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Subject to reading: Historical takes on reading as a technology

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I begin by extracting three historical 'vignettes' from Alberto Manguel's 'A History of Reading' (1996) to illustrate how reading is not the same thing in all times and places. Rather, I argue that reading is a human technology that, like all technologies, changes and, in turn, changes us as readers. Having made a case for using history as something that can unsettle, and even disrupt, taken for granted ways of understanding schooling, I go on to give examples from late nineteenth, early twentieth century reading curriculum materials that show the process of technological change at work in the classroom. I conclude with a brief comment on contemporary concerns around reading which may benefit from the kinds of disruptions that particular approaches to history can supply.

Somewhere in the fourth millennium BC writing probably began. In an area now known as Syria, clay tablets have been found dating from this time probably used by farmers to represent a number of farm animals - sheep, goats. This is the beginning of Alberto Manguel's telling of 'A History of Reading', a book which I heartily recommend as a tour de force of writing - a wonderful and enlightening read, and a heartwarming affirmation of the pleasures of reading itself.

The invention of writing was, of course, also the invention of reading - but digging into the history of reading, is much more difficult than the history of writing because writing leaves behind its own marks, its own traces, but usually reading does not, so we can be less certain about how these clay tablets were read than how they were written. (Perhaps the same can be said for the teaching of reading compared to the teaching of writing - certainly to the assessment of reading). Manguel uses a variety of sources, much of it peoples' writing about reading, or at least those parts which seem to refer to reading - art work, texts themselves - to dig into what reading has involved since its inception.

I'm going to take you on a few, brief dips into Manguel's text to illustrate how history can be read and used to help see the present as something a little strange - more like an unfamiliar landscape. A way of making the taken for granted in our current views of reading more noticeable.

Silent reading

According to Manguel, St Augustine, writing of his time in Milan, tells of meeting the bishop Ambrose in AD 383 who read in *silence* - never reading aloud - in other words, the notion of reading silently was sufficiently unusual for him to comment on. Apparently, reading silently did not become common in the west until the tenth century AD. He points out what a significant

change in the technology of reading this involved - it enabled an entirely new, and personal, relationship with the book.

The words no longer needed to occupy the time required to pronounce them. They could exist in interior space, rushing on or barely begun, fully deciphered or only half-said, while the reader's thoughts inspected them at leisure, drawing new notions from them, allowing comparisons from memory or from other books left open for simultaneous perusal. The reader had time to consider and reconsider the precious words whose sounds - he now knew - could echo just as well within as without. And the text itself, protected from outsiders by its covers, became the reader's own possession, the reader's intimate knowledge, whether in the busy scriptorium, the market-place or the home. pp.50-1

Manguel points out that some were quick to see the dangers of silent reading - it literally was a sub-versive act - that is allowing for no clarification, guidance, or correction by a supervising eye. For all the superior knew, the reader may be day-dreaming or simply being idle - how could it be known?

Punctuation

Manguel speculates that punctuation, not needed with early pictographic writing such as Egyptian hieroglyphs, was necessitated by this move to read silently. He reports that by the ninth century scribes started separating words with spaces and much punctuation was introduced to show parts of sentences.

By the tenth century the first lines of a principle section of the bible began to be written in red - later the first letter of a new paragraph was written in a larger or upper case character.

Writing, reading and memory

Socrates is pretty well known for his opposition to reading and writing as signifying much in the name of human progress (as Manguel wittily points out, we know this because one of his pupils, wrote down his thoughts and we can read about them today). One of Socrates key objections was that reading, because it acted as a reminder via external marks, would harm memory and that they would not truly know what they did not remember themselves - 'as men filled not with wisdom but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellow men' (p.58).

And for most of its life, it seems that the technology of reading has been attached to the idea of memory in a way that we don't understand it to be today. It was common for students up to the 13th century to memorise important parts of the text and other aspects such as positioning of paragraphs using mnemonic techniques laboriously learned over many years. Some memorised whole texts.

