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Teaching beyond post-modernism in a digitalised society

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The rapid and exponential growth of the internet over the past 40 years has changed the nature of society. Indeed, at the end of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the internet is our defining medium. This has implications for student learning and, consequently, teacher pedagogy.

In the modernist era, beginning around 1500, with early modern philosophy¹, and ending around the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989², truth came to be conceived of as an objective reality to be disseminated in a rational, scientific and systematic fashion. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who became his own “ism”, defined modernist methodology. Out of Kant’s deliberations came the Copernican Revolution. “Copernicus was a sixteenth century astronomer who suggested replacing the old Ptolemaic astronomic model, where the Sun and all the heavenly bodies are viewed as orbiting about the Earth, with the new model where the planets, including Earth, are viewed as orbiting the Sun.”³ Kant’s parallel theory endeavoured to eschew the human mind as a passive vessel so as to, alternatively, depict it as an active mechanism for thought in cognition. “So, instead of viewing the mind as the passive centre of observation, Kant viewed the mind as an active participator in observation. More radically, the consequence of this theory was that the mind creates and shapes its experiences.”⁴ However, it was Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the French mathematician and philosopher, who epitomised modernism with the aphorism, “I think, therefore I am.”

As one thought as an individual, with the enlightened awareness of living within a post-

medieval society, characterised by its perceptions of religious fate and feudal hierarchy, knowledge was comprehended as being factual, scientific and objective. Indeed, these facts could be tested and verified. In social theory, “modernity represents the rise of capitalism, science, and democracy through the rhetoric of universal reason and equality.”⁵ Further, later modernity, commencing around 1800⁶, is to be identified with industrialization and a mechanized workforce.⁷ In higher order thinking observations gave way to analysis.

In post-modernism, however, truth became more subjective and based on the experiences of those seeking to discern it. The imperative of truth was replaced with the importance of relationships and the need to respect the contextual reality of others. In this worldview analysis gave way to meta-analysis. Instead of the imperative of individual thought, born from the instruction of rationalist philosophy, there was a collective interpretation of experience. Today this is epitomised by social media, such as Facebook. Therefore, a concern for empirical realities, based on rational thought and a thorough investigation of the facts, became viewed through the lens of subjective and collaborated experiences. Therefore, postmodernism emphasised the elusiveness of meaning and knowledge.⁸

One can now discern a further shift in thought. Indeed, post-modernism has been replaced by a new dominant world-view. In this new era, the internet dominates. Not that the internet was not a feature of post-modernism. However, accessing knowledge is no longer the main issue. As much as its content is created, the internet, in and of itself, creates realities and shapes the lives of those who access it. In this, I am not simply referring to influences, although

⁵R. Samuels, “Auto-Modernity after Postmodernism: Autonomy and Automation in Culture, Technology, and Education, *University of California, Los Angeles, Writing Programs*, 2008, p. 222

⁶Identified by the theorist, Charles Darwin (1809–1882), existentialist Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862).

⁷B. Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, p. 2

⁸A. Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond”, *Philosophy Now*, Issue 58, 2006, p. 3.

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¹For example, the political realism of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527).

²The fall of the Berlin Wall symbolically marked the end of the cold war, with its rationalist ideologies and pragmatic responses.

³P. Rickman, “Lecture notes on Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason”, Autumn, 1995, p. 5.

