.

The canonization of selected texts in different cultures has also extended to family and community life. In the Islamic world, the Quran predominated, read either silently or aloud. In the Christian world, the Bible along with a few other books were initially the most common reading materials in homes. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville travelled the U.S. and found that the typical reading fare in frontier homes included the Bible, the works of Milton, and Shakespeare's plays. A thirst for books, even in many small settlements aspiring for libraries, eventually led to individual collections of reading repertoires.

Reading and Empire. Clearly there has been a reverence for the written word. In education, books have been seen as a source of information and a means of enculturation as a result of a shared cultural experience and immersion. In school, students' reading experiences were standardized in terms of what was read and how readers were expected to respond. Reading became institutionalized, and readers became stamped by the books that they were expected to read and the manner in which they were expected to read them. Books and oral reading comprised an individual's passport to education and constituted a test for citizenship.

As John Willinsky (1998) notes in *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End*, reading and writing has served as a tool of empires to assimilate or displace cultures and individuals in the interests of the metropole. Empires routinely destroyed or removed cultural artifacts and practices, replacing them with their own. If you were living in the British Empire or Commonwealth, you would be taught British history and read the poems, novels, and plays by canonical British authors. For students enrolled in colonial schools, the texts and related curricula

were anchored in the Empire, highlighting how the world was divided (Willinsky, 1998; Side Comment II.1a.2).

Side Comment II.1a.2.

In his book, Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End*, John Willinsky (1998) ended his unmasking of the imperialistic underpinnings of educational developments worldwide with retorts to examine our identity in the context of this legacy with a view to ourselves as foreigners. At the same time, he warned us not to become cathartic about identity and not to shy away from operating across cultures or globally.*

Pedagogy of Reading. For centuries, teachers and clergy defined what, why, and how we read—in ways that seemed akin to forms of indoctrination and enculturation. In Christian settings, what people read was preset or standardized in the interest of devout allegiance, patriotism, or the development of moral character. The approach to reading in this context—in which oral reading was the predominate mode of expression (and means of assessment)—also appeared to engender a reverence for the text itself rather than the reader's own meaning making. Before the advent of the printing press, a lack of access to texts was a factor in this approach. Yet even well after the invention of the printing press, the advent of psychological considerations of reading have tended to position reading as behavioral and mechanical—as if readers were expected to do close and overt reading of the text itself rather than engage in their own thought processes. While the pedagogy of reading has been the site of much debate since the 1900s, especially with contested approaches in the early grades, reading overall has been aligned with psychological studies that tout oral reading as a way of observing, measuring, and advancing targeted learning skills.[1] Consequently, despite the virtues of being able to revisit and reread written texts, there has been a tendency to align print with preset forms of meaning making and uniformity.

Indeed, considered historical, print text has been linked to the imposition of institutional norms upon texts. Despite the rise of constitutional monarchies, the independence of the U.S., the advent of liberalism and the growth of pamphlets, newspapers, and sites to the free engagement and debate with ideas, school-based texts have frequently been mandated—perpetuating a fixed representation of ideas rather than a model of free-flowing discussion. Norms and expectations

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[1] This view became challenged by Thorndike (1917) in his discussion of reading as reasoning—based upon his examination of reading comprehension and others (see Pearson & Goodin, 2010).

for reading those texts varied by context (e.g., religious and/or schooling); depending on the text and reading circumstances, there are likely to be different views on the authority of the writer (including the writer's scribe, publisher, etc.) and the responsibility or expectation of the reader. Adding to these dimensions are different agencies (e.g., governmental or educational) advocating different standards for reading texts. Politicians, curriculum developers, and scholars are implicated in this positioning as tools by which cultural norms, values, and allegiances continue to be shaped.

In Closing

Oscar Wilde is reputed to have coined the phrase, "we are what we read." We would suggest that we are *embedded* in what we read. That is, we are constantly engaged with reading our worlds as we pursue our everyday activities and interact with a range of media sites and other reading and writing materials. The texts that we read or write embody a range of goals and interests, from personal sustenance to economic, social, and political concerns. Hence, to study reading is to study ideas, representations, reflections, negotiations, and communication, and the ways in which individuals and groups contemplate, seek expression, or negotiate through art, text, or tokens. Reading occurs at the confluence of culture, language, and thought, amidst individuals and people, functioning economically, physically, socially, spiritually and politically. The history of reading is the history of ideas and records—including debates over reading itself—as well as the use of text to support developments on a number of fronts (Side Comment II.1a.3). It is through reading that ideas are expressed and debated but also given permanency and legality. It is through reading that cultures are given expression and people become enculturated. It is through reading that people become participants, rather than observers, in their futures.

The last seventy-five years has brought a period of rapid change with respect to text— especially with telegraphed technologies, the integration of print and image, and the networking of ideas and people. We have seen letters and notes replaced by email; the worldwide expansion of wirelessness; memory storage and processing capabilities increasing miniaturized; the growth of global video conferencing; an increasing immediacy and virtuality to our communications; changes to public and social spheres; and an increased use of robotics, avatars, simulations, and artificial intelligences to respond to our interests and pursuits—either clandestinely or as needed. As we engage with or in these worlds—shaping ourselves and these networks in the process—we may also be engineered to the enculturation goals of others. Indeed, reading and writing can fuel our advancement or our subjugation.

Side Comment II.1a.3.

Some of the key developments pertaining to reading and writing in societies:

- *The use of tokens as a means of representing exchange of goods (e.g., 9th to 2nd millennium clay holders—4th millennium)*
- *The creation of images to communicate, record observations, and to transact and engage with one's environment and community (e.g., cave paintings in France, circa 30,000 B.C.)*
- *The advent of texts as advancing rituals sometimes deemed as sacred.*
- *The development of writing systems (e.g., America, 300 B.C.; China, 1200 B.C., Northern Africa, 3100 B.C.)*
- *The growth of universities (e.g., 3 mosques and University of Timbuktu, 1200; University of Bologna, 1088) and libraries (e.g., Alexandra, 300 B.C.)[1]*
- *The introduction of the printing press and the expanded access to text (e.g., China, Tang Dynasty wood blocks, 200 A.D.; Europe, Gutenberg press, 1440 A.D.)*
- *The role of religious developments and texts (e.g., Islam/Muhammad, the Quran, 500 A.D.; Christianity, the Catholic Church, and the Protestant Reformation, 16th century)*
- *The Enlightenment (1650) and the circulation of texts in the public sphere (e.g., newspapers and pamphlets) as well as sites where ideas might be shared and debated (e.g., parlours and clubs)*
- *Global imperialism and empires as related to the spread and control of information and culture*
- *The growth of an educational textbook industry, especially the advent of readers (e.g., hornbook primers, etc.)*
- *The advent of oral reading of texts as a means of sharing and placing constraints on variation*
- *The pursuit of reading repertoires in communities with libraries and within homes through individual collections*
- *The institutional uses of text to enculturate (e.g., via nomination of certain texts and prescribed ways of engaging with texts as tools of cultural learning and moral development, economic self-sufficiency and participatory decision-making)*
- *The advent of web-based resources, digital media, and social media platforms with architecture that heightens participation with others in, with, and around our worlds via intelligent engineering for designed purposes*

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