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YOUR CLASSROOM • YOUR STAFFROOM • YOUR FUTURE

TEACHING ENGLISH TO TEENAGE TOURISTS

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Steve Henry offers some reflections on the challenges faced by English teachers in a time when social media has an all-encompassing influence on the students they seek to engage…

It was 2011. An English teacher in Sydney woke up, brewed his coffee and enjoyed a podcast as he drove his little white Yaris to work. Things seemed normal as he tried to avoid eye contact with the 'talker' at the sign-on book and then looked hopefully at the table in the English staffroom for any sign of baked goods. Period 1, his Year 10 class wandered in and sat down, but something was different.

The English teacher looked closely, they seemed . . . glazed. 'Krispy Kreme students' he thought.

'You guys lose a bit of sleep last night?' he asked.

They stared back at him like stoned goldfish.

Later he shared his donut joke with a younger teacher.

'Oh, you just need to click the 'like' button,' she said.

'What's a 'like' button?'

The next day he found a big thumbs up button at the front of the room. Whenever a student volunteered an answer or read out some of their writing he'd sidle over to it, tap it, and wow wouldn't their ears perk up? Wouldn't their eyes light up? What was there not to like about the 'like' button?

Still, he couldn't help but notice that the 'like' button was placed front and centre of the room. Was it possible to be jealous of a button?

AGENTS OF ONLINE CULTURE

Someone has left open the door to our teenagers' rooms and Online Culture Agents have snuck in and set up camp. They sing their seductive little TikTok songs, the glow of their campfire screens keeps our teens awake and all the talk is of Snapchat romances and insta-friendships. Their culture is replete with its own filters, rituals, skillsets and values. They are sneaky good.

Now when our teenagers arrive at their classroom some of them behave as if they are tourists.

Glazed. Homesick for their online world.

WE BECOME WHAT WE BEHOLD (FATHER JOHN CULKIN)

Warning: Mixed metaphors ahead.

In 2021, Facebook admitted that Instagram was toxic for teenage girls. A Roy Morgan survey showed that Australian teenage girls on average spend nearly two hours a day on social media (Morgan, 2018). American adults touch their phones 2,617 times a day (Naftulin, 2016). Classes have fallen silent, fake news now travels six times faster on Twitter than real news. COVID-19 has exacerbated the already parlous mental wellbeing of teens who are being hospitalised for self-harm in record numbers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Social media notifications are no longer novelties, they are little devils that demand to be fed at all times. The technology of distraction has ceased being a home invader – it's now bringing us coffee so we can stay up and watch another YouTube clip or wait for another 'like'. The algorithm that baits the social media hooks has determined that the negative emotions of outrage and anger will keep us right there . . . stoned goldfish.

Behold, our students are becoming what they are beholding.

Martin Gurri and Jonathan Haidt have talked about the way social media can be a type of 'universal solvent' (Haidt, 2022) at once dissolving many of the barriers behind which abuse and injustice have lain hidden but also eating away at the mortar of institutional trust and challenging the significance of those shared rituals that are foundational to our collective values and identity.

We tend to consider these things in isolation, the danger of Instagram, the increasing pace of life, mobile phones for children, invasive educational data, notifications and family filters. A sociologist would consider the way online culture has sought to fill a young person's life with 'entertainment', removing time previously spent bored

or in reverie or imaginative play or in face-to-face communication with family and friends. A psychologist would be rightly concerned at the impact of social media on the mental health of our young people, many of whom are exhausted by their inability to escape from the online world of heightened emotional response, cyber bullying, hyper-alertness and fractured attention. Parents worry about the lurking dangers of online predators and the closed bedroom doors of the online world their teens inhabit.

An English teacher has concerns as well, not just at the decay of basic skills and long-form reading, but with the subtle forms of narcissism and objectification that are entrenched in the online communication skillset.

The year is 2022. Our teacher is back in the Yaris and back to the classroom after two years of pandemic disruption and wretched attempts at getting students to speak or participate in zoom classrooms. He organises his Year 9 class into randomised groups to view and discuss film clips. Most groups work well, laughing and talking about the clip of Don and Peggy from Madmen, or the 'Commander of the Felix Legions' from Gladiator, or the 'make him an offer he can't refuse' Godfather clip. But one group of boys sits there and stares awkwardly at one another . . . for five minutes, for ten minutes.

'Come on you lot, get talking, get to work.'

'But we don't know each other sir. Can't we work with our friends?'

'No, you can't. Introduce yourselves, ask questions, speak, talk, get at it.'

They sit there in their misery. 'Like glassy little billiard balls', he thinks to himself.

Back in the staffroom he relates his experience.

One teacher says that she changes the seating plan of her Year 8 class around every three weeks for this very reason.

Another English teacher, Mr Brennan (likewise a Yaris owner), explains that he has developed a series of sayings in reaction to the student obsession with staying connected.