⁴Rickman, p. 5.

the internet remains a dominant influence in the shaping of young minds. Neurologically, brains are being rewired to think in entirely new ways.⁹ The result is that the world is now seen and experienced through emerging and alternative world views, relationships are entered into under an entirely new set of assumptions and beliefs, and knowledge is gained and conceived of on the basis of a totally reconstructed paradigm. Along with this, language has also undergone significant changes. As the New York futurist, Domonic Basulto, has observed, Facebook “deconstructed the meaning of ‘friend’ to near meaninglessness.”¹⁰ In this environment, the aim is not to discover and learn, but to be “liked”.¹¹

But beyond this, as Facebook is designated to an older generation, Instagram and Snapchat, containing only images, videos and brief phonetic messages, have emerged as the new ultimates. Here, it is not a matter of only being liked, but seen and encountered. The distinction between producers and consumers has also been obliterated, as everyone is seen to be a contributor, with the importance of the “expert” being significantly undermined.¹² This is particularly evident with sites such as Wikipedia. To be sure, in most cases, as English philosopher Alan Kirby has rightly observed, “Internet pages are not ‘authored’ in the sense that anyone knows who wrote them, or cares.”¹³ In its stead is emerging a new reality that is shaping a worldview taking society into a new phase. While Kirby referred to this emerging society as pseudo-modernism and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker define metamodernism (from *metaxis*, between, since metamodernism is said to oscillate between modernism and post-modernism),¹⁴ Basulto, following Nicolàs Bourriaud,¹⁵ has termed the new era, “Alter-modernism”. “Alter”, because it is characterised by altered perspectives. It is an alternative modernism. In it, the meta-analysis of post-modernism gives way to a collective trans-critical imagination. In the new reality, the usual

constructions are broken down and thought, with its accompanying behaviours and norms, moves beyond established conventions.

The imagination replaces empirical evidence, viewed through the lens of experience, and is seen to have no limitations. In place of evidence is the notion of fantasy, created by internet experiences. Indeed, imagination is not constrained by facts or knowledge, but tests possibilities and even embraces that which has no possibility. Indeed, the internet has enabled one to cross boundaries to create ethics, morality, belief and values that are fluid. In this, there are no facts, but experiences formed through “surface dipping” into the world of a multitudinous array of anonymous sites and posts.¹⁶ It spells the end of a natural inclination for critical analysis, as in modernism, or even of a subjective and relativized view of reality, as in post-modernism.

In this emerging reality a neo-romanticism oscillates between modernism’s enthusiasm and post-modernism’s irony; between projection and perception, form and unformable, determinism and apathy, and coherence and chaos.¹⁷ In this new paradigm, one can discern large proportions of a generation motivated by a regular stream of images, without commentary, and devoid of any particular cause, other than to empower a culture headed to no particular destination.¹⁸ Consequently, the tendency is to experience the cultural moment, in contradistinction to seeking advancement for the long term through the usual conventions of enterprise, creating boundaries and being self-disciplined for the purpose of pursuing excellence.

However, as we delve deeper into the reaches of creative thinking, the implications become quite alarming. Ultimately, what is championed in the neo-romanticism of alter-modernism is the delirium of untruth¹⁹ and the allure of connectedness without the depth required for perceptive and insightful understandings or worthwhile and enriching relationships.²⁰ Indeed, the cyber lifestyle stores very little to rely on for future emotional maturity or creative thinking. This is accompanied by the demise of the private life, now shared openly and frequently, but more significantly the secret life, which is now a

“*Ultimately, what is championed in the neo-romanticism of alter-modernism is the delirium of untruth*”

⁹N. Carr, “The Shallows: How the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember”, Norton and Company, New York, 2010.

¹⁰D. Basulto, “On the Internet, What Comes After Post-modernism?”, in *Bigthink*, 2016.

¹¹As Ana Homayoun from the New York Times has observed, teenagers “seeking external validation become intoxicated by sensationalist engagement, sometimes sending compromising photos or comments. Of course, some adults have fallen into the same trap.” A. Homayoun, “The Secret Social Media Lives of Teenagers”, *The New York Times*, June 7, 2017.

¹²T. Nichols, “The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters”, Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹³The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond, p. 4.

¹⁴T. Vermeulen, R. van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism”, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Vol. 2, 2010, p. 6.

¹⁵“The artists assembled in ‘Altermodern’ channel the different forms of social and technological networking offered by communication and mobility links in a globalized world.”

