20 November 2024 / The kids aren’t reading alright

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Have you heard of social annotation?

SCORING IN – Lighthearted Science NO DRUMS (explainer, pizzicato, flute, kitchen drums, shaker, whimsical, organic)

SEAN: It’s kinda like the annotation you used to do in a textbook or a novel with a pencil or a pen, except now we’re marking up the margins as a group on our screens with our machines.

Social annotation is actually how we edit every episode of *Today, Explained*.

*<CLIP> NOEL KING: I’m Noel King. It’s Today Explained.*

SEAN: But you know where else social annotation is huge? On college campuses. Students are completing their reading assignments on social annotation apps where they can comment and ask questions in the digital margins of a reading assignment. And teachers can track how much time students spend with a given article, essay, or journal. And our old friend AI will even grade students’ reading *for* teachers. And why would teachers need these kinds of tools?

Because college kids just aren’t that into reading anymore. What on earth are we gonna do about that, ahead on the show today.

[THEME]

BETH McMURTRIE (*Chronicle of Higher Education* reporter): I'm Beth McMurtrie and I'm a senior writer at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

SEAN: Okay, you're a senior writer, but we're here to talk to you about reading. Why are we talking to you about reading? What's going on with reading?

BETH: Are-are–sorry, are we starting? Are we just You're just … ? <laughs>

SEAN: This is it? Yes. <laughs> It's so casual.

BETH: Well, there's a lot that's going on with reading. When it comes to reading, one of the things that I've been hearing a lot from a lot of different faculty members is that students simply aren't doing the reading.

*<SFX> BOOK PAGES FLIPPING*

*<VO> Peter Balonon-Rosen (producer): mhmm, mhmm, mhmm, mmm mm*

SCORING IN – LAKE DITTY

BETH: A lot of professors are finding that if they assign anything that's more than 5 or 10 pages long, students tell them that they can't do it – that they get distracted, that they get exhausted, that they get lost in the reading, and then they just give up.

*<VO> SIGH*

*<SFX> POWER DOWN*

*<SFX> PAGES FLIPPING*

*<SFX> BOOK CLOSING*

BETH: Another element to this two, though, and one I think that is the most alarming to professors is that students are coming to college lacking critical reading skills.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
BETH: They might be asked to summarize what they've read and they fundamentally change the meaning of it. They can't summarize it. They might be asked to compare and contrast two readings, and they simply can't do it.

MUX BREATHES FOR A SEC

BETH: It's, it's a fascinating phenomenon that we're facing because, yes, we assume that by the time you get to college, you know how to read. Obviously, people can still pick up a book or an article and get the the gist of it. But what we're talking about now is like reading a dense or complicated or lengthy article or a text book or a novel. That's what seems to have been fading with this generation.

MUSIC OUT

SEAN: And so I take it a class that might require students to read, what, 4 or 5 books? Isn’t functioning the way it used to when I was in college, ummm, 15 years ago?

BETH: No, I think you would if you went into a college classroom today or you looked at a college syllabus, you would probably be surprised at how little reading is assigned. I mean, professors understand that they have to kind of meet students where they are. They understand that if students are not doing the reading, they have to change things up. Otherwise they will have a really bad class session and they will have students who simply aren't doing the work. So what I've been hearing from professors is, you know, maybe 15 years ago they assigned five novels, and today they're assigning one…

SEAN: Oooph.

BETH: or they may be eliminating academic articles altogether. Those really dense academic articles that we all struggled with. And students simply can't read them,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ek8ftFLePeQ)*> Fort Hays State University (tutorial): Reading research articles may be a different type of reading than you are used to. This tutorial will help you create a strategy for reading and understanding this type of information.*

BETH: They're substituting in news articles or essays. More professors are introducing videos …

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzSi7jE8ijQ)*> Nick (vlogger): Hey, y’all. I’m nick and this is my video blog…*

BETH: … and podcasts ….

*<CLIP> Noel King: I’m Noel King. It’s Today Explained*

BETH: … and other sort of original content as a way to kind of get students engaged in the course without saying, ‘I need you to read a book a week to get through this class.’

SEAN: How did we get here? This didn't happen overnight, did it?

BETH: No, it didn't, because what we're talking about here are kind of structural or systemic societal and educational challenges.

SCORING IN – Neutral Aparna (peaceful, 50s synth, layers, atmospheric, minimalist)

BETH: So let's start with the one that everybody knows about, which is the introduction of smartphones and the rise of social media that has affected all of us.

*<SFX> SMARTPHONE SOUNDS MONTAGE*

BETH: We are losing our ability to concentrate. We are getting distracted more easily.

