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The Reformed English Curriculum

Neil Postman

Not long ago, I attended a conference of courageous educators who met to discuss the theme "Teaching English in the 1970s and 1980s." I thought them courageous because they were willing to proceed with their discussions in spite of the possibility that (1) the planet will not be fit for human life in the seventies and eighties, (2) even if it is, there might not be "schools" as we normally think of them, and (3) such schools might not require "teachers." My main contribution was to suggest still another possibility: that there will be no such subject as "English" by 1980. What is called "English" is not a very old

subject, in American schools at least, and it seemed worth remarking that there is no one who can safely predict what subjects the future will require. After all, the ancient Greeks could never have guessed what the high school curriculum of today would consist of. Neither could the Medievalists, the Elizabethans, nor the Pilgrims. Sixty years ago, Latin would have looked like a sure thing.

Perhaps what I meant to say at the conference was that there *ought not* to be such a subject as English by 1980; that English, as it is commonly taught, is shallow and precious, is not very interesting to most children, and, above all, has very little *survival value* for people who are going to live most of their lives in the seventies, eighties, nineties, and beyond.

I will not take time here to catalog the shortcomings of English. If you have not already noticed that English is withering away, being consumed by its own irrelevance, the chances are slim that I can make you see that this is, in fact, the case. I do want to point out, however, that what happens in school *should* have survival value (or what's an education for?) and that the soundest reason for having such a subject as English has always been that children *need* to be competent in using and understanding the dominant communication media of their own culture. When these media were largely limited to such forms as novels, poems, and essays, the content of English made some sense. My purpose here is to suggest an alternative to

English for the high school of 1980 when we will be so deeply immersed in the nuclear space age.

I call the alternative "media ecology." Its intention is to study the interaction between people and their communications technology. More particularly, media ecology looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival. The word ecology implies the study of environments: their structure, content, and impact on people.

An environment is, after all, a complex message system which imposes on human beings certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. It structures what we can see and say and, therefore, do. It assigns roles to us and insists on our playing them. It specifies what we are permitted to do and what we are not. Sometimes, as in the case of a courtroom, or classroom, or business office, the specifications are explicit and formal. In the case of media environments (e.g., books, radio, film, television, etc.), the specifications are more often implicit and informal, half concealed by our assumption that what we are dealing with is not an environment but merely a machine. Media ecology tries to make these specifications explicit. It tries to find out what roles media force us to play, how media structure what we are seeing, why media make us feel and act as we do.

Media ecology is the study of media as environments.

Now, the first thing to be said about media ecology is that I am not inventing it. I am only naming it. There are more than a score of living media ecologists and another dozen or so who are no longer living. Among the latter are Edward Bellamy, Harold Innis, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Norbert Wiener, and Alfred North Whitehead. Among those who are currently doing important thinking in the field are Buckminster Fuller, Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Peter Drucker, Herman Kahn, David Riesman, Ray Bradbury, Harold Lasswell, Don Fabun, Walter Ong, Edward Hall, Paul Goodman, Lyon White, Ruell Denney, Ronald Gross, Ashley Montague, and Edmund Carpenter. In one way or another, each of these men is asking the kinds of questions that are characteristic of media ecology. For example, their questions have to do with the present and the future. Mostly the future. Their questions also have to do with our chances of survival, and how to prepare ourselves intellectually and emotionally for media environments most of us do not quite believe in, and which we may not be able to control. (That we are all suffering even now, in some degree, from "future shock" can simply be taken for granted.)

One media ecologist, Edmund Farrell, is reflecting at present on the effects of medicine, space, and other technologies on our seminal metaphors for love, mystery, and wonder. When heart transplants or plastic hearts become commonplace, what will become of the "heart" as the symbolic source of human compassion? When the moon is found to be a desert of dust, where will lovers gaze? Have jet aircraft already "disappeared" the mystery and wonder of the sea? TWA has recently run an ad that stresses the fact that at 600 miles per hour the Atlantic Ocean is no more formidable to cross than the Mississippi. Where will we find our symbols of love and wonder? Is it important that we do? If we do, what changes will the new symbols make in our ritual life and in the structure of our symbology? Speaking of seminal metaphors, media ecologists are even now looking into the implications of semen banks. Should we have them? If so, who should run them? Will they enhance or degrade our concepts of "the dignity of man" and "the sanctity of life"?