Altermodern: Tate Triennial 2009, in *Artpulse*, Feb. 3-April 26, 2009, para. 2.

¹⁶Kirby comments, that in pseudo-modernism a “triteness, a shallowness dominates all. The pseudo-modern era, at least so far, is a cultural desert.” Kirby, p. 3.

¹⁷Notes on Metamodernism, p. 8.

¹⁸Vermeulen and van den Akker define *metaxis* as “being simultaneously here, there, and nowhere.” Notes on Metamodernism, p. 12.

¹⁹P. Olson, “Why Your Brain Might Be Wired to Believe Fake News”, in *Forbes*, Feb. 1, 2017.

²⁰J. M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”, in *The Atlantic*, September 2017.

²¹A. Preston, “The Death of Privacy”, in *The Guardian*, 3 August 2014.

shared commodity.²¹ The demise of the secret life spells the diminution of introspective reflection, where creative and independent thinking takes place. It is a disappearing safe place to create dreams, energise hope and investigate possibilities. Consequently, the kind of critical thinking that is required to demonstrate higher order thinking has only limited experiences to rely upon. Indeed, excessive exposure to the internet has been found to lead to cognitive impairment and, and the most extreme cases, brain damage.²² Those students who are consciously resisting this trend are the ones who succeed. To be sure, capital, whether it be intellectual, psychological or emotional, only emerges after effective investments have been made to ensure its emergence, or sufficient intervention has been enacted to path the way for its establishment.

Sigmund Freud's concept of the unconscious mind provides an interpretative framework that aids in discovering a reasoning behind these trends and accompanying behaviours. Freud described the unconscious mind as being like the unseen part of an iceberg. Traditionally, as Freud understood it, the superego, comprising of learned values one gains from family, religion and society, seeks to persuade the ego, or decision-making part of the brain, to turn to moral values instead of pleasure seeking. It enables one to differentiate between right and wrong, the needs of the present and the needs of the future, and one's role in society in relation to others. However, if the traditional feeders of the superego are replaced by superficial encounters and a plethora of posted values, then its ability to inform the ego rapidly breaks down and becomes dysfunctional, as the ability to differentiate, through discernment, diminishes or is obliterated. What is left, in Freud's analysis, is a robust Id. That is, the part of the brain that responds immediately to wants and desires. "The Id is chaotic and animal-like, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain."²³ Since the submerged part of the iceberg has been radically altered in alter-modernism, the tip of the iceberg behaves quite differently.

The internet, with its propensity for pleasure, without a deep emotional or analytical investment, is the ideal place for the Id to flourish. This is manifested in flicking between screens for instant gratification and dopamine rushes, instead of differentiating by following learned conventions, including instructions regarding the virtues of

²²An extensive Chinese study (2008) found atrophy of gray matter in the brains of all heavy internet users who spent 8-13 hours a day playing games online. L. Dossey, "FOMO, Digital Dementia, and Our Dangerous Experiment", *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, March/April, 2014, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2014, p. 71.

²³S. Georgi, "Sigmund Freud and Motivation" [Slide show], *Education*, April 12, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/srgeorgi/sigmund-freud-motivation>

appropriate boundaries, self-discipline and the norms of civil society.

There is enough research to provide evidence of a correlation between the undisciplined allure of the internet and poor performance.²⁴ This is primarily manifested in multitasking. That is, flicking between sites in the "fear of missing out (FOMO)", rather than focusing on the task at hand.²⁵ Indeed, when multitasking is attempted, performance slows or there are more mistakes.²⁶ A study by Karpinski et al. in 2013, compared multitasking behaviours among students in Europe with those in the United States. They found that students in the United States who were distracted by multitasking suffered with a lower GPA. However, their European counterparts, who multitasked, were not adversely effected. They discovered two reasons for this. Firstly students in the United States, multitasked more. Secondly, European students were more strategic in their multitasking. For example, they would delay reading a message and responding when working on a task.²⁷