According to Manguel, what happened is that in the 14th century the scholar Petrarch suggested that the process of respectfully remembering a text - in

order to retain the wisdom it contained to be reproduced at appropriate times – might be surpassed by a radical idea (interestingly just at the time that reading silently became the dominant mode) that the reader should, in Manguel's terms... 'neither using the book as a prop for thought, nor trusting it as one would trust the authority of a sage, but taking from it an idea, a phrase, an image, linking it to another culled from a distant text, preserved in memory, tying the whole together with reflections of ones' own - producing, in fact, a new text authored by the reader' (p.63).

This was to become the dominant mode of reading by the 16th century according to Manguel. Not coincidentally, I think, the printing press was invented in this period and made available to many what was only available to a few in Petrarch's time - a collection of books to read. That is books that could be read alongside one another and considered as something related to one's own life – thus, it could be said, intertextuality was born.

These three vignettes illustrate a simple but still important point that reading, as a human technology, is subject to change. The vignette on punctuation is a case in point. The move from hieroglyphs to an alphabetic system made differentiation of words or the concepts they represented more difficult – the invention of spaces, and capitalisation show a technology on the move, being changed to make it a more exact and versatile tool.

These three vignettes, however, also illustrate another perhaps not so obvious point, that reading as a technology also changes the reader, makes new human relations to text possible, even demands them. Thus silent reading made possible a new relation to text, a newly unsupervised zone of private thought and meaning. Similarly, the development of printing and the availability of greater number of texts made different reading practices possible – literally required a new kind of reader – someone who could make connections across texts and be responsible for developing a personal set of understandings independent of a single, authoritative author. It was a move of author-ity to the reader, making that reader more important, more flexible, and less predictable (at least in what was taken from the text).

For me such historical work shows that in defining literacy or reading the curriculum shapes the students to itself and, in turn, shapes the teacher. It is largely taken for granted about technologies that we use them – that they are largely tools for our use – when they can also be thought of the other way around – as things that change us, make us different and require different things of us. The feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1991) describes us as Cyborgs - part machine - where technologies literally become part of us and the ways we behave as humans. The Walkman, the mobile phone, the television, the pacemaker, the keyboard are obvious examples. Mark Dery (1996) the cultural theorist, makes a similar point somewhat differently or more provocatively when he refers to technologies as amputating our bodies,

as ‘... the relocation, in technology of an ever greater number of our cognitive and muscular operations’ (p.234).

These are challenging and not uncontroversial ideas, but they help me to think about reading in different ways – to think about it as a technology and something that, in changing, impacts on us as people, as readers and teachers and learners, requiring us to do different things with our bodies and even our lives. Certainly, I’d say that reading is not the same thing throughout history. It has changed, been reinvented and, in turn, reinvented us.

Let me explore the possibility of such a ‘reading’ of reading as a technology through examining the reading curriculum in South Australian government primary schools from 1874 to 1907.

I begin in 1874 because it is the last year of the Central Board of Education (established in 1851) in South Australia. The Board of Education was a small group (3-5) of part-time government appointees who were responsible for broadly regulating and licensing teaching within the colony. The next year, 1875, saw the introduction of an Education Act which set up the Education Department and brought schooling into the governmental embrace of a purpose built educational bureaucracy. Thus the curriculum of 1874 comes just before a time of change in the administration of schooling and seemed an ideal starting point for an examination of change in the curriculum.

Interestingly from contemporary perspective, the whole of the curriculum and the regulations for running a school could be contained in two pages in 1874 (perhaps there was a golden age of education!) including ‘standards for the education of scholars at each class level plus seven regulations (GG 1874, pp.589-90). Table 1 maps changes for Class I (7-8 year olds) over six years, beginning in 1874, to subjects some of which would later be grouped together as ‘English’.

Table 1: Class I Curriculum for Reading, Writing, Grammar and Drill 1874-9

Year	1874	1876	1878	1879
Reading	First I. N. B. book or equivalent	As for 1874	First Royal Reader or equivalent	As for 1879
Writing	Capital and small letters on slate from copies on blackboard and from dictation	Letters or short words on slates from blackboard	As for 1876	Letters or short words on slates from blackboard. Darnell's Universal Copy Books 1 to 3
Grammar	To distinguish articles, nouns and verbs	not included in Class I curriculum	not included in Class I curriculum	not included in Class I curriculum
Drill	The disciplinary exercises	not included in Class I curriculum	not included in Class I curriculum	not included in Class I curriculum

Note that in 1874 reading in Class 1, reading was based on one particular reading book or equivalent, writing was copying small and capital letters on the slate from the blackboard or dictation and simple grammar was taught.