*<VO> DIGITAL DISTRACTION*

BETH: I remember talking to one professor, an English professor. He has always asked his students to tell him their reading narrative. He wants to know what their experiences with reading have been. And he said it wasn't that long ago that they would talk about things like going to the library or seeing their parents reading the newspaper over breakfast or having their parents read to them at night. Now they talk about things like reading on tik-tok, reading on Instagram.

*<CLIP> BABY BARRON TRUMP: I like, I like my sootcase!*

SCORING HARD OUT SLIGHT REVERB

SEAN: Reading what on Tiktok or insta– ? It's all video.

BETH: Yeah. Or just if you think about the words on the screen, fragmented, incomplete sentences.

SEAN: Mmmmmm.

SAME SCORING BACK IN

BETH: Now, the pandemic did have a huge effect on students. Unsurprisingly, as we all moved to Zoom and we students went to Zoom school.

*<CLIP> BABY BARRON TRUMP: I have to go to school now?  
 MELANIA: Yeah.*

BETH: Teachers are trying really hard to keep students engaged, to keep students online, even if their cameras were off.

*<SFX> SWIPE*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@lashaygreenwood/video/6890600736204377349?lang=en)*> @LaShayGreenwood (TikToker teacher): Good morning y’all. OK so as y’all know today is a virtual learning day. That means Lewis that we can see you*

*<SFX> SWIPE*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@samuelsleeves/video/7172378358016216366)*> @Samuelsleeves (TikToker teacher):* *Having to teach in 2020 at the height of the pandemic led to a lot of traumatic experiences. Teacher burnout was at an all time high. A lot of students were depressed. It was just a lot bad things going on*

*<SFX> SWIPE*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@ohhappydayteaching/video/7347456802310704427)*> @ohhappydayteaching (TikToker teacher): ​​I don’t know about you but this school year has been kinda tough for me and I’ve had to rethink a lot of things that I do traditionally*

BETH: So students were learning less and they were reading less. And at the same time, the grading changed a little bit. There was more leniency around grading. In some school districts, teachers might have been told, you know, gives everybody at least a 50%, even if they didn't do the work or grade for attendance or grade for participation. And what that did is I think it gave students a false sense of what was required of them, something that they have since taken into college.

SCORING OUT

BETH: If we want to step even further back, we need to talk about the testing culture in schools, because I think that has really fundamentally changed how we teach reading. Many of us remember for old enough, we remember, you know, reading multiple books over the school year, maybe even writing book reports, right? Or writing essays. When you teach to the test, you're basically assigning short essays, you're assigning paragraphs here and assigning excerpts from longer books. And then students are asked to say, discern the meaning in this paragraph or talk about the writing style or the use of metaphor. And as one professor described it to me, it turns reading into a scavenger hunt, right? So students were taught to read this way …  
  
SEAN: Mmmmmm.  
  
BETH: … and they come into college reading this way. And then professors who, you know, maybe didn't fully understand what was happening in the K-12 system are saying, what is going on here? My students don't have critical reading skills. If you think of reading like exercise. They weren't exercising, right? They weren't engaging in the act of reading.

SEAN: You know, this might be an insensitive question, but do we have any data that suggests whether in addition to reading less students are, I don't know, getting dumber?

BETH: <chuckles> Yeah. I think if you look at certain tests, there has been learning loss. If you look at maybe S.A.T. and A.C.T. trend lines, right? They've been going down a little bit.

SCORING IN – #DoYourJobDoSomeResearch (minimal kick, polyrhythm, moving forward, figuring things out)

*<CLIP> Let’s talk about those college admissions test scores they’re dropping lower than they’ve ever been  
<CLIP> More than 40% of seniors meet none of the college readiness benchmarks // it’s the 5th consecutive year that test scores have declined  
<CLIP> Now the question what is to blame the pandemic or something else?*

BETH: If you talk to or survey superintendents and teachers, they might say a significant portion of their students are doing more poorly on math and on English. So there has definitely been documented learning loss in K-12 that I think has been tied to the pandemic.

SEAN: So is that an argument professors can, can make here? If nothing else, ‘If you want to be as smart as your, you know, predecessors in your position, do the reading.’?

BETH: This generation is very self-critical.   
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
BETH: So telling students that they're dumb or dumber than previous generations, I think just feeds this spiral of anxiety. I don't think that's a way forward for anybody.

SEAN: Okay, sorry. <chuckles>

BETH: I think we have to remember that students didn't create this environment. We, the adults, created the environment in the system that they lived and write like this is the result of our handiwork. So we kind of have to ask ourselves if we're unhappy with that, the skills and abilities students are coming out of high school with and coming into college with. Do we care enough to change that?