The allure of the internet is that it facilitates the imagination, creates experiences and allows for surface interactions without discernment.²⁸ Further, the internet, following the ways of Freud's Id, provides a false feeling of control, autonomy and empowerment, as the viewer feels free to make choices regarding the interactions they are desiring.²⁹ Indeed, the alter-modernist demands to have input into the narrative of whatever they are experiencing. Where there is input there is power, which feeds the needs of one devoid of the superego. In some scenarios, multi-tasking turns into an outright surrender to the world of the internet, with the illusion of control, but none of its benefits. Here, work is not interrupted or diminished, it just fails to get done. There are not a few among this group who gaze, open eyed and transfixed, into the cyber world of fanciful possibilities, enchanted by its mesmerising glow.

Therefore, in the new order of things, the internet is not simply a vehicle for gaining information and

²⁴P. N. Landers, Z. L. Charles-Marcel, "Moderation in Digital Technology", in *Adventist World*, Nov. 11, 2017, p. 26.

²⁵In worst case scenarios, the internet has become an all-encompassing distraction. These students have almost, or have totally, ceased the ability to adequately complete assignments.

²⁶M.C. Lien, E. Ruthruff, J.C. Johnston, "Attentional limitations in doing two things at once: The search for exceptions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*", 2006, 15, 89-93.

²⁷A.C. Karprinski, P.A. Kirschner, I. Ozer, J.A. Mellott, P. Ochwo, "An exploration of social networking site use, multitasking, and academic performance among United States and European university students". In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2013, 29, 1182-1192.

²⁸B. Carlson, "Nicholas Carr on the 'Superficial' Webby Mind", in *The Atlantic*, June 5, 2010.

²⁹In a survey conducted at Prescott College 86% of Year 9 students, 82% of Year 10 students and 89% of Year 11s, surveyed indicated that using the internet gave feelings of control and power.

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communicating effectively, but a means of illusionary autonomy and control, that facilitates a life devoid of the usual differentiation that enables one to form boundaries and follow appropriate conventions. This is exacerbated by feelings of disenfranchisement among the many who have missed out on the prizes of education. Coupled with a life engrossed with the internet, they have been failed by the super-positive narratives of their post-modernist mentors, who told them that they could achieve anything so long as they believed in themselves and that the way to success was to “just be yourself”.³⁰

At Prescott College, South Australia, surveys were conducted to identify the internet habits of students in a variety of year levels and to make comparisons between the approach to the internet between high and low performing students.

In Year 11, among the higher performing students, only 3% indicated that they multi-tasked when they were working on an assignment, whereas 49% of lower performing students multitasked. This correlates with the results that no higher performing students wanted to know what people were doing on Instagram or Snapchat. By contrast, 38% of lower performing students did want to know what was happening on their social media and where willing to find out while working on assignments.

In Year 10, the top performing students didn't multi-task by flicking between different sites when attending to school work and always focused on work at home. Further, they are able to differentiate between work and play (computer games and social media surfing), by setting rules and boundaries when working on an assignment. Apart from the highest performing student who didn't access social media at all, high performing students indicated that they set rules and boundaries in place when working on an assignment. In the same class, the bottom three performing students all multi-tasked, but did not indicate that they had the ability to fully focus on their work by establishing rules or setting boundaries. In Year 9, the top three performing students, and only these, indicated that they were able to differentiate between work and play. The three lowest performing students indicated that they multi-tasked when working on an assignment.

