

The Evolution of Education and Literacy in Western Civilization

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ABSTRACT

Education and literacy have contributed to how people in Western Civilization communicate and learn about everything in life from the humanities to science and technology. Other civilizations and cultures also value education and literacy because it gives them the new knowledge of people, places, and inventions. The West is unique because fascinating knowledge and culture serves as a foundation of education for humanity. The new knowledge allows people to communicate in Western Civilization and all over the world.

1. Introduction

Education and literacy have contributed to how people in Western Civilization communicate and learn about everything in life from the humanities to science and technology. As a result, literacy and education have been the indicators of whether or not a person is “well off” or “disadvantaged” (Kraus, 2000, p. 323). Other civilizations and cultures also value education and literacy because it gives them the new knowledge of people, places, and inventions. The West is unique because fascinating knowledge and culture serves as a foundation of education for humanity. The new knowledge allows people to communicate in Western Civilization and all over the world.

Some historians, like Harvey Graff, think there are myths about literacy and education (Gallagher, 1989, p. 252). Others claim that evidence of literacy and education has always existed throughout history in the forms of “signatures on contracts, marriages, wills, service and church records” (p. 253). Through the talent of writers and the publication of books and journals, people had the opportunity to learn about different subject matters.

Certainly, people began to read cave markings, carvings, and tablets. This was beneficial to communities because they could communicate messages to one another. Hunter-gatherers would leave messages on caves to let the next hunters know about their successes. Soon, people began to write down their messages with pen on papyrus paper, which proved to be much more convenient and efficient than lifting heavy tablets (Boorstin, 1985, p. 496). As information was recorded on papyrus paper, people began to learn more. People also began to learn from story telling. The Greeks were famous for telling stories, and this oral tradition of learning continued from generation to generation.

Along with talented writers and publications, the printing press had a dramatic impact on the world as one of the greatest literary inventions; and the printing press became monumental in the development of literacy and education in the Western world (Barton, 1996, p. 86). By the fifteenth century, the movable printing press was developed by Gutenberg, and later on, during the Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, a permanent printing press was invented (Van Doren, 1991, p. 143). This new invention contributed to humanity because it gave people access to knowledge. The printing press enabled the binding of books with a metal press, much like the press used for olives and grapes. People could now learn about science and technology both in their home areas and even worlds away. Nonetheless, science and technology were the concentration because it gave humanity a method of completing work quicker and achieving success.

Today, technology allows people to learn more about every subject with a click of the computer mouse. Some scholars argue that people are writing and reading more than ever because of the age of texting. Others suggest that it is necessary to teach the history of literacy so younger generations understand

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where their ancestors have come from, and how education and literacy have evolved through the centuries. As young people learn and debate online, they are actually mimicking the Greek traditions of storytelling.

2. History and Evolution

Story telling, cave markings, scripture carvings and even tablets provide evidence of people in the beginning stages of learning and reading. Story telling was one means whereby people originally learned about stories and knowledge. Proof of this oral tradition dates from the Greek Bronze Age. Markings on seals also allowed people to read and later re-tell information about Greek traditions, culture, and stories (Grace, 2009, p. 6). As a result, the Greeks became associated with social status because of their oral traditions. In their minds, the oral tradition of story telling represented a pure language and “strategy for gaining social prestige” (Herzfeld, 1990, p. 151).

Some of the earliest writing tools came from the Neanderthals with the use of torches for cave markings as well as “the manufacture of special stone cutting tools” (McNeill, 1991, p. 6). People began to learn and teach with these tools. This allowed people to develop their own language and to communicate when they began to hunt and gather. The Egyptians are also credited with the invention of writing. The Egyptians associated writing with civilization and used it for bureaucratic purposes (DeCastell, 1986, p. 61). Scribes were responsible for writing on tablets. Initially, they would inscribe stone, much the way tombstones are still marked today (Boorstin, 1991, p. 496). According to William McNeill (1991), the purpose of tablets was to tell stories about “gods, kings and heroes” (p. 145). In most cases, the stories were based on myths, and these stories were spread to wider parts of society. Since many styles of writing existed at the time, “the need for a simplified system of writing was evident” (p. 145). As more scribes began to write on tablets, literacy began to spread (p. 146). Although the role of scribes was typically only to inscribe messages on the tablets, their responsibility sometimes grew as they learned many foreign scripts and signs. In McNeill’s view, “local scribes must have found it quite impossible to master the intricacies of so many styles of writing, each of which involved the use of ...several hundred signs” (p. 145).