Strange questions? They are the stuff of media ecology. Here is a spray of other questions. They are at different levels of conjecture, but of almost equal interest to media ecologists: What effects are television, film, LP record, transistor radio, etc., having on youth? To what extent are such media environments responsible for the generation gap? for student rebellion? for the search for self through drugs? What kinds of revolutions does TV cause? Are books obsolete? If so, when will we find out? If not, what useful purposes will they serve? Why, indeed, can't Johnny read? Will he ever? Why should he? What will be the long-range effects of the information explosion? Will it destroy hierarchies? Will it mean the end of organized religion? of the industrial state? Who will program the computers? What should we use them for? What will they use us for? Who should be forbidden to use them? Are schools obsolete? What uses shall we make of bugging devices? of the television-telephone? Do we need privacy? What will the pill do to our concepts of sex and marriage? of children? of religion? Will the electric car save our cities? At what cost? Are cities obsolete? Have mass media "repealed" the Bill of Rights? Have they made politics an offshoot of show business? If so, what should we do about it? What new kinds of politics will we require? What will be our new literary forms? Of what use will "tradition" be? What ideas will we need to forget? To what extent is technology remaking our language? Have the mass media polluted our language environment? To what extent is our language impeding our understanding of technology? Politics. Literature. Art. Sex. Love. Education. Law. Death. Lan-

guage. All of these have been and will be changed further by the new communications technology. And the worst and best part of it all is that no one knows for sure how, or when, or exactly why. That is why, when talking about the activities of media ecologists, one must use such verbs as "reflecting on," "looking into," "wondering about." In other words, media ecology has not yet developed firm methods of inquiry. At the moment, there are only fragments of methods available. Some media ecologists have popularized the use of language itself as an instrument of inquiry, in a manner somewhat akin to what I. A. Richards calls "feed forward." One makes discoveries about the world by inquiring into language, inventing new words, playing with metaphors, and in general searching for ambiguities and partially concealed meanings. Many media ecologists have used history as a "counter-environment" from which they can view contemporary happenings. Others have borrowed heavily from the methods of anthropologists in an effort to achieve some distance from what they wish to look at. Still others have relied upon their interpretations of art as a means of discovery, on the assumption that artists intuitively reveal what is happening in their own time. At this point, it is by no means clear that media ecology will turn out to be a science. Perhaps it will be an art form. Or some synthesis of both, in the manner of psychoanalysis. Certainly, no one has as yet come even close to inventing a thorough, or very useful, taxonomy of media ecology. Included in its current lexicon is everything from the language of jazz (hot media and cool media) to the language of science (entropy, feedback).

It goes without saying that media ecology has so far produced very few established facts and not even a handful of plausible theories. And that is exactly why media ecology lends itself so perfectly to the school curriculum of 1980: it is not yet a subject and may not be one for many years. Media ecology is a field of inquiry. Fields of inquiry imply the active pursuit of knowledge. Discoveries. Explorations. Uncertainty. Change. New questions. New methods. New terms. New definitions. A "subject" implies replicating, memorizing, ventriloquizing someone else's well-established answers to someone else's well-formed questions. A field of inquiry implies "a finding out." A subject implies "a parcelling out." That is why, in the school of the future, subjects (as we usually think of them) will have very little value. The school is no longer a viable medium for communicating what is already known, and hasn't been for at least a quarter of a century.

In the first place, there are too many already-knowns (subjects) to be encompassed by a "curriculum." There are dozens of subjects

that are arbitrarily excluded from school: cybernetics, psychocybernetics, non-Euclidean geometries, astrophysics, psycholinguistics, archaeology, anthropology, linguistic philosophy, sociology, psychology, and so on. In short, most everything that's happened in the past 50 years. In the second place, the school cannot compete with other media as a means of information dissemination. What the book, magazine, newspaper, film, television, radio, and the rest started, the computer is certain to finish. The fact is that the amount of information that the school can make available to the young is so small in relation to the total and informal effort of the other media that it is, literally, not worth talking about. In the third place, what is already known is changing so rapidly that even well-established subjects have lost their stability. And the idea of a school subject is based on the notion of a stable content. One of the unpublicized scandals of our schools is that their present course divisions (English, history, chemistry, art, etc.) have about as much meaning as would a curriculum divided into such courses as phlogiston, earth, fire, water, and air. (Phlogiston would be an elective, of course.)

Thus, the curriculum of the future is most likely to consist of fields of inquiry from which students learn how to learn about that which is unknown. This means, of course, the end of instruction as the dominant means of structuring the classroom environment. It also means the introduction of many new fields of inquiry, of which media ecology may well be the most important.