Consequently, from a survey of Year 9-11 students at Prescott College, it was found that higher performing students are able to differentiate, by creating effective boundaries and following suitable conventions of behaviour. However, lower performing students were unable to clearly differentiate by forming functional distinctions that form boundaries. The ability to differentiate, however, went further than multitasking. Among lower performing students it was

discovered that there was an inability to differentiate between their own work and how this related to the work of others. Consequently, this group were ill equipped to effectively collaborate with other students to successfully complete tasks. By contrast, higher performing students reported that they had the ability to effectively collaborate with others. Further, higher performing students were able to differentiate between using their imaginations for pleasure and work. Consequently, higher performing students reported the ability to utilize their imaginations to be perceptive when facing higher order tasks in an assessment. Additionally, higher succeeding students differentiated between truth and error, the present and the future, personal needs and the needs of others and surface observations and critical thinking. This differentiation emanates from the ability to be discerning. It is what I term *functional discernment*. That is, the ability to be discerning by creating boundaries and following conventions has subsequently allowed for the creation of a storehouse of reflective experiences, where creative thinking has been allowed to flourish in a protected private life.

While the situation can be observed, the question arises as to how effectively student internet use can be responded to, being, typically, deeply entrenched.

Students from Years 9-11 were subsequently asked to construct a schedule in which they would discipline themselves to intentionally differentiate between school work and pleasure when using their media devices. As a prelude, I shared with the students the research that had already been conducted and suggested that creating a program of *functional discernment* would improve their learning. At the conclusion of four weeks trialling a program of disciplined and intentional study without internet distractions, 73% of Year 10 students surveyed found studying to be easier, while 82% were more optimistic about their school work. Further, 45% had observed that their grades had improved. Among Year 9 Students, 80% of respondents believed that following a schedule of intentional and disciplined internet use, led them to feel more confident in their school work. Among Year 11 students, the highest performing students all reported that they followed a schedule balancing study time with pleasure. By contrast, among the lowest performing students only 12.5% reported that they followed a schedule. Further, among the lowest performing students in Year 11 only 43% felt optimistic about their school work, whereas among the highest performing students, all respondents felt optimistic. Consequently, among the Year 11 respondents there appeared to be a potential relationship between following a disciplined schedule that intentionally seeks to manage internet use and positive attitudes to schooling.

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³⁰J. M. Twenge, W. K. Campbell, “The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement”, Atria, 2009, p. 19.

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The internet ... [is] a major source of distraction and a creator of a new mind-set lacking in many of the skills required for higher order thinking.

Conclusion

The Alter-modernist generation has brought with it a new series of challenges. Predominately, these include changes in learning behaviour that may diminish student performance. Freud's analogy of the iceberg provides an interpretative framework to decipher the reasons behind these changes in behaviour and a clue as to how these challenges can be most effectively addressed. The internet has opened students to more information than any previous generation. However, it has also developed into a major source of distraction and a creator of a new mind-set lacking in many of the skills required for higher order thinking. This is most evident in lower performing students. However, higher performing students are to be distinguished by their ability to carefully manage their use of the internet in a scheduled, thoughtful, and intentional manner. After receiving some instruction on the effects of internet use, and the possible benefits of developing a disciplined and scheduled approach to learning, a significant number of students reported beneficial outcomes for their learning. Functional discernment, therefore, is seen to provide significant outcomes for students who intentionally manage their internet use. Therefore, there are two significant areas

for consideration. Firstly, a consideration of the importance of traditional institutions, such as family and religion, in maintaining a dominant influence, in contradistinction to the internet, in forming the superego into a robust, creative, discerning and constructive mechanism for good, within the life of children and adolescents. Secondly, and subsequently, the importance of an intentional approach to using the internet in a managed, scheduled and thoughtful manner, so that an undisciplined use of the internet does not inhibit effective learning. Indeed, students appear to flourish when the internet fails to dominate, but is of assistance to the disciplined, independent and creative thinker. **TEACH**

Author information

John Lewis is a teacher of Religion and VET Careers, with over 20 years of experience in both secondary and tertiary education. He focuses on: "the student as an agent of discovery. Most important is the discovery of self; as a worthwhile and loved individual, created by God for meaning and purpose in this world." John considers "it is a privilege to be entrusted with, and walk the journey alongside, a young person's formative years."