

Too Dumb for Complex Texts?

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Students used to multitasking and hopping from link to link will have difficulty tackling complex texts—and college-level reading.

Back in September 2008, some 3 million people in the United States became college freshmen—the largest cohort ever. But the weeks before school started brought a setback. The students took a placement test, and many found that they probably wouldn't be able to handle the work to come. If they were to enroll in a regular calculus or freshman composition course, chances are they would fail. They had graduated from high school, but they didn't have the knowledge and skills to tackle readings, tests, and papers at the next level. So the college assigned these freshmen to a remedial unit in math, reading, or writing—a precollege course for no credit that aimed to send them into spring semester ready to earn grades of C or higher.

Ready—or Not?

That's the fate of 43 percent of students at two-year public colleges and 29 percent of students at four-year public colleges (Strong American Schools, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

It shouldn't happen. A high school diploma is supposed to signify college readiness. To earn a diploma and then find out a few months later that you need more high school-level training is dispiriting and probably contributes to the high dropout rate—around 30 percent—in the first year of college (ACT, 2010). It also burdens colleges with providing preparation that should have taken place earlier.

Will more technology in high school classrooms help? Not in the crucial area of reading. When teachers fill the syllabus with digital texts, having students read and write blogs, wikis, Facebook pages, multimedia assemblages, and the like, they do little to address the primary reason that so many students end up not ready for college-level reading. When they assign traditional texts—novels, speeches, science articles, and so on—in digital format with embedded links, hypertext, word-search capability, and other aids, they likewise avoid the primary cause of unreadiness. That cause is, precisely, the inability to grasp complex texts. The most prominent monitor of college readiness, ACT, draws that

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conclusion after years of collecting data on high school students heading to college. In a 2006 report titled *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*, ACT identifies this inability as the decisive gap between college-ready and college-unready students. When measured by their understanding of various "textual elements" (such as main idea, word meanings, and supporting evidence), college-ready and college-unready students score about the same. The difference shows up on another measure: "The clearest differentiator in reading between students who are college ready and students who are not is the ability to comprehend *complex texts*" (p. 2).

When faced with a U.S. Supreme Court decision, an epic poem, or an ethical treatise—works characterized by dense meanings, elaborate structure, sophisticated vocabulary, and subtle authorial intentions—college-ready students plod through them. Unready students falter.

Does the gap widen because unready students don't have the intelligence or background knowledge to understand complex texts? To some extent perhaps, but ACT suggests that the difficulty lies just as much in students' lack of experience and practice with reading complex texts. ACT asserts, "The type of text students are exposed to in high school has a significant impact on their readiness for college-level reading" (p. 23). The more students are exposed to complex texts, the more they realize that they can't complete their studies through "a single superficial reading" (p. 24).

Complex texts require a slower labor. Readers can't proceed to the next paragraph without grasping the previous one, they can't glide over unfamiliar words and phrases, and they can't forget what they read four pages earlier. They must double back, discern ambiguities, follow tricky transitions, and keep a dictionary close at hand. Complex texts force readers to acquire the knack of slow linear reading. If they rarely encounter complex texts, young students won't even realize that such a reading tack is a necessary means of learning. Unready students might be just as intelligent and motivated as the ready ones are, but they don't possess the habits and strategies needed to carry on.

The Demands of Complex Texts

Unfortunately, digital texts and tools don't help much. Complex texts pull young minds in one direction, digital diversions in another. Complex texts demand three dispositions of readers.

A Willingness to Probe

Complex texts can be lengthy and opaque, the product of careful thought and studied composition. To address them, readers may need to sit down with them for several hours of concentration. Readers need to be patient enough to ponder a single sentence for a few minutes, because many complex texts aren't just purveyors of information, but expressions of value and perspective.

One can't rush by phrases from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*—such

as, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately"—and still follow the meaning of the work. Readers must stop for a moment, even if only to shake their heads and mumble, "Huh?" They insert a hesitant question before moving on. What does he mean, "deliberately"? Maybe Thoreau thinks you have to ponder each experience before you file it into your memory. The full import of deliberation emerges only as the chapters unfold.

Such works as *Walden* are opaque precisely because they pose *Why?* questions without always providing answers, making readers turn them over, peek around and under them, and draw a tentative inference or two. Often readers can't find a ready fact, moral, or definition to resolve these questions; and they are stuck with their own meandering suppositions.

That willingness to pause and probe is essential, but the dispositions of digital reading run otherwise. Fast skimming is the way of the screen. Blogs, chats, and comments are usually hastily produced and consumed. The more students become habituated to them, they more they will eschew a slow and deliberate pace; or, rather, the more they will read quickly and fail to comprehend. If they have grooved for many years a reading habit that races through texts, as is the case with texting, e-mail, Twitter, and other exchanges, 18-year-olds will have difficulty suddenly downshifting when faced with a long modernist poem.

Even when they realize that they need to slow down, the fast-skimming habit presses forward, for an individual's ways and means of

reading are not a matter of choice. They are deep and semiconscious behaviors that are difficult to change except through the diligent exercise of other reading behaviors. Consider the metaphor—you don't *change* a habit, you *break* a habit. For teenagers who send up to 3,000 text messages per month on their cell phones and who spend their entire school day surrounded by the tools of acceleration, decelerating their reading when complex texts come up in class becomes nearly impossible.

