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Review of The Textbook and the Lecture: Education in the Age of New Media by Norm Friesen

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The Textbook and the Lecture: Education in the Age of New Media by Norm Friesen, a professor of educational technology, is a historical argument about enduring influence of two well-known educational forms: textbooks and lectures. Friesen (2017) began the book project with the following question: “Why are schools and higher education apparently so little changed in our era of digital media?” (p. 149). The question seems somewhat counterintuitive given contemporary higher education’s preoccupation with rapidly changing technology. To answer the question, Friesen (2017) looks back to the beginnings of literacy. His book-length examination is divided into three parts. The first part introduces his argument that writing and speech are interconnected and that they have together helped humans advance and develop their existence. Part two briefly reviews two dominant psychological paradigms that have influenced western education, rationalism and romanticism, which are connected with writing and speech, respectively (Friesen, 2017, p. 65). Also discussed in this part is a brief cultural and intellectual history of books. Lastly, in the third part, Friesen (2017) presents case studies of textbooks and lectures, two lasting forms that have historically shaped education and look strong going forward despite their critics’ dire predictions.

In chapter one, evocatively titled “No More Pencils, No More Books?”, Friesen (2017) reminds readers about doubts cast on the educational utility of books by past thinkers such as Rousseau, John Dewey, and Marshall McLuhan. Friesen (2017) counters this criticism by posing a reverse question: “Why have so many educational forms [notably, books] and practices been around for so long?” (p. 6). His answer is that books—and their oral counterpart, lectures—have “reflected and shaped . . . our relation to knowledge or truth” over many centuries (Friesen, 2017, p. 12).

Chapter two briefly compares writing instruction in the 21st century BCE Sumer with that in our own 21st century. Archaeologists have discovered a sophisticated writing curriculum from an ancient Mesopotamian city called Nippur. This eponymous curriculum offered phased instruction to students, training them at first to “write the basic wedges” and then advancing to “the inscription of words of increasing complexity” (Friesen, 2017, p. 25). Friesen (2017) compares this instruction to contemporary “instruction that is varied and sequenced” (p. 28). He also points to similarities between Sumer and our times in how students train in a “sequestered space” using pedagogical tools such as “tablets, written exercises” (Friesen, 2017, p. 28). Friesen (2017) posits that such arrangements have an “efficacy and mutual-reinforcing interdependency” and thus have stood the test of time (p. 28).

Chapters three through six are included in part two of the book. In chapters three and four, Friesen (2017) discusses psychological paradigms of rationalism, associated with writing, and romanticism, associated with speech, respectively. Among representative thinkers of the rationalist paradigm Friesen (2017) mentions John Amos Comenius, a seventeenth century education scholar, and French philosopher Rene Descartes. Comenius gave primacy to “questions of structure, rules, and grammar” (p. 40). Chapter three also contrasts writing with speech in light of how various world cultures perceived these two forms of media: “Speech is authentic . . . but it is flawed when compared to the fixity of writing” (Friesen, 2017, p. 39). Friesen (2017) compares these historical

views about the two forms with their contemporary counterparts: “authenticity of the face-to-face meeting,” “importance of writing down one’s proofs in ‘black and white’” (pp. 39-40). Chapter four describes the romantic paradigm through the ideas of its major proponent Rousseau, who believed that writing makes language artificial. According to him, speech allows us to keep “ties to . . . natural feelings and expressions” (Friesen, 2017, p. 48). These two paradigms have continued to inform theories of education: “The accumulated ideas and methods of the past are what make today’s education . . . possible” (Friesen, 2017, p. 55).

In chapter 5, Friesen (2017) discusses how education continues to be affected by the rationalist and the romantic paradigms. “Those who say that schools need to free children from their books and writing tasks . . . are not saying those things for the first time” (p. 56). Conversely, scholars influenced by the rationalist paradigm believe writing to be “the basis for understanding teaching and learning” (Friesen, 2017, p. 56). The chapter briefly discusses ideas of prominent contemporary scholars whose ideas reflect the two paradigms: Seymour Papert, Roger Schank, and Marc Prensky representing the romantic paradigm and Noam Chomsky and his grammar following the rationalist paradigm. Friesen ends the chapter by hinting at the interconnectedness of the paradigms.

Chapter six explores the pedagogical value of books in western education. Books have “long shaped how we think about knowledge, its validation, acquisition, and circulation” (Friesen, 2017, p. 75). Friesen (2017) explores historical notions about books through the ideas of a few prominent proponents of British Empiricism (p. 75). Empiricists valued books as an “epistemic object” but were wary of their “dumbfounding effects” that took one away from “clear and indubitable perception and experience” (Friesen, 2017, p. 79). Friesen (2017) ends the chapter by describing books as an “interface” between public and private, personal observations and general ideas, and writer and reader (p. 81).

