

A review of
Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century
by Neil Postman,
published by
Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1999)
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Rating: 10

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net five point scale from 6-10.)

I suppose I should admit right up front that this is not the first Neil Postman book I've read. Indeed, the first Postman book I came across was *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* in 1974. How could I, as someone who had intended in college to become a teacher, pass on a book with that title? From that admission you might reasonably infer that I find something in his writing that continues to draw me in. Read on ...

This book, written three decades after *Subversive*, is also ultimately about education and teaching, although you might not guess that from the title. It is also about questions and language and narrative and thinking and technology. Predominantly, however, it concerns itself with how those facets of culture relate to education. (The italics in the quotes, by the way, are Postman's.)

Postman offers a wide-ranging perspective on events and trends from 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He reminds us, for instance, of the concept of *tabula rasa*: "Locke wanted education to result in a rich, varied, and copious book; Rousseau wanted education to result in a healthy flower. ... Children are [today seen as] neither blank tablets nor budding plants. They are markets; that is to say, consumers whose needs for products are roughly the same as the needs of adults." Children are not seen as members of society with special requirements, but just another market segment.

Postman looks at how the nature of education has changed; he points out some serious short-comings he finds in contemporary educational practices. Viewed from a slightly different perspective, children are not simply a market segment but a largely passive audience for an expanding use of technology. And education's own increasing reliance on technology poses a serious short-coming. He writes, "Before the printing press, children became adults by learning to *speak*, for which all people are biologically programmed. After the printing press, children had to *earn* adulthood by achieving literacy, for which people are not biologically programmed. This meant that schools had to be created. ... And it is my contention that with the assistance of other media such as radio, film, and records, television has the power to lead us to childhood's end. ... There is no need for any preparation or prerequisite training for watching television Watching television requires no skills and develops no skills. That is why there is no such thing as remedial television-watching."

Strong words. Postman clearly has his doubts about the value of technology in education. But he is not a single-minded, anti-technology Luddite, either. In one section of the book, he offers a series of questions to be asked about *any* new technology. The questions begin with, “*What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?*” and end with, “*What changes in language are being enforced by new technologies, and what is being gained and lost by such changes?*” Okay, he’s saying, we are going to see changes in technology. But let’s think about the consequences before we jump on board.

But let’s return to education *per se*. What should we do to bring some sense of integrity (in the sense of *integratedness*) back into school? Firstly, Postman wants us to remember the importance of a historical narrative. That narrative provides continuity and connections and above all context. We don’t have to re-invent ourselves with each new generation (baby-boomers, baby-busters, Gen-X). We have a long history and a valuable collection of lessons-learned. We would do well to remember the story and build on it. On the other hand, we can’t assume that we have discovered The Truth in that narrative. So, secondly, to balance that narrative we need to introduce (or re-introduce?) *critical thinking* into the school curriculum as a useful response to mindless viewing of technology or listening to the narrative. “Wisdom,” he reminds us, “means knowing what questions to ask about knowledge. . . . Wisdom does not imply having the right answers. It implies only asking the right questions.”

Near the end of the book, Postman takes fifteen pages to offer five suggestions on how we – as a society consisting of parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, school boards, and ordinary folks – might move in the direction of rejuvenating critical thinking. First, we need to teach the art of asking good questions. Students need to understand the need to be both answer-givers *and* question-askers. Today, the balance is sorely out of whack. Second, we need to look to The Trivium for assistance with questions. Questions are posed in language, and language depends on logic, and on rhetoric, and on grammar. When children are allowed to get away with utterances such as, “Well, you know she goes ‘Like you said that?’ and then I go, ‘Well, like what else could I do, I mean she was, you know, like so totally like bummed. . . .’”, we are in deep trouble.

Postman’s third suggestion focuses on what I learned to call “the scientific method.” How does a theory come into being? How is it tested? Can it be proved? Can it be disproved? What constitutes evidence? Who gets to decide? His fourth suggestion might prove a little more challenging. Basically, he claims that if schools don’t teach computer skills, people will get them anyway. So we don’t need to educate people on *how* to use technology, but rather to move up one click: how to think about the implications of using technology. This gets back to his set of questions about adopting any technology.

And his fifth suggestion might be most controversial, since it concerns religion. Not showing a preference for any single religion, he contends, “has also been taken to mean, not so wisely, that public institutions should show no interest in religion at all. One consequence of this is that public schools are barely able to refer to religion in almost any context.” He believes that in about grade eight and beyond, students should be exposed to comparative religion, including the metaphors, arts, and rituals of various

world religions. Someone reading the newspaper today, if anyone still actually does, cannot help but notice that religion is a major factor in disputes around our small globe.

Postman may not have all the answers. But he does pose a good set of questions.

Neil Postman's *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century* was released in 1999. Over three-quarters of my life ago (I should add for transparency's sake), and nearly as significant an era in the lifespan of the Internet. At fifteen years remove, Postman's dire warnings about the digital era can seem quaint. The eighteenth-century is great, Postman's list tacitly declares, because the reading public associates these figures with greatness. And because the accidents and prejudices of history have attached such names to greatness, their century must have been great indeed. True, Postman hints at why he adores some these thinkers. But by invoking them all at once, Postman implies that their renown alone justifies his adoration. In the third chapter ("Technology") of his book, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, Neil Postman analyzes how progress is defined and how it can result in corruption. Postman also ponders the relationship between moral progress and technological advancements. In the first few pages of the chapter, Postman explains that by the close of the nineteenth century, progress was still thriving, individuals were moving towards a common goal of improving the quality of life and making society more productive. However, he says this is likely because, "the nineteenth century America still had id Neil Postman, in his book *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, claims this as the most significant intellectual skill to be cultivated in a student. In his summary of how to teach reason and skepticism (usually called critical thinking), Postman places the first thing on his list this need to teach the art and science of asking questions." The premise of this book is that the Enlightenment guys, the post-modernists notwithstanding, got it mostly right: about children, language, education, narrative and democracy. The Enlightenment can provide a roadmap or guide to helping build a rational society for the 21st century. A Facebook review is not the place to a length critique, but allow me to say that I mostly like what he has to say, with the following caveats.