

Introduction

Your alarm goes off. You roll out of bed, but not before checking your phone to catch up on any emails you may have received overnight. You head into the kitchen, and while waiting for your coffee to brew, you take it upon yourself to read the back of the cereal box while still half asleep – by this point you should have the ingredient list memorized. I guess the aforementioned sleepiness is to blame for lack of retention. You turn on the TV to check out the weather forecast, only to find yourself captivated by the news headlines rotating on the screen. Now that you probably know more than you would like to about what is going on in the world, you sit down with your laptop and dive into your coursework. Of course, an obligatory first sip or five of coffee have been had by this point.

Within the first hour of being awake we have consumed and interacted with more text than we even realize, without even uttering a single word. Whether scanning through digital communications, mindlessly skimming over ingredient lists, or intensively reading through course materials, we have immersed ourselves in the world of silent reading. Although this act seems instinctive, it is a skill that demanded cultivation, both in terms of individual development and in a much broader sense, throughout history. So where did it all begin?

History

An Uncertain Beginning

In the early days of Christianity, texts were predominantly interpreted and performed orally. One of the most commonly referenced early instances of silent reading involves St. Augustine, much to his surprise, finding St. Ambrose engaged in the act of silent reading in 383 AD. His reaction certainly demonstrates how rare this practice truly was at the time (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014). Prior to this account, there is a great deal of ongoing debate regarding the initial presence of silent reading. For the sake of inclusivity, let's recall two instances dating back to fifth century BCE where silent reading was believed to have been demonstrated in Ancient Greek plays.

The Medieval Period

Returning to the Early Medieval Period, silent reading was prone to suspicion within the Christian church. This was largely due to the fact that it was out of reach of official public monitoring, which was deemed necessary to ensure accurate interpretation of scripture. Scribes were read aloud in early scriptoria, rooms within which texts were accessed and copied. Without the presence of punctuation, word spacing, and capitalization, the spoken word was all that could be used to copy passages, consisting of 15 to 25 letters strung together in narrow columns of text, onto the manuscript material. This stringing together of words is known as *Scriptura Continua*. Even monks who had taken a vow of silence were able to read passages aloud, within a monastery's scriptoria for the sake of copying (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014). Oral reading in scriptoria lasted until the tenth century, which is when silent reading was implemented, in accordance with advances in orthographic representation. In other words, spacing between words made silent reading a possibility among skilled readers who were responsible for copying texts. Word spacing and punctuation became especially important in places like Ireland, where Saxon and Celtic priests were not all that well versed in Latin. They relied on these reading mechanisms in order to access a number of religious texts (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014). Early medieval

libraries were filled with the quiet mumblings of readers crouched over their books throughout this period. By 400 AD, the codex made of parchment started to replace the formerly used scroll as a medium that was not only considered more portable, but also more secure in the sense that it could be easily hidden or tucked away. Codex eventually brought with it an increase in silent reading and scholarly-focus within libraries (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014). Beginning in the 11th century, Medieval Universities employed a method of critical thought called Scholasticism, which gave prominence to dialectical thinking and syllogistic reasoning. Scholasticism involved the close analysis of highly revered works, in their respective fields, and acknowledgement of any questions or contradictions presented throughout, in pursuit of revealing underlying truths. This approach demanded deep understanding of the content within these works, as well as profound faith, as Christian Theology played a large role in Scholasticism (Vlach, 2012). Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in Germany aligned with an increased demand for textbooks between 1450 and 1455 AD. By 1500 more than 30,000 books had been printed throughout Europe (Carr, 2010). The nature of textbooks in that they allow the reader to revisit, reanalyze, and reflect on the content, mirrors the outlook adopted by many during the 16th century Reformation in Europe. They started to question authority, while searching for individual meaning and truth in the texts they read.

The 1600's & 1700's

Before the United States' first printing press was established in 1638 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, books were imported to the U.S. from London, England. In 1744, English publisher John Newbery, "The Father of Children's Literature", started printing books geared toward children in London, and from there he focused on producing educational works. Meanwhile, in Colonial America, the end of the 1600's and the early 1700's saw both boys and girls being taught the alphabetic method of instruction through oral pedagogy (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014). Up until then, girls were mostly taught domestic skills, with little emphasis on reading. Around the mid-1700's, the spelling book gained popularity, as it drew connections between sounds and symbols, and at this point were used in conjunction with oral reading instruction methods. In the century following the American Revolution, there appeared to be a shift from religious to more secular texts, likely due to the rising popularity of reading for pleasure among children (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014).

The 1800's & 1900's

With widespread industrialism and commercialism in the 1800s through early 1900s came increased access to all sorts of literature. In the mid 1800s an American politician named Horace Mann started the movement toward meaningful learning, as an alternative to rote learning, which oral reading seemed to promote. By the end of the century, it was leaders such as Francis Parker who continued to criticize oral reading, while advocating for silent reading as a well-rounded, holistic pedagogical approach (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014). A discovery was made during the enlistment of American soldiers in World War I, and was once again brought to light during World War II. Soldiers were unable to read at the level required to follow written instructions. This was a motivating factor behind the push for more research into reading and reading instruction (Pearson & Goodwin, 2014). Evidently, exploration of these topics led to the consensus that silent reading was more effective in promoting speed and comprehension, as well as knowledge retention, than oral reading.

Children's Literacy

Around the early 1900s children started being welcomed into libraries- a forum that hadn't always been so inclusive- and librarians enthusiastically supported children's reading practices outside of the classroom through literacy programs. It was important at this time for children to read silently in order to develop their imaginations, along with a taste for good literature. The rise in interest in children's literature led to a surge in the production of these works, with the introduction of numerous literary awards only encouraging authors to produce such works in greater numbers.

The 21st Century

Connecting Past to Present

Although religion no longer governs our reading habits, nor is reading restricted to being done aloud for the purpose of performance, a few connections can be drawn between the past and present. In previous centuries with high rates of illiteracy, it was common for a literate individual to read aloud for their family members. Despite much higher rates of literacy today, this same practice is evident when parents read to their young children before bed (Bikos, 2013). Digital media, which has essentially brought texts from book to screen, has made reading more of a cognitively demanding activity, as we find ourselves confronted with more visual graphics and links to pique our curiosity. Just as a lack of spaces between words, as seen on papyrus and scrolls, made text more difficult to read, new technology has demanded a greater amount of mental energy and focus when reading (Carr, 2010).

Conclusion

I would just like to conclude with a quick word on the recently developed practise of silent reading parties, courtesy of Christopher Frizzelle, editor-in-chief of Stranger Magazine (Zych 2014). While the notion of reading silently in a room full of people may be lost on some, I think it aligns pretty well with the type of world we live in today. While particular locations were once reserved for specific activities, those lines have been blurred with the introduction of mobile technologies and a quickening of the pace at which we live. Solitude is no longer a physical separation of oneself from the hustle and bustle of society and its constituents. Rather, it is a mental, emotional, and spiritual state achieved through self-guided and self-empowering activities such as silent reading. Just as it always has done and will continue to do, reading is what connects us with history, enlightens us with knowledge and truths, and helps us to better ourselves.

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