How rapidly media ecology, or something like it, will replace the nineteenth century concept of English instruction is difficult to predict. "Subjects" die hard (which is another reason, in the nuclear space age, why they are inappropriate metaphors on which to base an educational program). Subjects generate specialists with vested interests. Specialists reproduce themselves wantonly. Establishments result from the whole process. But media ecology has some important things going for it: It is, first and foremost, *relevant* to what is happening in the world, and no farfetched and precious philosophies need be invoked to justify it. Media ecology is *necessary*. If the questions it asks are not asked, we may all lose our perspective, our sanity, and then our lives. Because media ecology deals with the unknown and the future, it is an invaluable instrument for helping the young to learn how to know the unknown and to prepare for change.

Then, too, the irrelevance of English (as grammar, print-literature, and composition) is becoming increasingly noticeable. Teachers are beginning to realize that the "newest" development in English, lin-

guistics, turns out to be a new system for diagramming sentences. Even diehards are finding it something of a strain to "teach" English, and everyone seems to be asking, What is English, anyway? Finally, there is the irrevocable, uncompromising fact of the media themselves and the magnitude of the cultural transformations they are bringing. It is inconceivable that the schools of the future will be indifferent to all that.

Let us assume, then, that the schools will not be indifferent to all that. What might a 1980 high school class in media ecology be like? To begin with, the teacher will be quite different from his 1960 predecessor. Most likely, he will not regard himself as a specialist in a subject whose content he is committed to impart. Instead, he will be something of an expert in how to find things out, especially things whose answers cannot be found in libraries; that is to say, he will be oriented toward the future and its problems. He will think of a syllabus roughly in the way modern physicians think of blood letting: that is, he will understand why teachers of the past used a syllabus (or a textbook or a standardized test), but he will regard such procedures as wholly inappropriate to his own work.

But most of all, he will differ from today's teachers in his understanding of the role of a "teacher." He will not be much of a talker; rather a listener. Not much of an answerer; rather a questioner. Not much of a tester; rather a rewarder. Not much of a restricter; rather an opener. His work will consist largely of designing an environment in which high school students can learn how to ask questions, to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant questions, to invent methods of finding answers to their questions, to develop the capacity to conduct inquiries with rigor, and to apply the results of their work to some vital aspect of their lives.

His students would also have to learn how to be competent in the uses of all modern communication technologies. Thus, their learning environment would include the presence of tape recorders, TV cameras, photo-offset equipment, movie cameras, radio transmitters, telephones, television-telephones, still cameras, computers, etc. Such an environment implies that his students will be activists in the way that, at the moment, only student revolutionaries are. For example, it would be part of the study of media ecology for students to produce a regularly published newspaper, their own radio programs, their own TV programs, their own movies, their own architectural designs for cities, homes, schools, churches, and hospitals. The media ecology "class" may not even meet in a classroom because the answers to the questions the students would be asking would have to be found in the process of their *doing* some-

thing and, in such circumstances, who would have time to attend class?

Below are several examples of inquiries and projects that a high school group in 1980 could conduct as a part of their media ecology "course:"

1. What are the language and other symbol differences that exist among the various people in their community?

Obviously, one result of such a study might be the publication of a glossary, or dictionary, or even a linguistic atlas. The point is that this information is largely unknown and is, in any case, constantly changing. But such an inquiry would also lead to studies of the form, meaning, and impact of verbal and nonverbal symbols. Media ecologists are, of course, greatly interested in symbology, and any inquiry into language moves quickly to such questions as: How do symbols "start?" How do symbols change? How can people be made to "forget" important symbols? What are some dangerous symbols? Some good ones? How can you tell?

2. In what ways are the perspectives and attitudes of young people different from those of older people in relation to sex, drugs, politics, work, leisure?

The important questions here are: What kinds of evidence would be acceptable? What methods can be used to obtain such evidence? In what practical ways can communication among young and old be facilitated?

Such inquiries might lead to the production of a series of TV or radio programs produced, written, directed, performed by students; studies of differences in language, clothing, manners, fears, rituals, etc. Obviously, in this inquiry (as well as most others in media ecology) conventional subject matter lines are crossed and recrossed. For example, what we presently call psychology, sociology, anthropology, and aesthetics would be involved in getting at these questions.

3. In what ways will new technologies affect various institutions, beliefs, and definitions in the society, e.g., churches, schools, marriage, voting, patriotism, justice, etc.?

Since the students may be the only significant group in the culture examining these questions systematically, they might produce for the rest of us a series of articles, monographs, even books, as well as film documentaries on this subject. Again the key questions are: What evidence is acceptable? How and where can it be found? What, if anything, can be done to avoid disorder? How does one make predictions about the future? The students might write, draw, film, photograph (whichever is appropriate) projections of the future of various institutions: What will our schools be like? Will we have

schools? Will people marry? Will they vote? Pray? Will nations exist? Will there be world law? Who will administer it?

