

IN DEFENSE OF TEACHING “OUTDATED” MATERIAL

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We all know that Euclidean geometry does not adequately explain the space in which we live. Our world is not that of the plane, as found in Edward Abbott's *Flatland*. Why, then, is Euclidean geometry still taught in schools? I suggest that without an understanding of Euclidean geometry, one would have difficulty understanding advanced concepts, such as trigonometry or calculus. As my college calculus teacher noted, calculus is just addition done with lines. Advanced concepts build on previous knowledge.

During my rhetorical criticism course, students sometimes wonder why we cover so much history. A similar issue is also raised in my rhetorical theory course, a survey course that begins with the pre-Socratics and ends with post-modern rhetorical theory. I openly state that some of the material that we cover is no longer useful from a methodological standpoint, but that there are reasons for teaching the material. I explain to the students that it is important to recognize not only current rhetorical theory and methods of criticism, but also the controversies, dead ends, and landmarks that brought us to the place we are today. Innovation is often the result of recognition of suboptimal processes or ideas. If we help students see where these shifts in method or theory occurred and what spawned these insights, and, more importantly, why previous generations held inaccurate understandings, we are more likely to have students who will likewise improve the discipline because they, too, can see potential ways to improve their craft.

In this essay, I will draw on the idea of time-binding in order to make a case for teaching supposedly “outdated” material. My focus is primarily toward educators, but the idea can also be applied by anyone who wishes to

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more fully understand his or her craft. Knowledge does not spring forth *ex nihilo*; current knowledge is built on previous knowledge. But it is not enough to simply teach history; we must teach students how to *use* history. If we can teach students how to bind together previous knowledge with current knowledge, there will be little in any discipline that can truly be considered outdated.

Time-Binding and Education

Every subject has a history, including biology, physics, mathematics, literature, music and art. . . . To teach, for example, what we know about biology today without also teaching what we once knew, or thought we knew, is to reduce knowledge to a mere consumer product. It is to deprive students of a sense of the meaning of what we know, and of how we know.

—Neil Postman¹

Too often we seek the most up-to-date material at the expense of the monumental works that defined a discipline. This is also structural; publishers stop publishing groundbreaking books because there is no longer sufficient demand for them. For example, when I ordered Postman's *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* as part of the readings for my graduate pedagogy course, I was informed by the university bookstore that the book was "out of stock indefinitely with the publisher and no longer available" (despite the many potential sellers on Amazon and other such sites). Groundbreaking works in my field of rhetorical criticism, such as Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, are only recently available through print-on-demand. With a seemingly constant flood of new books and knowledge, it is difficult enough to simply keep up, let alone delve into the archives.

We must, of course, stay up-to-date on current trends in our field. However, we must also remember that the insights of tomorrow are dependent on the knowledge of the past. Alfred Korzybski observed:

The simple steel structure of a bridge, familiar to us in every day life, is a clear reminder to us all of the arts of Hephaestus and the bound-up knowledge of countless generations of smiths and mechanics, metallurgists and chemists, mathematicians and builders, teachers and engineers who toiled for many thousands of years to make possible the riveted steel beams which are the elements of modern structure.²

Korzybski referred to this process as time-binding, defining it thus:

Human beings possess a most remarkable capacity which is entirely peculiar to them—I mean the capacity to summarize, digest and appropriate the labors and experiences of the past; I mean the capacity to use the fruits of past labors and experiences as intellectual or spiritual capital for developments in the present; I mean the capacity to employ as instruments of increasing power the accumulated achievements of the all-precious lives of the past generations spent in trial and error, trial and success; I mean the capacity of human beings to conduct their lives in the ever increasing light of inherited wisdom; I mean the capacity in virtue of which man is at once the heritor of the by-gone ages and the trustee of posterity.³

S. I. Hayakawa describes it more succinctly as “the ability to organize social cooperation *at a distance* and to accumulate knowledge *over generations of time* through the use of symbols” (emphasis in original).⁴ The simple fact that I am writing this essay using a system of symbols that I did not develop, and drawing on ideas created by a man who is now dead, is an example of time-binding. As Harry Weinberg observes, each of us “stands on the shoulders of the dead to peer into the future.”⁵

Yet, time-binding is not simply a matter of constantly revising and discarding the past. As Hayakawa notes, “the greater the area of cooperation between the living and the dead in the interests of those yet unborn, the better; the more people embraced in the cooperative enterprise, the better.”⁶ We must make use of the past if we are to become effective time-binders ourselves and teach our students how to use the past if we are to also help them to become effective time-binders. Herein lies the problem with most uses of history: rather than teaching the student to use history, many of us teach the student the history itself, as if it stood apart from contemporary practice.

Perhaps the key term in time-binding is not *time*, so much as *binding*, at least where pedagogical practice is concerned. We must recognize that we are building knowledge from disparate elements and binding them together. Milton Dawes reminds us that “whatever we think, say, feel, do, expect, plan for, want, theorize about, etc., is incomplete, because we have not included all.”⁷ And we never can say it all. Michael McGee notes, “The only way to ‘say it all’ in our fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse*” (emphasis in original).⁸ We must help students to become active participants in the construction of knowledge, rather than simply consumers of information.

