February 11, 2009

Aloha, Mr. Hand

Posted June 19, 2008 | 10:33 AM (EST)


Show your support.
Buzz this article up.

- Share
- Print View
- Comments

Like this story? Get Alerts of big news events. Enter your email address

"The present age makes great claims upon us," Matthew Arnold acknowledged in 1853. But, he warned, without "the steadying and composing effect" of "the ancients", acquired by reading "the best that is known and thought in the world," young men and women might well be forced to rely on their own meager resources.

Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English at Emory University and former director of Research and Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, agrees with Arnold, the icon of American conservatives. In The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future, or Don't Trust Anyone Under Thirty, he cites evidence that Americans have stopped reading books, and blames the "low knowledge levels" of adolescents mainly on the Internet. "The world delivers facts and events and art and ideas," he writes, "but the young American mind hasn't opened." Busy e-mailing and text-messaging, uploading photographs onto MySpace and Facebook, and creating playlists for iPods, they have trouble identifying the three branches of the American government, the Allies and the Axis powers in World War II, and where Iraq is on the map.

Warning that "knowledge is never more than one generation away from oblivion," Bauerlein is the latest in a long-line of Chicken Little critics of culture. Like Allan Bloom, he rails at the youth culture of the 1960s. Like E. D. Hirsch, he documents the decline in "cultural literacy." And like Neil Postman, he proclaims that the screen pacifies viewers, isolates individuals while perpetuating illusions of social connectivity, and turns "every event and experience into entertainment." Indeed, The Dumbest Generation is so indebted to Amusing Ourselves to Death the tsunami of studies summarized by Bauerlein does provide ample cause for concern about the education and skills acquisition of young Americans in the Digital Age. According to The Dumbest Generation, except for Harry Potter, tweens and teens read fewer and fewer books. When they go on-line, they "snack" on sites "adjusted to lesser literacies and leaping eyes," rarely taking the time to absorb complicated content. The data shows they favor news briefs to full articles, almost never go beyond the first page of results on their Google searches, and are either unwilling or unable to assess the reliability of the material they encounter.

The Information Superhighway, Bauerlein concludes, does not instill "higher-order learning skills." Despite the claims of "techno-cheerleaders and their academic backers," the time kids spend on-line does not constitute a "cognitive workout" for "college-bound digital natives." He shoots down arguments that young Americans are becoming mentally flexible, hyper-alert, multi-taskers, interacting with tools that promote specialization, pattern recognition and problem-solving. Nor does he buy that they are pooling knowledge by posting, revising, and criticizing as they follow the flow of information across multiple modalities. Instead, according to The Dumbest Generation, what teenagers are doing is "horizontal modeling" -- hanging out in their rooms using peer-to-peer technology to produce a "Daily Me" show. Bauerlein cites employers' complaints that college graduates haven't even mastered "lower-order skills," including verbal and numerical competence, as they enter the work force.

Although he denies he's a Luddite, Bauerlein sure sounds like one. He notes, in passing, that studies of digital learning are preliminary. And, indeed, they are. MySpace and Facebook, after all, had not even penetrated the youth consciousness when the seniors at Emory University were in high school. Who knows what will permeate youth culture five years from now? Moreover, efforts to teach kids how to use the Web are in their infancy. Nonetheless, Bauerlein supports the decision of school districts in Liverpool, New York, Richmond, Virginia, and Broward County, Florida to phase out programs to provide laptops to their students.

While Bauerlein dislikes "digital diversions," he despises America's "youth culture." Again and again, The Dumbest Generation delivers a tiresome lecture: unless kids are forced to shape up and shake off their slacker ways, the nation is headed down the tubes. Without adult mentors, Bauerlein asserts, teenagers have "always wasted their time and chances." But since the 1960s, "moral and cultural canons at home and in class" no longer keep them in check. Today "youth teach elders, not vice versa" -- and it seems that "only the adult world needs fixing." And indulgence has "settled into a sanctioned pedagogy." Given the wrong signals -- or no signals at all -- America's youngsters gradually traded "independence, creativity, and skepticism" for "routine irreverence and knowledge deficits."

Like Allan Bloom, Bauerlein yearns for an age of citizens, gentlemen, and believers, unspoiled by Freud, Dr. Spock, Mr. Spock, the Yippies, and YouTube. A time when professors could and did force students to read the "canon" of "Great Books" and regard Rembrandt with reverence. And tell them, again and again, that without these "counter-poisons to mass culture" they'd never become complete persons.

Well, "Aloha, Mr. Hand." Bauerlein doesn't remember -- or wish to remember -- that in response many kids went home, whipped out Encyclopedia Britannica or Cliffs Notes, and wrote "research" papers while watching TV or listening to rock 'n' roll. For all his reliance on social science research, Bauerlein doesn't present any evidence to justify his assertion that this generation is the dumbest in American history. He cannot adequately explain that volunteerism among American youth has grown steadily. Moreover, his sensationalist title and sub-title, and the images of action figures holding up an American flag, Iwo-Jima style, we suspect, were chosen to attract "snackers" with short-attention spans. And he doesn't deliver on his promise (on the book jacket flap) to provide a "compelling vision" to address the "deficiencies" of the Digital Age. For the book's second subtitle, "Don't trust anyone under thirty," we'd like to substitute "Don't trust anyone who libels a generation in order to sell books."

A revolution in technology and communications, with immense implications for the economy, culture, and society, has only just begun. It has already demonstrated an awesome potential for liberation and democratization. As Mark Bauerlein reminds us, at the moment it also provides opportunities for young consumers to be distracted through snacking or social networking. But the appropriate action is not to unwind the clock. Or start viewing technology as the enemy. Or look to paternalistic "canon fodders" for salvation. As the poet Robert Lowell supposed, "even God was born too late to trust the old religion."

More in Media...

- GOOGLE POWERMETER: A Goony Step Toward A...
- Jon Stewart Rips Bill O'Reilly Over Hypocrisy...
- Julio Osequeda, Florida College Student, Rules Obama...
- Specter To Ingraham: "Don't Give Me The...

**English Skills Training**
Learn how to read and write English at-home with Penn Foster.
www.PennFoster.edu

Comments 52 Pending Comments 0

Want to reply to a comment? Hint: Click "Reply" at the bottom of the comment; after being approved your comment will appear directly underneath the comment you replied to

FAQ: Comments and Moderation FAQ: HuffPost Accounts

View Comments: Newest First Expand All
Page: 1 2 Next » Last » (2 pages total)