

Avoiding the Obvious: Skim Reading, Exams and the Internet

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Theme: [History](#)

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It is the anxiety-inducing nightmare for the studious: A dream where you find yourself in an exam hall, which might, on ordinary days, be a gym or some other facility. It is repurposed for that most cruel of blood sports: sorting out the learned from the dolts, the prize winners from the dunces. The stern invigilators gaze as you like vermin to liquidate. You are seated on a firm stool, rarely comfortable. You have been checked to see if you have any cheating accoutrements. Permitted items: scrap paper, a pencil, an eraser.

Before you, apart from the often blue-rinsed wonders wishing to smother you, is the “exam paper”. It has a “cover sheet”. The most evident rule, one that does not apply to reading many, say, Australian newspapers, is to not start at the back and work your way to the front. (The back-to-front principle is sound on some level, as Australian sports writing can, in many ways, be more catchy and sprightly than the political dross at the front.) Not so with your conventional exam papers. The front sets tone, temper and tempo.

For those sitting exams now, in whatever fanciful mode they are delivered in, the same problems arise. But another complication has been added: the enormous, mind numbing distraction of the Internet. Infinite choice can have a negating effect; such an endless buffet destroys a capacity to consume nourishingly. According to sociologist Todd Gitlin, “If you have infinite choice, people are reduced to passivity.”

From this garden variety of choice sprung the social media netizen, the hyper-networked operator of several tasks, meaning that none are done proficiently. Such a figure is incapable of the deep read. Such an action becomes one of glancing, skimming, and gazing. Profundity is not consumed and is, for the most part, shunned. Maryanne Wolf [looks at this](#) in the context of the skim reader, saturated with the distraction. Babies and toddlers are “pacified” by the iPad; school children get stories from smartphones; boys play games instead of reading; parents read their Kindles and wade through newsfeeds and emails. “Unbeknownst to most of us, an invisible, game-changing transformation links everyone in this picture: the neuronal circuit that underlines the brain’s ability to read is subtly, rapidly changing – a change with implications for everyone from the pre-reading toddler to the expert adult.”

The digital medium is not so much the message as an obfuscation of it. “Studies on ages from elementary school students to young adults,” [noted](#) Wolf in 2018, “indicate that the slower, more time-demanding processes involved in comprehension and attention to details are adversely affected when reading the same content on digital mediums.”

The modern instructor (forget the term pedagogue, which is now being done to death by modern management, class room theories and political correctness), is left with a

bewildering array of efforts that repudiate the self-evident front page, the instruction manual, the damnably obvious. The truth is not out there so much as somewhere, lurking on some digital platform. One student email suggests that she “heard from somewhere” (vagueness is golden in gossip) that she only had to answer one question from each section in her exam. Never mind that the front cover of the set paper states, with punchy clarity, that all questions have to be answered, and not doing so will sink the grade.

To answer an exam, the person sitting it will deploy various strategies, except the obvious one. The obvious one is described in simple terms [in a resource book](#) for teachers. The section titled “Typical exam mistakes and how to avoid them” states the following: “The first most common mistake in exams is not reading the exam or task instructions properly.” To think we know what to do is not the same as actually understanding what is expected. “Read everything carefully and read the instructions twice or three times to make sure you understand what you have to do.” Not bad advice.

When answering exams, there will be the chancing opportunist, the ambitious cheater, the diviner. In that mix can be added the social media mind, addled by availability, rumour and chat room feeds. While not exactly on point, this could be regarded as a symptom of “secondary orality”, that manifestation of the post-literature world [described](#) by Caleb Crain with such force in 2007. In such a culture, disagreeable ideas are put aside as unworkable and undesirable; we “fall back on hunches”, take refuge in our instincts. This is not helped by learning platforms which are larded with so much screen information so as to infantilize the user.

An interesting study on how such platforms as Brightspace or Canvas actually serve to impair student learning could be gathered from the fine-boned resistance against downloading certain links, especially those that lead to the intimidating sight of multiple pages. Unless the image is instant and obvious, dashingly glitzy and the soul of brevity, going to a link that states “course guide”, where all the material is available, is hard going indeed. Preference is given on finding spread material through “tabs” and “modules”, much of it repetitive. Let the user stroll through a series of clicks, and all will be well.

Wolf suggests that we need a new literacy for the digital age, in line with a deeper understanding about a very battered neutral circuitry. But what we are getting is an illiteracy profound and pronounced. And reading the front page of an exam paper was never exactly the sort of thing that was done by many in any case.

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