

Key points in *The rise of writing*

Deborah Brandt (Cambridge University Press, 2014)

Introduction

In *The Shallows* (2011), Nicholas Carr argues that deep reading is disappearing.

Our brains are being reshaped by how the internet invites us to read:

- We surf
- We sample
- We browse
- We scan

As we attend to more, Carr claims, we understand less. Is this argument convincing?

The problem with Carr

is that he doesn't really pay attention to writing.

For the first time in history, masses of humans have keyboards under their hands; these keyboards connect them to people at a distance. Carr, like others, assumes that our literacy can only develop through how we read.

Is it possible to contemplate a mass-literacy based on new relationships between writing and reading such that how and why we write will condition how and why we read? Is it possible to contemplate new approaches to literacy based primarily in writing? We are entering an era of deep writing, in which more and more people write for prolonged periods of time from inside deeply interactive networks.

Brandt studied accounts of 90 people aged 15 to 80 (p. 4). All these people used writing regularly in their vocations. She conducted in-depth interviews between 2005 and 2012.

Reading is considered the

- fundamental skill,
- the prior skill,
- the gateway to writing (p. 89)

Students' poor writing is often ascribed to their lack of reading experience.

- Reading is thought to teach the techniques of textuality, diction, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation and syntax.
- Reading is thought to shape character and intellect and provide wisdom.

Mass reading emerged in America through the 18th and 19th centuries, largely through the sponsoring agents of Church and State. These institutions sought to universalize reading in order to integrate people in shared belief systems. Reading was critical to **salvation** in the ideology of the Protestant church and to the promise of **citizenship** in the ideology of the Republic. Mass writing emerged more slowly, stimulated by artisanship and commerce.
(pp. 90-92)

Note: You can find Bibles in hotel rooms in the US. The Protestant faith encourages reading of the scriptures whereas in the Catholic Church clergymen acted as mediators and interpreters.

STORY 1

Evan Davis published his first book when he was 20.

As a young boy, Evan started collecting exotic amphibians and developed a passionate interest in caring for them. He began participating in forums with fellow amphibian lovers, swapping information and experiences. When he was about fourteen, he set up a website on which he began to write on this topic, creating a series of care sheets. By the time he was in high school, Evan was spending an hour or so each morning answering emails from people all over the world who wanted to know more about how to feed amphibians and care for them.

As his website gained in authority, it came to the attention of a major publishing house for pet care books. When Evan was 18 years old, he received an email from the editor, seeking his interest in **writing a traditional print book** about one of the species he knew well. When it was published, the book was distributed nationally for pet supply chain stores and sold 10,000 copies in the first year. The success of the book led to an invitation to write two more books for this publishing company.

Brandt asked Evan about his literacy development. She asked him what role reading had played in helping him learn how to write a book. Evan confessed that he did not like to read and did not read books very thoroughly. He confessed he would rather be writing than reading. According to Brandt, Evan's experience is not typical, but it shows how writing literacy may flourish in cultural dissociation from reading (p. 93). Over the course of 5 years, Evan moved from a chat participant to published author, a development sponsored not by formal schooling but by commercial interests associated with knowledge economy.

These days, one of the main functions of writing is to congregate, educate, cultivate consumers. The more informed consumers become, the better chance they will frequent the pet supply store.

Brandt's research

Brandt was intrigued by Evan's story and wondered whether it was common for other young writers to follow the same trajectory. She went in search of 30 young adults aged 15 to 25

All of them said they engaged in regular substantive writing outside of school.

Many of them published on the internet, several had websites. Others were reluctant to disseminate their work on the Internet for fear they would lose authorial control. They recognized the role of the internet in lowering barriers and expanding capacity for writing, and publishing (p. 104).

Many of the young writers interviewed by Brandt encountered writing masters at work or teaching the work, as living, breathing role models. This one-to-one mentorship replaced deep reading, in some cases (p. 110).

In a reading-oriented environment students who feel a compulsion to write are seen as precocious, atypical, maybe even worrisome. Writing manifests as excess that spills beyond page length, defies expectations, and marks one as different. (p. 117)

High school literature courses train students to be readers, perhaps active, responsive, and critical readers, but readers nevertheless. Many of the writers interviewed by Brandt preferred writing and producing something for others to discuss, rather than discussing someone else's texts. Some of these writers explained that writing and engaging with one's own writing can be a deeply satisfying experience. So these young writers tend to resist the readerly role they are supposed to play in high school courses. These young writers are writing-oriented. How does this orientation to writing affect the reading experience? (p. 120)

Most of the young writers interviewed did believe in the role of reading in writing development. For some, writing drove to reading. One of them believed that her reading only began to develop after she started publishing articles in her student newspaper. Otto, a journalist, noticed how writing enhanced reading: "It's like when you ride in a car you don't pay attention, but as soon as you get your driver's license, you are much more active."

Cordelia is an African-American writer and activist.

Her elective reading consisted almost completely of doing research for her own writing on her blog. Of the relationship between reading and writing in her literacy development, she said:

I can read just fine. I just don't like to read... I'm a crazy multitasker so when I'm writing I can have all the things on the screen that spark my mind and help me write. But when you are reading, all the things around you don't really coincide with it. Also, I'm a big picture type of person, so when I do research, I'm always skimming. I get the big picture and move on. but I don't skim when I'm writing. I read what I write over and over to make sure that it's clear in my mind, to make sure that I really understand what I'm writing. (p. 122)

Thomas: "I am less engaged when I am reading."

Otto: "Writing is more active, more interactive [...] Reading means somebody else has done it and you are seeing what they did. In writing, I am making my own mark, doing my own thing."
(pp. 122-123)

Brandt: The relationship between reading and writing is not smooth. The two can be at odds with each other or compete with each other.

According to Brandt, it's especially interesting to notice how some of these young writers seemed to read out of a sense of solidarity with the larger writing community to which they felt they belonged (p. 125).

For these young writers, reading was a direct way to support the enterprise of writing, socially and artistically. The interaction with fellow writers helped the young writers to locate themselves in a network of writers. In this context the quality of texts is often determined by how well these texts inspire other people to write. One to many modes of information and knowledge sharing are being replaced by multi-directional, active, responsive networks of voices. These shifts require us to stop complaining about the 'end of reading' to reflect on the rise of writing.