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Do you think this trend can be turned around?

BETH: When it comes to reading, I think it helps to take the long view. It … I thought it was interesting when I was reporting the story that a couple of different people talked about the shift from the oral to the written culture. Like thousands of years ago when writing was first introduced, people mourned the loss of the oral culture, the oral tradition, and they just thought of writing is like a negative, like nobody would say that today. But the point is that if we're shifting to an oral slash written culture again, if we're shifting to a multimedia culture, what does that mean? What are we gaining? Even as we lose some of the deep reading that we have been used to doing? And the truth is, we don't know yet because we're just at the beginning of this shift.

SCORING IN – A Slow Swirl to Safety

SEAN: Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. You can read her, if you’re into that sort of thing, at chronicle dot com.

When we return, we’re gonna talk about what’s going on in your brain when you’re reading and why you might miss it when it’s gone. A little food for thought, coming up on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> READING RAINBOW THEME:   
Take a look, it's in a book..   
PATRICK BOYD (engineer): Today, Explained.*

*ANDREA KRISTINSDOTTIR (engineer): Cut!  
PATRICK: What?! Is that not what it says?*

SEAN:Maryanne Wolf has probably read more books than you this year.

MARYANNE WOLF (Director of Center for Dyslexia, UCLA): My goodness. Probably somewhere between 50 and 75.

SEAN: 50 and 75!

WOLF: I have a reading life. I learned to bookend my day, which means I begin with a book and I end with a book.

SEAN: Maryanne is so big on reading, we had to ask …  
  
 SEAN: Professor, are you in the pocket of big book?  
 Maryanne: I don't know what it is.

<LAUGHS>

SEAN: We also asked her some questions she could answer, like why it seems that most people are choosing the opposite path she is when it comes to reading books.

WOLF: You know, the repercussions of the digital culture are such that we never knew the what I considered the pernicious effects of the kind of efficiency that, that the digital screen gives us. So the book is the antithesis of the get it done and over with mode. Books have become like vinyl. <laughs> You know for for though that Emily Dickinson would say ‘for that select society.’ That shouldn't be the case.

SEAN: I'm sure there's a lot of people in our audience who know exactly what you mean. But for all of the people listening who need to be convinced that they're actually missing out on something…   
  
WOLF: Mmm.   
  
SEAN: What do you think they're missing out on?

WOLF: So, Sean, I'm going to answer in two modes. I'm going to answer as a cognitive neuroscientist who studies the reading brain.   
  
SEAN: Okay.   
  
WOLF: And I'm going to answer as a former English literature major. So I'm going to first start with the cognitive neuroscience.

SCORING IN – Neutral Mordecai

WOLF: The reality is that no one on this earth was meant to read. The brain had to build up a new circuit, and that new circuit connects all these amazing parts of the brain: cognition, language, perception, memory, but also feeling affect. So we build this circuitry and then over time, we, we actually have the capacity to elaborate it. It becomes ever more sophisticated. And when it becomes sophisticated, it begins to have a circuit. I call the circuit for deep reading.

MUSIC BUMP

WOLF: Figuring out how the new information meets or does not meet the information stored already.

MUSIC BUMP

WOLF: Most important to me are the three, the three big deep breathing processes. Empathy. Sean It takes time, but the brain connects the ability to leave, really leave the page and enter the lives and thoughts and feelings of others who are completely different. Whether it's a completely different historical epoch or a different culture, religion, etc., you are entering that life. That's empathy.

Next, and probably never more important than in this moment is critical analysis. We have a frontal lobe dance in which we say ‘Ah! this is what is meant.’ ‘no, this is this. I refute this because it's not true.’ So we have this evaluation process, but it takes time. And the end is a real sense, whether it's true, misinformation, or worst of all, especially these days, intentional disinformation.

Now, the third deep reading process is one that doesn't always happen. And that's this almost, like, sanctuary feeling of being so immersed that this is where the novelist, Proust, comes in in my work, he said the heart of reading is when we enter the wisdom of the author and go beyond it to discover our own wisdom, our own insights, our own best thoughts. Most of the people who are not reading books aren't reading at that level.

SCORING OUT

WOLF: But from my perspective as an English literature major, they're not just skimming the information and getting, you know, just the gist. They're skimming the opportunity to enter another life.

SEAN: Are we missing out when we read a dozen articles before we go to bed on our phone or our first thing when we wake up? Are we missing out? If we decide to listen to *Moby Dick* as an audiobook while we commute over the course of a month instead of sitting down and reading it every day when we get home from work.

WOLF: So every single time I'm asked this question <chuckles> …

SEAN: Oh no! Someones asked you that before?

WOLF: Ooooh, psha!   
  