The third and final part of the book presents case studies on textbooks and lectures (chapters seven, eight, and nine) before concluding (chapter 10). Friesen (2017) begins chapter 7, on textbooks, by invoking Thomas Kuhn who found that textbooks “present a simplified and sanitized version of the prevailing [scientific] paradigm” (p. 89). However, Friesen (2017) adds that textbooks also enable students to understand “basic procedures and activities” of a science (p. 89). Friesen (2017) discusses examples of an ancient Chinese text and Euclid’s *Elements* to show “rudiments of many of the key characteristics of today’s textbooks” (p. 92). Next, Friesen (2017) provides a mini-case study of catechism in medieval Europe. Friesen (2017) states that printed catechism “display[ed] a number of characteristics . . . central to the textbook as a pedagogical form, including its logical and dialogical structure and its method of exposition” (p. 98). Friesen (2017) ends the chapter by discussing the impact of the “inductive method” (p. 102) of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, an “educational disciple” of Rousseau (p. 50). “Catechetical questions” of earlier textbooks were replaced by “inductive questions” around the mid-nineteenth century (Friesen, 2017, p. 103). Summing up the importance of textbooks, Friesen (2017) states that their “presentation of educational knowledge” is an often overlooked aspect of “the production and reproduction of knowledge” (p. 109).

Chapters eight and nine explore lectures as a pedagogical form. The first of these chapters looks at historical antecedents of this form and the second chapter discusses contemporary developments related to this form. Rejecting the notion that lectures have been found to be an ineffective pedagogical form, Friesen (2017) points to “video and audio podcasts,” including famous TED talks (p. 112). Informing the reader that “the medieval meaning of the word lecture is to *read* or *read aloud*,” Friesen (2017) states that historical roots of this form involved “reading aloud or dictation of an authoritative text” (p. 113). Friesen (2017) posits that lectures should be seen “as bridging oral communication with writing” (p. 112). Lectures have adapted to their historical circumstances. For example, when books were scarce in “High Middle Ages,” lectures helped preserve knowledge (Friesen, 2017, p. 113). After the development of printing technology, lectures became a more flexible form, with lecturers’ commentary largely replacing the verbatim reading of earlier times (Friesen, 2017). German educational scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt credited lectures with uniting teaching and research (Friesen, 2017, 123).

In chapter 9—an extension of his analysis of the lecture form—Friesen (2017) looks at lectures “as a performance . . . an event—even as a kind of pedagogical illusion” (p. 127). Referring to audio recordings of lectures of French philosopher Michel Foucault, Friesen (2017) asks: “What does it mean that their recording is not of Foucault’s words or thoughts, but rather the electromechanical registration of the sound of his voice?” (p. 128). Friesen (2017) explains how lectures as a mass genre has become adapted to an individual viewer in our “televisual” age (p. 131). Invoking sociologist Erving Goffman’s talk about lectures, Friesen (2017) points to “multiple roles” of a lecturer: a “telegenic performer,” “an intent researcher,” a “textual self” (pp. 132-133). Friesen (2017) adds that the textual self is supplemented with other modes, such as “images, audio, and video” (p. 133). Lecturers create an “illusion” of sorts by using their “writing and editing skills to be . . . as engaging and even conversational as possible” (Friesen, 2017, p.134). Explaining the significance of this pedagogical form in our times, Friesen (2017) reasons that “it is not the lecture that is rendered obsolete by a new media technology, but rather, the new technology that eventually finds a way of being adapted to this flexible, perennial form” (p. 136). Lectures, then, are alive and even healthy as a pedagogical form.

In the final chapter, Friesen (2017) makes an interesting claim: “We *are* as a result of what we learn” (p. 140). This claim is dovetailed upon his analysis that textbooks and lectures have shaped us for centuries, though in different ways. Friesen (2017) concludes that “development of these formations is much more closely synchronized with larger religious, political, and cultural shifts” (p. 141). Friesen (2017) describes textbooks and lectures as “connecting devices through which the priorities and pressures coming from both media and education can be negotiated” (p. 142). Lastly, these two forms “provide similar places where knowledge is embodied, enacted, and disseminated” (Friesen, 2017, p. 145). By way of a cautionary note, Friesen (2017) calls on educators to appreciate “human limitations” as far as entirely upending enduring pedagogical forms (p. 152). Overall, in this scholarly work, Friesen (2017) provides a careful and timely analysis of two pedagogical forms whose relevance seems to be questioned even more in our times than was the case in previous decades.

In conclusion, as a professor of educational technology, Norm Friesen is particularly well-suited to write an elaborate argument about the relevance of textbooks and lectures given the onset of a digital age, high costs of textbooks, and demands for active learning. By examining these two forms through the lens of history and culture, Friesen has provided a much-needed cautionary perspective for policy makers, arguing that they must not minimize the importance of continuities in their pursuit of educational innovation. To put this point more charitably, Friesen seems to suggest that leaders in education must ponder the substance of education—what has worked for centuries—as they think of ways to keep pace with the changing world. However, while Friesen has provided this necessary reflection, his discussion of the two forms in our contemporary digital age is too brief. He has mentioned TED videos, but such examples are few and serve to reinforce his thesis.

One can argue that, because the main purpose of the book seems to be to point out historical longevity of these two forms, the book has mainly delivered on its promise. However, to many readers of this book, the discussion of the two forms may not seem satisfactory if it is limited to their historical roots. These readers may expect a discussion surrounding these two forms to also include their role in an age in which technology has penetrated our lives in ways that seem like a point of no return. For example, in a recent article in *Inside Higher Ed*, Doug Lederman and Mark Lieberman (2019) have reported that “as many as two dozen state university systems . . . are talking publicly (or quietly) about undertaking ambitious online learning initiatives.” What role do textbooks and lectures have in a higher education that is increasingly looking to an online delivery system? How do the two forms help an increasingly digitally conscious student body? What strategies may work to adapt these two forms most suitably to the digital environment? An in-depth discussion involving these and similar questions would have added more value to this thoughtful and scholarly work.

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