The Capacity for Uninterrupted Thinking

Complex text reading requires few interruptions. The train of thought and action doesn't wait while readers check e-mail or answer a text message. Take Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, a work that appears on college syllabi because of the author's audacious and ironic treatment of the problems of the True and the Good, which date back to Plato. If readers cover four pages of the work, then pause for a sally into Facebook, they lose their place in the argument.

Nietzsche's book unfolds in spurts of declamation, alternately vatic and ironic, and it trades in knotty, troubling terms such as "the Will to Truth." Nietzsche tosses provocations, such as the famous opening, "Supposing truth is woman—what then?" with abandon; and these sallies make sense only in the larger context of later sallies on prejudice, philosophy, inquiry, and virtue. Are the males in the class to think, "Truth is something to romance?" Are the females to think, "We are truth?" As they continue

reading, a more mature question develops: Is truth somehow tied to human vanity?

Texts like this one are too complex to allow for rapid exit and reentry. They often originate in faraway times and places and discuss ideas and realities entirely unfamiliar to the modern teenager. To comprehend what they say requires a suspension of present concerns. In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, the bitter misanthropy on display may appear altogether nonsensical to the 18-year-old raised on the sanguine plots of Disney and the lurid sensualism of MTV. It takes a determined adjustment for young readers to drop their easygoing optimism and acclimate to the settings of Lilliput and Laputa.

Consider how 18-year-olds would interpret Gulliver's condition at the end of his voyages. They would be inclined to laugh uneasily or just label him "weird." He has come to abhor the human race. The affections of his wife disgust him. He associates her and his fellow countrymen with the Yahoos, the filthy savages who hounded him in the land of the Houyhnhnms. He prefers the company of his horses. It's a bizarre outcome that requires a leap of imagination for 21st century teens. If they stop reading to send a few text messages to their buddies or catch a rerun of *Friends*, the transport ends. The interruption doesn't just slow them down. It hinders their imagination, clouding their comprehension of the novel.

In other words, complex texts require single-tasking, an unbroken and unbothered focus. Digital activities foster multitasking and

constant interaction. A text message that goes unanswered for an hour leaves the sender puzzled. Digital-age youths have grown so accustomed to multiple inputs and steady stimuli that the prospect of two hours alone with one book and no connectivity would most likely strike them as a depleted occasion.

A Receptivity to Deep Thinking

Finally, the comprehension of complex texts depends on a receptive posture in readers. They have to finish the labor of understanding before they talk back, and complex texts delay the reaction for hours and days. Readers can't skim the opening paragraphs of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance* and exclaim, "Yeah—that's the truth!" and rest.

First, they have to take in the whole piece and grasp the implications of its contentions. Emerson's assertion, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist," might appeal to the adolescent personality, but the 18-year-old's quick agreement fails to pose the right reservations: If everyone is a nonconformist, what kinds of society and culture ensue? If rebellious teen readers agree too readily with Emerson that "no law can be sacred to me but that of my nature," they only confirm their own dispositions. Further, that response fails the text itself, because to concur with Emerson is precisely to *conform* to his opinion, at least in Emerson's hyperindividualistic vision.

The essay, in other words, puts readers into a special bind, and this is one reason why it counts as a

complex text. To comprehend it sufficiently, readers must undergo a secondary conflict outside the text, reflecting on their agreement or disagreement with its statements. Obviously, such a process halts the smooth and easy scanning of the essay.

Digital communications, on the other hand, especially those in the Web 2.0 grain, encourage quick response. They turn users into active participants and "content creators," as when an article on the website of the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times* opens up hundreds of comments containing paragraphs of heated opinion. No longer need readers sit quietly while writers expound. They can become writers, too, and they have the mechanisms of doing so instantaneously.

The network urges users to announce themselves—note the motto of YouTube: "Broadcast Yourself"—casting the receptivity to slow reflection as oppressive and antidemocratic. Adolescents love it, their budding egos so often tending to crave evidence of self-significance. An 18-year-old who has maintained a personal profile page for five years, created 10 cool videos, and issued 90 text messages a day may not be inclined to read 10 of the *Federalist Papers* and summarize each one objectively. He may be more inclined to say what *he* thinks of them than what each one actually says.

Complex texts aren't so easily judged. Often they force adolescents to confront the inferiority of their learning, the narrowness of their experience, and they recoil when they should succumb. Modesty is a precondition of education, but the Web teaches them something else: the validity of their outlook and the sufficiency of their selves, a confidence ruinous to the growth of a mind.

A Habit of Slow Reading

This is not to say that schools should go Luddite. We should continue to experiment with educational technology, but we should also preserve a crucial place for unwired, unplugged, and unconnected learning. One hour a day of slow reading with print matter, an occasional research assignment completed without Google—any such practices that slow down and intensify the reading of complex texts will help. The more high school teachers place complex texts on the syllabus and concoct slow, deliberate reading exercises for students to complete, the more they will inculcate the habit. The key is to regularize the instruction and make slow reading exercises a standard part of the curriculum. Such practices may do more to boost college readiness than 300 shiny laptops down the hall—and for a fraction of the price.

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