'No Snapchat, no backchat. We don't Facebook, we face our books. Forget social media, try antisocial media.' The 'Brennanism' is born.

Perhaps when Marshall McLuhan (1964) declared that 'The medium is the message' he envisaged something of what technology might bring with it. I suspect, however, that even he would be surprised at the seductive weight of both medium and message of online culture: stealing time and focus and, increasingly, our young people's ability to think critically, relate open heartedly and listen carefully.

THE SKILLS AND VALUES OF THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Speaking and Listening

Most English classrooms are set up to facilitate discussion. The classic 'double horseshoe' where students all face each other, or desks arranged in small groups. Students venture their opinions in an environment where random thoughts, whimsicality, philosophical musings, wry humour and tentative speculations are all welcomed as grist for the collective mill. The skill is in catching new ideas and putting them into words, developing deeper, more complex thinking and new perspectives and giving them shape, testing them out. The underlying values are the dignity and worth of each individual, a recognition that the class is better for the input of a variety of students.

What about formal debating? Two teams are sent off with a topic. They need to adopt a firm position on the topic, clarify and define, research and discuss, develop coherent arguments and summaries, make notes and collaborate. Then, they face their classmates and they disagree, armed with rational argument and clever rhetoric. They listen carefully to opposition points and do their best to counter and rebut. After the debate is over, they listen to the adjudication, accept defeat graciously or celebrate victory, thank each other and then sit down as colleagues. The formal debate privileges the skills of rationality, well-chosen example, and collaborative effort, it insists that an opposition argument is worth careful attention and the person who offers it is not to be mocked or belittled or sneered at. A debate takes students deep into relevant topics and asks them to wrestle with new ideas and possible solutions to current issues.

There are online forums and courses that aim to foster these same skills. However, the mediation of the screen and the potential for an almost unlimited audience immediately introduces troubling elements of anonymity, deception and spiteful feedback. Cacophony becomes default. Many apps have, as their foundational principle, the notion that someone else is only worth listening to, or engaging with, if they look cool, or interesting, or

beautiful . . . hey, otherwise, just move on, just swipe left (or right, our English teacher isn't sure). The fast pace of the medium means that for the most part, students don't have the time or opportunity to formulate coherent rational arguments and, even if they did, they couldn't be sure that they would be listened to. No, better, to shout, better the loud insult than the nuanced argument, better to sell product as an influencer with hundreds of thousands of subscribers than to lose a debate.

Reading and Writing

It's not all Krispy Kreme and billiards for our English teacher however. There are still many of THOSE moments, when a class is caught up in a story or play, drawing a collective breath when the rock plummets towards Piggy, screwing up their faces and trying not to leak at the end of *The Book Thief*. They walk out of the classroom taller, sadder, wiser, more reflective, more at one with their fellow students.

When a teacher challenges a class to read a Dickens novel, when they ask them to dig deeper into the poetry of Plath or Oodgeroo, they are asserting a set of values: that a novel is worth investing hours of their time into because it will cause them to think differently about life and people, that time spent in different worlds where they are not the centre of attention is well spent indeed. Research has shown that reading long form fiction creates new neural pathways, strengthening brain activity, it reduces stress, amplifies our ability to empathise and helps alleviate symptoms of depression (Stanborough, 2019). The reading and study of poetry will likewise reward them, bring them to an understanding of how beautiful language can be when it harmonises form and freedom, careful word choice and unspeakable emotion, painful history and glimmers of hope and beauty, immortal visions and flickering mortality.

Our teacher suspects that the Online Agents are using books for their campfires. But where would they get them from? So many bookshops have closed.

'Two old people are sitting on their porch. There's a table between them and there is a pot of tea and some other item on the table. Write down what you see in your mind's eye, the detail.' Our English teacher begins another creative writing lesson. Thirty students, all in their school uniform have walked in, but within two minutes, each of them is developing a unique world, giving imaginative shape and texture to the sketched image their teacher has presented them with. The object on the table? A postcard, a gun, a porcelain dog, a newspaper, a linen bag, a single flower, a water pipe, a seashell, a fortune cookie, a pair of broken glasses, an empty photo frame. The students read out their pieces, listen, laugh, applaud or sit there, puzzled. No answer is dismissed, these are beginnings of stories and histories. They move on, experimenting with setting, form, character and plot.

Later that year, our teacher leads the students through the art of the formal essay. Some of them complain that they are confused. 'Good', he answers. 'Stay in that valley until you find clarity, then write your way out.'

The way we read has changed with the broken-dam-deluge of information that overwhelms us. We scan text for things of immediate interest, skimming texts instead of engaging with them. The algorithm that filters texts for our consumption is not geared for nuanced perspectives, worthy literature or balanced world view and the deep focus and flow states that are an enriching part of novel reading are sacrificed for the assumption that anything that doesn't capture our attention in the first few seconds is of lesser value. Johann Hari (2022) tells us that this move away from sustained reading 'creates a different relationship with reading. It stops being a form of pleasurable immersion in another world and becomes more like dashing around a busy supermarket to grab what you need and then get out again.'

