Tech Snacks: Teaching in a Post-Literate Age?

Are we entering a post-literate age? Stories from professors about students' lack of interest in reading and difficulty engaging in tasks that demand sustained attention, worrisome data about declining reading habits, and that sense that maybe we should just look at our phones for a second even while reading this paragraph… All these things point toward something larger going on with humans and technology, including the written word and the digital technologies transforming and displacing it. What does teaching look like in an era of so-called post-literacy? Is there a different lens through which to view the transformations societies and education are undergoing that both better captures what we're experiencing and offers something more useful than a narrative of decline? Walter Ong's notion of "secondary orality" might be a useful concept for teaching today.

Is There a "Literacy Crisis" for Students? All of Us?

Writing based on the reports of 33 seasoned professors that even students at elite universities cannot read like they used to, Rose Horowitch notes that survey data backs teachers' observations. For example, "In 1976, about 40 percent of high-school seniors said they had read at least six books for fun in the previous year, compared with 11.5 percent who hadn't read any. By 2022, those percentages had flipped" (11.5 percent had read 6 or more books for fun; 40 percent had read none).

The issue Horowitch and the professors she talked with are noticing is different than that "some students arrive with literacy and comprehension deficits that can leave them unable to complete collegiate courses." It is not that students are illiterate, but that "they struggle to muster the attention or ambition required to immerse themselves in a substantial text."[1] This challenge has led professors to lighten workloads and lower expectations about what students will attempt and accomplish.

And it's not just reading. A recent report from UC San Diego Senate-Administration Workgroup on Admissions found a staggering nearly thirtyfold increase between 2020-2025 in "freshman whose math placement exam results indicate they do not meet *middle school* standards." This "group constitutes roughly one-eighth of [their] entire entering cohort." The report also noted that "weaknesses in math and language tend to be more related in recent years."[2]

And it's not just students. Writing about the decline of reading, Eric Levitz presents a sobering picture for reading generally (while still highlighting the issue for youth):

> "In 2021, American adults read fewer books on average than in any year on record, according to Gallup. Among young Americans, the dwindling of deep reading is especially stark. In 1984, some 35 percent of 13-year-olds said they read for fun 'almost

[1] Rose Horowitch. 2024. "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books." *Atlantic Monthly* 334 (4): 14–16.
[2] UC San Diego Senate-Administration Workgroup on Admissions. 2025. *Final Report*.

every day,' according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). By 2012, that figure was 27 percent. By 2023, it had fallen to 14 percent. Similar declines have transpired among the nation's 9-year-olds and late adolescents. Meanwhile, daily screen time among all age groups is surging to record highs."[3]

This kind of data has led many to ask the titular question of Sarah O'Connor's column in *Financial Times*, "Are we becoming a post-literate society?" In 2024 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

"released the results of a vast exercise: in-person assessments of the literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills of 160,000 adults aged 16-65 in 31 different countries and economies. Compared with the last set of assessments a decade earlier, the trends in literacy skills were striking. Proficiency improved significantly in only two countries (Finland and Denmark), remained stable in 14, and declined significantly in 11, with the biggest deterioration in Korea, Lithuania, New Zealand and Poland. Among adults with tertiary-level education (such as university graduates), literacy proficiency fell in 13 countries and only increased in Finland, while nearly all countries and economies experienced declines in literacy proficiency among adults with below upper secondary education. Singapore and the US had the biggest inequalities in both literacy and numeracy. 'Thirty per cent of Americans read at a level that you would expect from a 10-year-old child,' Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the OECD, told [O'Connor] — referring to the proportion of people in the US who scored level 1 or below in literacy. 'It is actually hard to imagine — that every third person you meet on the street has difficulties reading even simple things.'"[4]

[*Side note: There's lots of interesting stuff in the OECD report, including country-specific data and data about the relationship between skills and socioeconomic outcomes.*][5]

Walter Ong's Orality and Literacy (1982)

Ong's *Orality and Literacy* is a book about the changes in human consciousness brought about by the introduction of writing (and then print) into human culture.[6] For over 90% of human history, humans lived in an oral culture, where communication occured through the spoken word. Then about 3500-3400 BC, writing started to develop. Further key developments in Ong's account are the development of the Greek alphabet (~800-700 BC), the subsequent interiorization of the alphabet and the possibility of writing (~400 BC), and the Gutenberg printing press (1440). As the technology of writing progressed, a literacy culture emerged, changing our brains along the way to a degree that Ong thinks it is almost impossible for a person in our era of high literacy to return to the kind of consciousness of a primary oral culture.