In addition to tablets, papyrus sheets were also a major contributor to the spread of literacy among communities. This is because it was easy for scribes to write with pen on sheets, and papyrus was much lighter in comparison to the stone tablets. Not everyone had the opportunity to write on scribes and sheets; however, if it were not for the Chinese developing the use of paper around 105 AD, this innovation would have occurred much later. The Chinese were the first to begin publishing and printing books. They were also the first to make printed books available for distribution. According to Charles Van Dorn, other areas of the Western world, like Europe, did not yet see a necessity for this invention, and they had not recognized the benefits. It was not until the fourteenth century that other areas of the Western world came to understand the art and purpose of papermaking. They would soon learn that it was essential to the spread of literacy and education.

According to McNeill, “literacy continued to be the special preserve of conventionally minded priests and scribes. Yet not entirely so.” (p. 147). When people wanted to rebel or to express disagreement with their communities, for example, they now had a way to write and spread their own individual messages and agendas. This new way of learning and writing had far-reaching consequences. McNeill suggested that the “democratization of learning implicit in simplified scripts must be counted as one of the major turning points in the history of civilization” (p. 147).

In actuality, storytelling, tablets, papyrus, and paper was not enough for people. They wanted to learn more and this helped the spread of education and literacy. In India, for example, people formed a learning education institute to learn and read (p. 368, 369). Further West, learning societies formed to encourage interest in educational pursuits. In McNeill’s opinion, “a society remarkably open to the innovation thus emerged – sure of itself, interested in the wonders of civilized world, and eager to seize wealth, fame and learning wherever they could be found” (p. 539).

As literacy spread, education was essential. According to Greek philosophers, reading and learning began in schools, and the success of a particular student typically determined the value of the education (Kraus,

2000, p. 322). In T.J. Kraus' view, it was to the students' advantage to make the most of their educational experience much like it is today: "For someone who is destined to be a real citizen with rights and duties this membership requires that he can write and read properly" (p. 322). The Greeks also believed that it was essential for someone to read and write because they trusted Aristotle's claim that education was necessary to fit into society. The Romans also supported this philosophy and it was one of the few ways to make the transition into the upper reaches of society. They also believed that children should not only learn at schools but that their education should continue at home. In Kraus' opinion, "Literacy was not only held in high esteem, it was part of the education of human beings in order to turn them into noble beings" (p. 323).

Along with education in schools, the publication of the Bible stimulated literacy and education. When the Bible was printed, people began to read it to learn about Christianity as well as to share their knowledge with people in other communities. Scripture readings actually brought communities together (McNeill, 1991, p. 343). Karen Armstrong (1993) explains that it has always been important that the Bible be read in a sacred manner. She suggests, "The Bible must be read metaphorically like poetry if it is to yield that sense of the sacred" (p. 388). The Bible became an asset to the Christian church as a guide for Christians to learn about Jesus' messages and the disciples' good news in the gospels. People, then, spread the message of Jesus' hope, love, and peace for all humankind. These messages continued to spread because of the monastery movement throughout Europe. This movement gave monks the opportunity to read secular and sacred scripts, and enabled the Church to place a heavy influence on educating people in various cultures. According to McNeill, monasteries became the sole source of education: "With the decay of secular centers of education, monasteries especially in the West...were...the principal refuges of learning" (p. 410). This set a foundation for a larger movement of education in the fields of humanities and "science" allowing people to access more information about these subject areas (Smith, 1991, p. 61).