The corporate values that are the impulse of major media corporations also provide the impetus for the writing that succeeds in this culture: fast, emotionally manipulative, accusatory, spin-laden and catchy. Online Culture (OC) creates space for important conversations and shines its light into dark corners of abuse and prejudice, but it is also the breeding ground for shallow comparison and envy, untested theories and obvious untruth. While the immediate potential of a world-wide audience has its egalitarian element, there is considerable risk for today's shy teen who writes themselves onto the screen and then sits there, tragically isolated in the 24/7 glare, unable to hide from cyber nasties and trolls.

Why have we accepted the hairy-chested intrusion of surveillance capitalism and the self-referential algorithm into the lives of our children? These cultural bullies seek to elbow physical reality aside and replace the contemplative and creative disciplines of reading and writing with grunting emojis, narcissistic posing and a billion

snippets of vacuous trivia and forgettable TikTok performances. If we really think our children are somehow safe from the trillion-dollar social media culture agents then perhaps we should ask ourselves how well we've done with it, whether we, the 'adults in the room' have been able to resist the constant distractions that have fractured our attention and fostered our obsessive focus on small screens on trains.

A CLASSROOM COUNTERSTEP

Where does all of this leave our teacher? Tasked with teaching a set of skills, passing on a love of literature and fostering the accompanying values that are increasingly being relegated to the margins of a dominant OC, he feels that his subject, far from being regarded as central to learning and life, is now becoming niche. He feels like one of those guerrilla gardeners, sneaking into the concrete landscapes that OC agents have constructed in his students' lives, hoping to plant some fragile little seed. Or, perhaps he should just join them. Trade up for a car that is more corporate and a job that is more in tune with the pace and monetised values of the online culture.

OR PERHAPS ENGLISH TEACHING IS NOW MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER.

Every culture, every religion or system of thought, every artistic or artisanal endeavour, every scientific breakthrough relies on the teacher student nexus to survive into the next generation. Mentors and mentees, masters and apprentices, professors and students, teachers and disciples, the aged and the young, the key is to be found not in the method, but in the nature of that ageless, archetypal relationship. Set against the emotional fragility or explosive echo chambers of online connections, are the robust interactions between a teacher and student. The best learning has always been cocooned within the teacher student relationship. My contentions here are that:

- English teaching is increasingly a counter cultural activity.
- The antidote to some of the damage done by online culture can be found within the stable learning environment of the teacher student relationship. Culture, skills and knowledge mediated not by screen or algorithm, but by a teacher.

Healthy teacher student relationships exist when a student is challenged to grow and learn but can find support in the process. They exist where students are celebrated for their uniqueness and are expected to rejoice in the difference of others and the richness that brings. They exist when students are helped towards clarity, not popularity. Disagreement and argument will naturally exist within a classroom, but a robust student teacher connection will humanise it and provide students with avenues for asserting their perspective, listening to others and growing in understanding. Texts are introduced into the relationship, not with the aim of added screentime or the promotion of moral superiority, but with the hope they will touch something deep in the student and provoke self-reflection, greater wisdom and empathy.

Healthy teacher student relationships include moments of catharsis, they develop their own rituals and routines and foster resilience. They feel safe and inspiring in equal measure, they mitigate against extremes, they force students to recognise their own knowledge and skill deficit and challenge them into pathways of growth. The dynamics of classroom relationships requires students to submit to authority and requires authority to bow to the needs of students. Tasks are attempted, the syllabus is followed, the imagination is engaged, mistakes are made, reflection is required, apologies are offered, lessons are learned, jokes are laughed at, skills are cultivated, day after day, year after year.

This face-to-face relationship remains the best model we have for passing on the best we have to offer to all of the next generation, regardless of social position.

In a nutshell, our teachers, not our textbooks, are the embodiment of the finest things that we want for our next generation. They lead, they serve.

This is why our teacher should puff out his chest when he wakes up and gets into his Yaris tomorrow morning. English teaching (and all teaching) is more important now than ever. The challenges faced are of a different scale and the task is increasingly difficult but more urgent. Educational policy must not first be one of data or corporate values but must recognise that the student teacher relationship must be privileged.

And if he walks into Year 9 and sees a student take out their phone he will say, 'Put that away and get ready to listen carefully, to read and think deeply, speak thoughtfully and write beautifully.' He will mutter his favourite Brennanism, 'Instagram? I don't give a damn' to himself

and then say to the class:
'Alright everyone, today we are going to start with this question. In The Book Thief, *when Liesel Meminger's world descends into chaos, why is it that she chooses books to steal? Eh? Why books?'*

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