[3] Eric Levitz. 2025. "Is the decline of reading poisoning our politics?" *Vox*.

[4] Sarah O'Connor. 2024. "Are we becoming a post-literate society?" *Financial Times*.

[5] OECD. 2024. *Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?: Survey of Adult Skills 2023*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b263dc5d-en.

[6] Walter Ong. 2002. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

(Primary) Orality

- No knowledge or familiarity with writing/print or the possibility of writing/print.
- No way to look things up; "no dictionary in the mind" (14).
- "Knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration" (24).
- "You know what you can recall" (33). This need to remember values repetition, formula, pattern, cliche, rhythmic patterning, mnemonic devices, and a smaller vocabulary.
- Conservative/traditionalist - preservation over new creation (41).
- Knowledge is embodied, communal, social, situational–no lists, charts or figures; "an oral culture … has nothing corresponding to how-to-do-it manuals for the trades" (42).
- Oral cultures were "agonistically programmed," open to combative exchange (44).
- Emphasis on outsized, heavy, heroic figures (Achilles, Odysseus, Mwindo, Anansi) (68).
- Orality produces a kind of human excellence, and it is "destined to produce writing" (14).

Literacy

- Writing is a technology, even more drastic a change than print or computers (80).
- Fixes words: "The new way to store knowledge was not in mnemonic formulas but in the written text. This freed the mind for more original, more abstract thought" (24).
- Writing creates an inert thing; no context of being spoken to someone in some place.
- Writing creates a distance, separates "the knower from the known," making possible "increasingly articulate introspectivity" and abstract reasoning (103).
- Writing leads to growing vocabulary and more complicated syntax.
- Major shift from hearing-dominance to sight-dominance (115-120).
- Writing is accused of ruining memory, making minds weak, and being unresponsive (78).

Secondary Orality

- The secondary orality "of present-day high technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (10-11).
- "Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality" (133).
- Generates "a strong group sense," a "participatory mystique," but at a much larger scale than primary oral culture (133).
- Relies on formulas, cliche, repeated phrases, epithets. ("67!", "The GOAT", memes)
- An emphasis on heavy, "heroic" characters and the way they are "present" to us.
- "Fosters a new, self-consciously informal style" that should appear spontaneous. "We plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous" (133-4).
- Electronic era not eliminating books, but producing more (132).
- Secondary orality is promoted not only by television, radio, and computers, but podcasts, social media, and short-form video (not necessarily as writing-dependent forms).
- Agonistic, combative exchange (or excessive praise) is algorithmically encouraged. Contra the individuality fostered by writing, digital communication (the immediacy of agreement/disagreement, liking/disliking, and the currency of virality) leads to a kind of group conformity that can split along "tribal" grounds.

- Concern that a return to orality without memory reduces the technology to store and transmit knowledge. We need not just dictionaries and libraries but data centers.

Some Possible Takeaways

- Framing the challenges in education as one of "secondary orality" rather than "post-literacy" picks out some of the structural features of the problem. We are all undergoing this massive shift in the relationship between technology and human culture!
- Being explicit about pedagogy helps. (e.g., we read textbooks, have lectures, do Assignment XYZ because the kind of learning accomplished cannot be done otherwise.)
- The figure and presence of the teacher and the social-communal context of the classroom remains invaluable.
- Incorporating media that leans into the tendencies of "secondary orality" could help student engagement and participation, but is not without risk.
- Hard choices about changing curricula and syllabi.
- A return to phonics education in elementary education is showing positive returns.