Another landmark era for literacy was in the 1940s and 1950s when the public library gained growth (Albright, 2009, p. 13). Adults, young children, and families could now go to the library, not only to borrow books, but also to hear stories, much like the ancient Greeks. The library hour allowed librarians to read books to young children before they learned how to read. According to Meghan Albright, "librarians began to understand their value as a resource for children learning to read" (p. 13). When children had the opportunity to hear librarians read stories to them, it prepared them for their school years. The ultimate objective of the "first story hours was to begin a child's socialization with peers, as well as to foster a love of books and facilitate a child's adjustment to school" (p. 13).

3. Connections from Other Cultures and Civilizations

Literacy and education allowed people to communicate beyond the walls of Western Civilizations. The movement in literacy permitted the Western world to share ideas, practices, and new improved ways with other parts of the world and to learn because of innovations like Chinese paper. As people began to access books, journals, and other materials, they wanted to learn more. For many people, social status was determined by their ability to read and write. Rhoads Murphey (2002) argues, "Education makes good men and good men act nobly" (p. 104).

In places, like China, very few women had the advantage of a formal education as only a few of the elite women were able to take advantage of educational opportunities (p. 52, 62). Since some women did not have access to these learning opportunities, they created their own societies to learn. According to Carolyn Merchant (1989), "An expanding group of educated women began to participate in the philosophical and intellectual life of the period" (p. 269). No matter where they were located geographically, they shared a common bond for the yearning of knowledge in reading new material. As women were forming societies throughout the Western world, much of their work was accomplished in London, England where they demanded inclusion into the Royal Society of London, an all-male scientific society.

Although not all people had easy access to books or could enjoy the educational experience, Gutenberg's invention of the movable type gave people the opportunity to read new material. Between 1450 and 1500, many books and journals were printed and made available in many languages including Italian, French, English, and Spanish (Van Doren, 1991, p. 143). The range of languages allowed people to share their

knowledge, information, and discoveries with people of different cultures. Movable type also encouraged a new wave of readers and writers (Boorstin, 1985, 519). Just a few hundred years later, the invention of the steam-powered rotary press during the Industrial Revolution greatly increased the speed of this mass production.

The Renaissance was also significant to the expansion of literacy and education as it spread from its initial base in Italy to France, England, Spain and Germany (Van Doren, 1991, p. 143). As the Renaissance exploded across Europe, artists and poets began to write more. They were inspired by the fact that other people wanted to read about their written stories, thoughts and aspirations. Van Doren argues that these writers, like Clement Marot, Francois Rabelais and Geoffrey Chaucer, were regarded as heroes (p. 143).

Shakespeare also experienced fame as a hero as one of the greatest “linguistic creators” in the English language (p. 147). He was best known as a playwright, and he wrote plays based on real life experiences of people. In Van Doren’s view, the plays were as “close to a satisfactory imitation of human life as any author has ever managed to achieve” (p. 146). If people could not travel to London to the Globe Theatre to see his plays performed live on stage, they could read them in books, even if they lived in France, Spain, Germany or elsewhere in England.

4. Education and Literacy made Western Civilization Unique

Education and literacy in Western Civilization had many unique aspects such as social status, the contract and the introduction of the essay. One monumental fact that contributed to the distinctiveness of this part of the world is that teachers were revered. These teachers were not ordinary. They had their own special purpose and mission to teach people and later, gained fame for their talent. These teachers were prophets and philosophers who taught people about the sciences. Other philosophers, such as Plato and Socrates, taught people that they did not need to be “religious” but that they could decide how to live a good life on their own (Armstrong, 1993, p. 1992).