Henry Giroux writes, "This is what the pedagogical struggle is all about—opening up the material and discursive basis of particular ways of producing meaning and presenting ourselves, our relations with others, and our relation to our environment so as to consider the possibilities not yet realized."⁹ But to help students recognize the possibilities not yet realized, we must inculcate a consciousness of their own time-binding nature. Dawes suggests:

With time-binding consciousness we shift our notion of time-binding from a definition and classification, to a *verb* representing an action. We recognize time-binding as a psychological tool . . . a tool we can use to improve ourselves in any area we choose. With time-binding consciousness, we move from simply repeating "each generation can start where the former left off," to self-consciously appreciating ourselves as time-binders.¹⁰

By helping students to make the connections between past and present understandings of the topic at hand, we can help them learn *how* to use the past. In other words, we can help them to become the self-conscious time-binders that Dawes proposes.

When we teach, we are not merely teaching content. We are teaching an orientation to a discipline, especially in upper-division courses and certainly in graduate programs. To know the current literature without an understanding of how we arrived there is much like entering a conversation at a bar and immediately joining in an ongoing heated debate. Without an understanding of the controversies and issues within a discipline, the student will likely have only a surface understanding of the material. The student will have a much greater understanding of the intricacies of a topic if he or she is aware of the ground that has already been covered by those before. This will help students avoid the pitfalls and dead ends that others may have already encountered. More importantly, the controversies in a field often persist and shape present understanding; knowing the contours of these arguments is an essential part of becoming a member of the discipline rather than simply an outside observer.

Teaching the history of a discipline—any discipline—provides students with a greater understanding of how we have collectively arrived at the knowledge we currently hold. But we must teach this history with an eye focused on building conscious time-binders—those who can effectively use the history of a discipline to drive forward our understanding of the problems that face the world as a whole. After all, the ability to transmit knowledge across time and space is worth little if we are unable to use it well. Teaching students without providing a context in which to understand the discipline may well doom them to repeat the mistakes of those before them.

Conclusion

Despite our best efforts, many teachers still hold a bias toward current material, sloughing off old readings as we bring our reading lists and syllabi "up-to-date." Yet, recency of the scholarship does not necessarily equal relevance. After all, Plato has been read for almost 2500 years and his insights are still useful. Moreover, in our quest to teach current research, it is easy to lose sight of ideas to which we can bind that current scholarship. In the words of Ziggy Marley, "If you don't know your past, you don't know your future."¹¹

But it is not enough to simply teach the insights that are still valid. A biologist teaching students that people used to believe that geese were generated from gooseneck barnacles not only teaches a historical anecdote in biology, but also helps students understand how misguided thinking led to incorrect conclusions. Just because one thing looks similar to another does not mean that one becomes the other or that they have similar properties. It is just as important for the biologist of today to continually evaluate his or her patterns of thought that may likewise lead to incorrect conclusions. Such is the aim of general semantics.

History must also be critically assessed. After all, our representations of history are never as accurate as one may hope.¹² Thus, we must take care concerning how we transmit knowledge to students. Ben Hauck writes, "When the future listens, its understanding and success depends on *our* reports from the present. Time-binding is done individually and now_{1st}, but the minutest choice of word can have cultural impacts and implications now_{2nd} and later."¹³ The practice of teaching is an exercise in creating the future out of the past. Gerald Savage notes that educators should transcend mere instrumental teaching and help students "begin to reconceive the profession as one that can be practiced in alternative ways that would permit them greater autonomy and professional integrity."¹⁴ This seems to be good advice for educators in any discipline.

Notes

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2. Korzybski, Alfred. *Manhood of Humanity*. 2nd ed. Lakeville, CT: International Non-Aristotelian Library; Institute of General Semantics, 1950, p. 255.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
4. Hayakawa, S. I. "The Aims and Tasks of General Semantics: Implications of the Time-Binding Theory (Part I)." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 58, no. 1 (2001), p. 65.

5. Weinberg, Harry L. *Levels of Knowing and Existence*. New York: Harper & Row, 1959, p. 157.
6. Hayakawa, S. I. "Ethics of Time-Binding." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 61, no. 4 (2004), p. 678.
7. Dawes, Milton. "On Time-Binding Consciousness." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 62, no. 3 (2005), p. 265.
8. McGee, Michael Calvin. "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture." *Western Journal of Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990), p. 288.
9. Giroux, Henry A. *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 202.
10. Dawes, "On Time-Binding Consciousness." p. 268.
11. Ziggy Marley and the Melody Makers. "Tomorrow People." *Conscious Party*. Beverly Hills, CA: Virgin Records America, 1988.
12. Shapiro, Irving David. "The History Con." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 64, no. 2 (2007), pp. 165-171.
13. Hauck, Ben. "A Tangible Experience of Time-Binding." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 64, no. 1 (2007), p. 73.
14. Savage, Gerald J. "Redefining the Responsibilities of Teachers and the Social Position of the Technical Communicator." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1996), p. 310.

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