SEAN: I blew it!

WOLF: No. You asked it because – and I have answered it because – it is on the top of everyone's mind. I love audiobooks and I especially like them for commuting or for, and I work with a lot of individuals with dyslexia, that's one of the best ways they can get information. Now, is it the same as reading at the immersive level? For some it is, but by and large it does skip what is called ‘comprehension monitoring’.  
  
SEAN: Huh.   
  
WOLF: That's when we're reading and we are actually checking ourselves, checking what we have, what we have missed, what we have skipped. And in the audio version, by and large, we don't go back. There are many other differences, but I'll name one in particular that's important for development and for especially children and individuals over time and that is the palpable kinesthetic nature of the book because it aids spatial memory because it aids spatial memory. So, Sean, here's a book I could find. It's left side lower about a third way through. I have a spatial memory that we aren't even aware of.

SEAN: Mmmm.

WOLF: So there's all these extra, if you will, affordances when we have the physical printed book.

SEAN: Ummm …. Are you worried?! You've clearly pointed out that, you know, reading books opens up our minds to a world of possibilities that otherwise we wouldn't be open to. And yet we're seeing this downward trend.

WOLF: I'm mostly worried about the young.   
  
 SCORING IN – Glass Balls  
  
WOLF: Junot Diaz said. It's the closest thing to telepathy humans ever get.   
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
WOLF: And that's an amazing, amazingly beautiful, almost mind boggling opportunity that is that goes missing. It just plain goes missing when you do not ever understand what that, that sense of interiority, that sense of immersion can give you.

SCORING OUT  
  
WOLF: I'll give you the tiniest example. Last night. Okay. I probably have Covid. I feel really …

SEAN: You just violated your own hippo!

WOLF: So I'm thinking, you know, no, I feel bad. I have to go talk to Sean in the morning.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
WOLF: I have to have a voice. I’m feeling miserable self-pity. And then I think, how can I cheer myself up?

SEAN: Did you read a book?!

WOLF: And I went and read a half a book! I did!   
  
SEAN: Amazing.

WOLF: I read a half a book. And did I feel better? Yes!  
  
SEAN: <chortles>  
  
WOLF: I felt good enough to come on your show. <laughs>

SEAN: How do we convince kids that they're missing out? Because the phone is just so much easier and so much more available and there's quick hits of dopamine – the kind of hits that you'd have to wait to get to the end of the chapter or the end of the novel. They're just waiting for you on TikTok every six seconds, you know? How do you, how do you win against that?

WOLF: We have to model love. <laughs>  
  
SEAN: Love!  
  
WOLF: Love. We have to model love of what happens when we are entering that state. And I think part of the problem is that we give up before we try.

SCORING IN – Make yourself comfortable

WOLF: Great books increase the humanity of our world. And I think we are succumbing to the idea that, you know, everything's official and everything is, you know, has to be done quickly. And and and we have to go with whatever the kids want. How would we let our next generation just go down that slippery slope into the ‘shallows’? <laughs> That's what Nicholas Carr and my colleagues in Norway call, you know ‘shallow reading’.

Sean: And Lady Gaga, I believe, also calls it the shallows.

*<CLIP> SHALLOWS VOCALS MIXED INTO SCORING: In the shallow, shaaaallow.*Maryanne: Ah, did she? Well, good for her.   
  
SEAN: <chortles>

WOLF: It's not just our young. It's all of us. And when I said model, I wasn't kidding. Parents have to model. But that requires some tough things on the parents and teachers. You know, you're going against the tide, but if you don't, we're going to have a What is that? What was that movie where everyone, the humans, they have given all of their tasks to the robots. And finally, they they were just these obese creatures. What was that?

SEAN: Was that *Wall-E*?

WOLF: Yes! *Wall-E*!

*<CLIP> WALL-E: Cupcake in a cup, wow look at that!*

WOLF: We're all going to be Wall-Es! You know, we're going to be cerebral Wall-Es out there. Don't let it happen!

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Maryanne Wolf. She’s a cognitive neuroscientist and the director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners and Social Justice at UCLA. We sincerely hope she feels better soon.   
  
Peter Balonon-Rosen likes big books and he cannot lie. Amina Al-Sadi edited, we can’t deny. We were mixed by Andrea Kritinsdottir and Patrick Boyd, who are great listeners. And Laura Bullard fact checked. She packs all of her books into her suitcase.

*<CLIP> BARRON TRUMP: I like, I like my sooootcase!*

SEAN: This is *Today, Explained*. I’m Sean Rameswaram. And …

*<CLIP> BARRON TRUMP: I have to go to school now?  
 MELANIA TRUMP: Yeah.*

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]