In Class IV (10-11 year olds), as is shown in Table 2, there was a similar pattern. Note in each class the presence of drill in the curriculum.

Table 2: Class IV Curriculum for Reading, Writing, Grammar and Drill 1874-9

Year	1874	1876	1878	1879
Reading	Fourth I. N. B book or equivalent	As for 1874	Fourth Royal Reader or equivalent	To read with ease and expression from the Fourth Royal Reader or equivalent
Spelling	not in curriculum	Dictation from reading-book	As for 1876	As for 1876
Writing	Text and small hands in copies. Dictation from reading lesson	Mixed or small hand in copy book. To copy from reading-book	As for 1876	To copy from reading book. Darnell's Universal copy books, 11-13
Composition	not in curriculum	To write a letter	As for 1876	As for 1876
Grammar	Parsing, and inflexions of parts of speech. Analysis of simple sentences	Etymology, easy syntax, parsing	As for 1876	As for 1876
Poetry	not in curriculum	To learn by heart simple pieces	To learn by heart pieces from the Fourth Royal Reader	As for 1878
Drill (Boys)	Proficiency in company drill	not in curriculum	not in curriculum	not in curriculum

The regulations also had instructions about discipline - mild but firm, and corporal punishment was regulated.

By 1876 - two years after the Education Department had begun, and in the first new iteration of the curriculum those seven regulations from 1874 had blown out to more than 80. The curriculum had some modification and points of emphasis were laid out through the regulations. For example, drill had its own regulation.

All male teachers will be required to drill their pupils at least to the extent shown on pages 1-15 of Commander Norman's Schoolmaster's Drill Assistant. ... Female teachers must understand and practice class drill. In estimating the proficiency of a school, special notice will be taken of drill. (GG 1876, p.41)

Also in 1876, a curriculum for a junior division was inserted below Class I - these children were to learn the alphabet and simple combinations of (not more than) four letters. Grammar was removed from Class I and now began in Class II.

In 1878 the major change was the introduction of a new reader – *The Royal Reader*. The next version of the curriculum a year later in 1879 introduced a whole new technology for Class I – now copybooks (specially provided books into which students must write in their best hand) were mentioned for this class in addition to the slate. Over this six year period, two major changes were introduced – a new reader, and the copybook which began to supplant the slate. The new reader had a sizable impact because it determined the curriculum beyond the subject reading. Note how in 1878 poetry in Class IV involves learning by heart pieces from the reader, and Writing (what would now be called handwriting) required copying of words from the reader. Also over this period, whole subjects appeared or disappeared in the curriculum, or had been moved between Classes.

Subsequent developments in the curriculum are too complex to show as in tables 1 and 2. After 1879 the curriculum was regularly updated and modified. There were iterations in 1885, 1888, 1890, 1892, 1900 and 1907.

By 1885 the regulations had expanded to 14 pages. Each subject was now introduced with a set of ‘general principles’ which clearly explained to the teacher some new ways in which the content was to be taught - or specifying what was to be done and not to be done. In the introduction to the Reading curriculum a focus was put on reading aloud.

The aim of the teacher should be to secure intelligent and expressive reading in all classes. Pupils should be made to understand what they read, and then to read it in such a way as to show that the meaning has been grasped. To this end, explanation, illustration and pattern meaning must be frequent. (GG 1885, p.116)

The introduction went on to explain one classroom practice related to reading aloud.

Simultaneous reading, if judiciously used, will be found very valuable. ... The teacher should first read the passage with correct inflexion and emphasis, and then cause the pupils to repeat it after him ... If he finds that they cannot give the proper emphasis and modulation with their books before them it will be well to make the attempt with their books closed ... Every attempt must be made to correct the monotonous and sing-song style into which children so frequently fall. (GG 1885, p.116)

Here we see reading shaping the student (and teacher) subject. Reading in unison, reading with the book closed (!), reading without a regular rhythm.