4. What should be the characteristics of those in leadership roles in the year 2000?

This question presupposes that the students will spend time considering which values and symbols need to be preserved, and which ones need to be "forgotten." Perhaps the students could design a whole school system that would help to reinforce those attitudes and behaviors that they believe the future will require. I would not be surprised if their inquiries led to some serious work in "sensitivity training" or some similar method of increasing self-knowledge.

5. In what ways do the mass media inform or misinform the public on vital issues?

This question could lead to the production of films, pamphlets, newsletters, etc. that would monitor the information environment created by the mass media. For instance, one group of students might engage in trying to verify the accuracy of statements made on news broadcasts. Another group of students might engage in designing alternative methods of electing representatives and of increasing the viability of participatory democracy. For this purpose, a media ecology group might wish to plan a constitutional convention whose purpose it would be to restructure our system of government to fit the communications technology of the twenty-first century. It would be easy to imagine the students corresponding with lawyers, engineers, artists, philosophers, etc. from all over the world to solicit their opinions on this problem. Moreover, it would be highly desirable for the students to govern their own school: to establish criteria for judging performance, to arrange for the purchase and use of media within the school, and to determine ways in which the school can serve the community. This last point is a particularly important one. Every media ecology group ought to be deeply involved in finding ways to relate to the community that surrounds the school. For example, media ecology classes could inform communities on all laws relating to media and technology. Students could produce a weekly journal of media criticism, in which films and radio and TV programs are evaluated. Students could also publish a newsletter which would comment on community problems, especially emphasizing those that are perpetuated through semantic misunderstanding.

6. What can be learned of future problems through the study of communications history?

In this inquiry, students would immerse themselves in the study of the history of communications with a view toward understanding how new media change society. Fortunately, there is relatively little

known about this process, and students will have an authentic opportunity to contribute to scholarship in the "social sciences." It may even be possible for students to discover some as yet unformulated principles of social change.

7. What are the characteristic art forms of today? What might be the art forms of the future?

Here the students would be engaged in the production of art forms, as much as analyses of them. The class would produce a steady stream of folk songs, comic strips, cartoons, advertisements, comedy routines, photographic essays, collages, pop, concrete and found poetry, radio plays, etc. The only time an art form becomes something to "appreciate" (in the school sense) is when it is dead: that is, when it no longer has any impact on the culture. It is not so difficult to imagine a time when some of the best contemporary art will come from high school students, if art is thought of as inseparable from contemporary technology.

No one knows, of course, what all of this would mean to the schools of 1980. You would have a situation where the students knew more than their teachers, where state departments of education would be unable to use conventional standards of teacher certification, where commercial textbooks would be practically useless, where guidance counsellors would be extraneous, where conventional school administration would be impossible, where the schooling process would be indistinguishable from the educative process, where the usual method for selecting and training teachers would have practically no value, where ordinary high schools would be one of the richest sources of research and idea production in the community, where universities would be forced to organize themselves on some other basis than majors, minors, subjects, courses, departments, divisions, credits, grades, etc. (No self-respecting media ecologist would accept such arbitrary, even bizarre, categories.)

As puzzling as all of this may sound, one must understand that the world of 1980 and beyond will make very severe demands on the schooling process. No serious English teacher can believe that the future will be accommodated by reforms in methods of diagramming sentences, or by replacing old book lists with new ones, or by adding units in logic and the history of language. No serious English teacher can believe that the future cries out for improved methods of teaching composition. The future, quite simply, will require the pursuit of relevance; and this, in turn, will require a new subject, a new teacher, and a new student. Toward this end, I offer media ecology.

The Reformed Social Studies Curriculum

Charles R. Keller

The purpose of education in general and of the social studies in particular should be to help young people come to grips with, and begin to find answers to, that most basic of all questions, Who am I? Such is the case in 1970; it will be even more true in 1980. For who among us believes that life a decade hence will be any less difficult than it is today, that it will be any less fragmented, that there will be any less need for self-identity, inner resources, and inner unity? In 1970 the poet, William Butler Yeats, seems prophetic in his 1920 poem "The Second Coming." The first verse goes:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

In 1980 the "falcon" will be hearing the "falconer" and the "centre" will be holding only if, among other things, we have education concerned with the Who am I question. Young people will be living in a world they did not make; they will need an education that will help them to live effectively and responsibly in this world—and perhaps to change it.

So, what needs to be done in the field of the social studies? Change there has been during the past decade but not the revolution that some people—I have been one—have been calling for. What should be the ingredients in a real revolution, insofar as a revolution is possible? I am prepared to dream, but I insist on dreaming realistically.

I begin not with organization, not with content, not with schedule, not with technology and media, but with people—with teachers. Much change is in order. Teachers will have to forget *their* version