In actuality, Plato attracted an audience, who wanted to hear more about philosophy than religion. His students “were not dried-up academics in ivory towers but men with a mission, anxious to save the souls of their contemporaries by attracting to the disciplines of their particular school” (p. 92). Plato’s teachings focused on individual thought and how people could live life according to his philosophies and still maintain integrity and a pure heart. Armstrong suggests, “His teachings would help the philosopher to realize his true self, by liberating his soul from the prison of the body and enabling him to ascend to the divine world” (p. 93). This contrasts with Plato’s view that, “reading the scriptures is not discovering facts about God” (p. 127), it was a way for people to understand themselves and their purpose.

Aristotle’s ideas also established the Western world as one of the unique places in which to learn. He thought it was ideal to be an educated person because it encouraged people to be critical and seek more knowledge. In his view, the goal for students should be to seek a liberal education so they would learn the equivalent “to modern curriculum of languages, philosophy, mathematics, history and science” (Van Doren, 1991, p. 41). These separate areas of academia gave birth to the university. At the same time, a professorial class emerged, where professors specialized in particular areas of knowledge (p. 136).

Another reason why education and literacy were unique in the Western world is that it was here that a connection between social status and education was first established. Specifically, during twelfth and thirteenth centuries in England, social status gave people a direct access to education. Initially, only the upper class had access, but later the rising new middle class began to enjoy the same privileges. According to Mark Vaughn (2004), “the gentry represented a new, educated, and politically active social stratification within their order” (Vaughn, p. 47).

In addition to determining social status, the introduction and invention of the contract also made Western civilization unique. By the 1570s, as more people began to read in French societies, the contract became increasingly necessary in many situations. The invention of the contract created a way for people to think and monitor their behavior (Siddle, 1987, p. 19). Contracts even reached the far ends of France, where typically they would not usually be found. In Siddle’s view, this was the hallmark of literacy because

people could now sign their name to a document (p. 19). It further made the Western world unique because the concept was not familiar in other geographical areas (Stone, 1969, p. 69).

Along with contracts, the introduction of the essay also made the Western world distinctive. People could learn about writers' thoughts and experiences by reading their essays. Frenchman Michel de Montaigne was the first writer to introduce his own essays to the public (Van Doren, 1991, p. 144). What made his essays so special was that he used them for self-reflection (p. 144). As these essays became accessible, people were able to read and learn more about Montaigne. In Van Doren's opinion, "he is content to report what he is, what he thinks, what he feels in the expectation that he will be sufficiently like his reader—any reader—that his account will be interesting" (p. 144).

5. Conclusion

Some suggest that writing was the actual start of civilization because it introduced people to learning and reading (DeCastell, 1986, ix). The very first forms of writing typically appeared on cave walls, but in time, the written word was sent by letter and published in books with the invention of the printing press. The movable type and the printing press allowed people worlds away to access journals and books to learn more about religion, art, science and technology. As society and culture change, so do the people's demands and expectations.

People want to learn more about the world they live in. In modern culture, technology allows for quick access to information. According to Clive Thompson (2009), "Technology isn't killing our ability to write. It's reviving it and pushing our literacy in bold new directions" (p. 48). As such, the high-tech way of communicating with smartphones and computers allows people to text and twitter. In his view, "before the Internet came along, most Americans never wrote anything, ever, that wasn't a school assignment" (p. 48). Along with technology, there is an ongoing debate as to what should be taught in the classrooms. Historians, like Theodore Rabb (2004), believe that curricula should include the history of literacy so that students can connect their past with their present and use this as a foundation for the future (p. B24).

As people continue to communicate and learn, many scholars argue that it is similar to many ways of the Greeks. They learned by storytelling and by going to school. In Meagan Albright's (2009) view, "an understanding of storytimes of the past enriches those of today" (p. 13). With today's emphasis on online communication and discussion, these ways of learning are not private. They are there for the public to see. This is very similar to Greek oral traditions. According to Thompson, online conversations are "closer to the Greek tradition of argument than the asynchronous letter and essay writing of 50 years ago" (p. 48). Whether true or not, it is clear that in addition to the ability to write well in a formal essay or online, good teaching will always be necessary for people to learn.

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