Later this same introduction stated how dull and uninteresting lessons can become when children learn their one reader off by heart (surely, at least in part, a response to reading with the book closed). It then states that the Education Department has introduced new readers so that students have more than one for each year. We can only speculate what impact the supply

of new books and more books would have had on the students and the teacher but it must have been to push reading in a direction different to the practice described in the quote above.

In the same year (1885), there was an interesting reference to Writing lessons in a note on drill which was no longer part of the curriculum but still subject to a special note in the regulations. The note stated:

Lessons in drill should be frequent, short and spirited. They should be given in the playground, except when the weather is unfavorable; and if properly managed they will always be popular. To teach drill successfully, the closest attention to every minute detail is as necessary as in conducting a writing lesson. (GG 1885, p.120)

This note, which so closely links the agenda of body-shaping in drill to the teaching of writing, demonstrates that writing too is a technology that shapes the student subject - literally. Later versions of the curriculum (from which mention of drill has disappeared) will include diagrams and pictures which show in minute detail proper bodily positioning while writing and illustrate the correct fitting of the body to artefacts such as pens and desks.

Five years later, in 1890, additional text was included in the introduction to reading from which I include an extended extract here.

It should not be considered that a teacher's work is completed, if his pupils can read correctly the words of the textbook which happens to be specified for the class. His aim should be to develop a love of reading as far as possible. With this end in view, it is suggested that some time might be devoted to reading aloud interesting stories, accounts of travel, or the like, the readers being selected from the best scholars. Probably such reading might be given with advantage during the lesson in needlework.

In order to encourage a further taste for reading, a small paper ("The Children's Hour") is published by the department for circulation among scholars. Several teachers have done useful work by establishing school libraries. (EG 1890, p.65)

This is a significant addition to the instructions to teachers in relation to reading which, I would argue, arise directly out of the availability of new forms of reading material beyond the class reader - something hinted at in the 1885 curriculum discussed earlier. The child reader has now changed, or at least, new requirements are placed on top of the old. Students must now love reading, they must read a paper as well as a reader, and select from a library. The availability of new resources requires a new kind of reader.

This is also true of the teacher who must adapt to the new reading technologies. Now teachers must be well read and know the best of scholars (authors). They must select stories for their *interest*. They are to replace the silence of the needlework class with reading to the students. They must

establish libraries (which meant going to the parents for donations of money and books).

The introductions and course content vary little in relation to reading in the next two versions (1892 and 1900) until 1907 when the formerly separate subjects of reading, grammar, writing, poetry, speech etc are grouped under the now familiar label of 'English'. In the section on reading the introduction is even longer with subheaded sections entitled 'school libraries', 'silent reading lessons', and 'interest in reading'. The curriculum alone now consisted of 19 pages compared to the half page of standards for classes provided in 1874.

Preceding the introductions to the subjects, the course of instruction now begins with two new sections entitled: 'The functions of the elementary school' and 'The Teacher'. Compare the following to the teacher who in 1874 had to teach drill meticulously (along with writing) and ensure students could read aloud in a pleasing fashion one reading book. In 1907, the teacher must be four things:

1. Teaching is a vocation. The teacher is the best who teaches because he loves the work
2. The teacher should have a thorough knowledge of what he teaches
3. He should have a deep and abiding interest in the *minds* of his pupils
4. In his work those minds come first in his consideration, then his subject, then himself last of all. No teacher, however able and devoted he may be, can add to a child's natural endowment: but he may hope to bring all the powers with which the child is gifted into free, full and harmonious play. To seek to begin to do this is the teacher's business. (EG 1907, p.43)

This is a very different teacher to the one required in 1874 - some 33 years earlier - something like the span of one teacher's career. The materials used for reading, and what teachers and students were expected to do with these materials also changed enormously over this period. Clearly the technology of printing and being able to produce books more cheaply has been an important driver for change along with greater wealth in the state to afford these materials over this period.

Reading by 1907 appears to require a different kind of disciplining compared to the tightly choreographed reading of the 1870s. The teacher must now deal with freedom and with minds compared to the focus on the body and voice in the earlier period. At least this was the case in reading - the curriculum seems to suggest that writing carried much of bodily drill and discipline well beyond the early 1900s.

