

Do Books Still Matter

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A few of years ago, an ex-pupil paid me the best compliment I've ever had as a teacher. In a Christmas card, she wrote, "Mr Soltyssek, thanks for everything. Because of you, I still smell books before I buy them." Bless you, Lesley-Anne.

Now, quite apart from the fact that this is evidence of the rather strange things we got up to in my classroom, I think this illustrates one of the most important reasons why books still do and always will "matter". Books are cultural artefacts in a way that bits and bytes and signals across the World Wide Web can never be. We can pick books up, leaf through them, smell them, feel the tension of the paper as we bend them. They are sensual creatures, are books.

They are also unalterable: the strength of Wikipedia, YouTube and MySpace lie in the fact that they can be changed to accommodate often breathlessly fast changes in the world; the strength – and the beauty – of books is that once published, they stand before us like a great statue or a painting and ask us to respond to them for what they are, for better or for worse. That is why we keep favourite childhood books and pass them down the generations; that is why children queue overnight for the next instalment of their favourite wizard's adventures, carrying it home like treasure; that is why, while websites can become redundant within days, books will still be exhibited in museums in thousands of years' time, just as they are now.

There will always be a place for books: they will not be "replaced" by e-books or blogs, simply because comparing books to these media is like comparing chrysanthemums to sardines. We use them for different audiences and purposes, interacting with them and interrogating them in radically different ways. The emphasis should not be on "should we choose more books or more technology?" Rather, we should be asking "how do we instil in children the skills they need to handle all the types of media they will encounter?" Therefore, new technology, because it is a new media, is an *additional* demand for which resources need to be found: it is short-sighted to rob the Peter of printed text to pay for the Paul of shiny computers.

So, of course, books still matter. I am an English teacher and a professional writer: you would expect me to say that. But what we must ask, certainly in the English classroom, is, "do books still matter *in the same way*?" Well, it has always been impossible to find a novel which appealed to the interests and met the needs of thirty individuals in a classroom. While many of us can recount experiences of teachers bringing particular books to life, we tend to forget that these experiences are often limited to those who already have a love of books, who have supportive parents and a reading culture at home, and the feelings of the other twenty-nine students in the class may have been quite different

Now, given the demands of the Curriculum for Excellence and developments in formative assessment, the traditional approach is positively undesirable. The highly individualised strategies required to create successful learners, confident

individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors means that the “one size fits all” approach is no longer tenable: the days of the class set of 30 copies of “The Silver Sword” – good book though it may be – are over.

English classrooms are going to have to become places where individuals can build a love of literature *for life*. Carefully structured and monitored personal reading programmes will become a much more important part of each pupil’s reading experience, simply because this will allow them much greater access to books, and is more comparable to the contexts in which pupils will experience books in later life through libraries and bookshops. Books of all descriptions differentiated by interest and ability will have to be supplied, necessitating an investment in good classroom libraries which are used effectively. Textual analysis of genres will be better approached through the use of differentiated group texts or by studying extracts more clearly focussed on the aspects required. Finally, imaginative and motivational library programmes will be essential to build readers who are able to make informed and independent choices about their reading.

All this means we have to ask serious questions about the whole supply and use of books. Firstly, are appropriate books being written? Certainly, national treasures such as Theresa Breslin and Julie Bertagna are producing books for the junior and middle years that will clearly pass the test of time, but I feel there is a dearth of suitable material from the young adult reader, if only because modern Scottish fiction – and I include my own – is frequently inappropriate in content and language for unrestricted use in schools. Secondly, are books produced in the right way? The paperbacks we buy in bookshops, read once and then banish to our bookshelves are not suitable for the punishment received by constant classroom use, while the success of, for example, Heinemann Windmills is that durable and attractive books are provided exclusively for schools. Then, are these books marketed in the right way? Word of mouth works extremely well in the marketplace, but teachers use catalogues, because catalogues guarantee quality and suitability. Fourthly, are books supplied in the right way? I know I would love to see “Scottish book boxes” – especially at the young adult stage - which cull the best from a variety of publishers’ lists. And finally, we must ask if books are supported in the right way. The successful use of books in the classroom depends on materials to support that use, and this cries out for collaboration between authors, publishers and teachers.

I’m optimistic about the future of books. I believe that The Curriculum for Excellence offers a fabulous opportunity to integrate reading into the daily lives of pupils. And I am also optimistic because of a generation of teachers being introduced to new ways of thinking about reading, intelligence and ability. It is a matter of considerable delight to me that Lesley-Anne has become a Primary teacher, and I am comforted by the thought that, at this very moment, her class of wide-eyed tinies are burying their faces in a crisp, new book and preparing to take a long, deep and life-enhancing breath.