

Banality and Optimism: Webbed Education

Anthony G. Rud, Jr.
Purdue University

I welcome the opportunity to think alongside of Barbara Duncan on hypertext in educational settings. I share her ambivalence about the growth of the web, even as I require its use by my students, and encourage its presence in my university and in our partner public schools, as the “technology liaison” in our dean’s office. I wish to highlight some areas of agreement with Duncan, as well as draw attention, in a somewhat different manner, to what I see as key issues surrounding book and screen, print and digital culture, especially in regard to education. I join Duncan in treating the banal, as well as the optimistic, aspects of hypertext in education.

After briefly recounting some pertinent theoretical essays and drawing distinctions among three related claims about hypertext and education, Duncan focuses on the claim that poststructuralist practices promoted by the web are beneficial for education. She states that the web “encourages the development of new ways of knowing, and turns us away from unitary conceptions of knowledge...hypertext...encourages users to think differently, to break out of traditional reading practices.” In what follows, I shall focus on some aspects of traditional reading practices, in discussing this change from book to screen, with a different voice to further gauge losses and gains, costs and benefits with the use of hypertext.

I turn to a recent collection of essays,¹ where the critic Sven Birkerts discusses how reading has been transformed in the shift from a print to a digital culture. He is unapologetic in lamenting the loss of book reading. For Birkerts, the reading experience of one reader reading one book by a single author seems paradigmatic. It is a deeply personal one-on-one encounter.

An extreme example of this is the *lectio divina* of the Benedictine monk. Such “divine reading” is the daily practice of ascertaining spiritual truth through careful reading of a short scriptural text. A monk reads and rereads a passage, allowing the words to reveal a truth. Likewise, such a personal encounter with a text is what Birkerts describes when he speaks of interiority in relation to reading books. One “gives oneself over” to the vision of the author. While there is a passive “ravishment” that occurs with this kind of appreciation of art, interactivity is not ruled out.²

There is a difference between deep reading and personal appropriation of an author’s vision, and a more mediated, interactive, “hypertextual” reading that often characterizes screen reading. In a delightfully apt phrase, Duncan discusses some of the dangers of such “browsing and tourism,” where information is viewed and considered, but not made one’s own. I would contend further that deep meditative reading leads to a development of the self, as an entity outside the flow of time, or at least the agent of its own choosing of the sense of time. Reading is at first glance a mediated experience (the self encounters the text). However an engrossed reading, where the self becomes concerned with encountering itself in deep Bergsonian³ time, is not a mediated experience, but a radically immediate one. This type of interior

relation within the self, using a single author book as the occasion for self-reflection, is at odds with the gathering or “retrieval” of information more typical in a digital environment.

We must remember that the web is still a technology in its infancy, and like most infants, is exasperating and wondrous at the same time. Some of Duncan’s concerns, particularly what she calls browsing and tourism, and the state of feeling lost amidst links to endless information, could be only relevant to the current state of development of search engines.

We know that requests for information on Yahoo! or Alta Vista will often turn up many irrelevant web links. Nicholas Negroponte says that we will soon see the development of “digital butlers” and “personal filters” that are completely attuned to one’s personal preferences. He gives the example of a completely personal newspaper, where information is culled from far and wide: “Imagine a future in which your interface agent can read every newswire and newspaper and catch every TV and radio broadcast on the planet, and then construct a personalized summary. This kind of newspaper is printed in an edition of one...Call it *The Daily Me*.”⁴ Negroponte promotes a radically interconnected world, where each generation is more “digital” than the previous one.

Yet, radical interconnectedness that does not allow time or place for introspection of one’s soul, and attention to what an individual person does and can accomplish, may indeed be disempowering rather than empowering. I join Duncan in concern that youth may grow up distracted and unmindful of themselves or the social context in which they live. In his provocative essay, “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer,”⁵ Wendell Berry calls upon us to tend to our individual duties, to pay attention to the here and now. If we are to teach our children anything about the digital age toward which we are hurtling, it may be the importance of an anchor of local concern, grounded in individual choice and perspective.⁶ Berry works in his own radically individual way to conserve the earth, believing that the best way to do this is to mind one’s own store, in a sense, to “heal thyself” first.

I do share Duncan’s cautious optimism as we move toward the digital age. I would want our children educated in both digital and print worlds, but to not cling to either one with any finality. I do not believe the end of the book is here.⁷ Even the technology enthusiast Negroponte cannot discount the power of the page, as he envisions the digital transformation. He wrote his book. When asked why, he said that he wanted to permit all of us to imagine the new world.⁸ This startling admission from a dyslexic nonreader goes far to deepen the problematic of book and screen in our cultural life.

Yet, we are leading a jagged life of technology two-mindedness as we educate our students in our universities and schools. Duncan does not discuss questions of equity and distribution of this resource; these have yet to be resolved or even really discussed. Many of our leading universities still educate their preservice teachers with equipment incapable of web access, and students graduating with limited computer knowledge or even comfort is still the case in many instances.⁹

Too often computers take front and center stage in teaching and learning without sufficient reflection upon the other avenues available for instruction. I would advocate as an alternative what Thomas Callister calls “decentering” the computer.¹⁰ I believe that *both* book and screen ought to remain decentered in an education that focuses more on construction of the moral self, where dialogue is occasioned by our encounters with both printed text and blinking cursor.

As Duncan shows in her essay, the web is not a simple entity. It is at once a glittering banality, eagerly hyped and hawked, yet a tool that can essentially reproduce categories and means of thinking already firmly in place. There is unrealized potential and optimism flecked through much dross. What intrigues both of us about the web in teaching and learning is the challenge it can present to current practices. How do we engage our students in sufficiently rich activities so that they can see how much is both revealed and concealed in what they are doing online?

Nonetheless, as I join Duncan and other philosophers of education in seeing how the web can promote poststructuralist practices in teaching and learning, I hesitate more than she perhaps over the losses. Much of current practice, intriguing though it may be, is indeed elegiac to Gutenberg, to the absorbed, occupied attention demanded by many books, and I do not quite see a replacement emerging.

1. Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).

2. For an interesting discussion of this kind of reading, see Richard Rorty, “The Necessity of Inspired Reading,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 February 1996, A48.

3. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: G. Allen, 1950).

4. Nicholas Negroponte, *being digital* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 153.

5. Wendell Berry, “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer,” in *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 170-77.

6. See Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

7. See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, “The End of the Book? Some Perspectives on Media Change,” *The American Scholar* 64, no. 4 (1995): 541-55.

8. Negroponte, *being digital*, 8.

9. J.M. Barksdale, “New Teachers Unplugged: Why Schools of Education are Still Sending you Staff You’ll Have to Train in Technology,” *Electronic Learning* (March/April 1996), 39-45.

10. Thomas A. Callister Jr., “Educational Computing’s New Direction: Cautiously Approaching an Unpredictable Future,” *Educational Theory* 44, no. 2 (1994): 255.