For me, studying history shows how educators, politicians, bureaucrats, young people, community members have constantly struggled over what should count as reading. These struggles have produced particular versions

of reading and the subject English at different times - versions strongly implicated in the play of social, political and cultural forces at work at those times. Many times I suspect the shape of the curriculum could easily have turned out otherwise. Why, for example, did English end up carrying so much of the moral work of schooling, why not history, or nature study, or physical education, all of which, at times, made claims for such a role? And each version of English and of reading has required a different kind of student reader and teacher of reading (Cormack & Comber, 1996).

This historical 'reading' of reading has utility for teachers and policy makers today. Through an historical consciousness, we can make strange the curriculum materials of our day, as if we were reading a document produced decades or a century earlier. We can ask: what does that word mean here? How is reading being constituted and what new technologies or resources are being brought to bear on its conduct? What kind(s) of student subject are required by the technology of reading? How is that subject to be shaped bodily, or in terms of their attributes or dispositions? What, in turn, does that require teachers to be and to do? In short, we can see how students and teachers are being framed by the framework and go on to ask ourselves more critical questions about the consequences of the new practices being required, the traditions being lost, and the effects on the relationship between teachers, students, texts and the community.

The recently released South Australian Curriculum Standards and Assessment (SACSA) framework is a case in point. It says of the aims of the English curriculum:

The English Learning Area aims to develop in all children:

- the ability to critically and creatively speak, listen, read, view and write with intellectual and emotional engagement, including imagination, passion and confidence, for a range of audiences and contexts
- knowledge of the ways language is used for different purposes, audiences and contexts, and the capability to apply this knowledge
- knowledge of and respect for diverse varieties of English, including Standard Australian English, and the capability to critically analyse and apply this knowledge
- a knowledge of a broad range of texts and the capability to critically analyse these texts in relation to personal experiences, the experiences of local and global communities, and the social constructs of advantage/disadvantage in order to imagine more just futures
- capacities to apply learning in English to other Learning Areas, to life in the wider community, to the virtual community, and in accessing further education and training. (DETE 2000, p.127)

The first dot-point is different from some of the views of reading quoted from a century before. We can note new requirements such as the ability to read *critically*. We can also note the absences such as the requirement to *love* reading noted in 1890. Has 'emotional engagement' replaced 'love' and, if so, what is the difference - what else might the 'emotional engagement' require of the student (and teacher) that 'love' did not? Another notable difference

among many is the inclusion of issues related to information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mention of the 'virtual' and 'global' community. Just as the introduction of supplementary readers had a huge impact on the student reader and the teacher of reading in the late nineteenth century, so too will the introduction of ICTs. Here we see evidence that ICTs will not simply be 'tools' bent to traditional purposes, but that they will change what reading *is*, and the ways students and teachers must be – their bodies, their dispositions, their desires, their values (they must now imagine 'more just futures' for example).

Many policy documents and curriculum frameworks provide definitions of literacy or its component parts such as reading. I'm often struck by how confidently they do this, as if there is an easy agreement about what's involved and the implications that flow from the definition. My brief historical excursion has sought to show that we should be place in 'scare quotes' around all statements and definitions of this kind. History provides us with a way of reading such documents at a distance, and to see them as a framing of the student and the teacher with many effects on their daily lives. It is appropriate that I leave the last word to Manguel, who helps us to see the ultimate unknowability of reading in a scientific sense.

We continue to read without a satisfactory definition of what we are doing. We know that reading is not a process that can be explained through a mechanical model; we know that it takes place in certain defined parts of the brain but we also know that these areas are not the only ones to participate; we know that the process of reading, like that of thinking, depends on our ability to decipher and make use of language, the stuff of words which makes up text and thought. The fear that researchers seem to express is that their conclusion will question the very language in which they express it: that language may be in itself an arbitrary absurdity, that it may communicate nothing except in its stuttering essence, that it may depend almost entirely not on its enunciators but on its interpreters for its existence, and that the role of readers is to render visible – in al-Haytham's fine phrase – "that which writing suggests in hints and shadows". (p.19)ⁱⁱ

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GG South Australian Government Gazette

EG Education Gazette (Education Department of South Australia)

i This text has been adapted from a keynote given to the Annual conference of the South Australian English Teachers Association, May 2000.

ii al-Haytham was an 11th century Egyptian scholar