WHY TEACH IN THE AGE OF GOOGLE?

John Mark Kuhns
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A few years ago I was walking down the hall at my school and spied a small pill lying on the floor. None of my students recognized it or claimed it as their own, so I was about to toss it into the trash. However, out of curiosity, I did an internet search and found a website that would identify most pills by their color, shape, and markings. In less than a minute on that website, I had found that the pill in my hand was a popular anti-allergy medication. I had also found the symptoms it treats, the side effects its users can expect, and the drugs with which it interacts. In only a few minutes, I "knew" as much about this pill as our local pharmacist. Did the pharmacist waste his time getting a license?

Our time in history is rightly called the Information Age. An earthquake happens in Nepal, or a terrorist attack occurs in Paris, or a princess is born in London, and we can know about it within, at most, a few hours. Wikipedia gives us up-to-date information on any subject we wish to research; YouTube provides thousands of hours of high-quality lectures and demonstrations; Project Gutenberg lets us read the great works of literature; and the Wikimedia Commons lets us view images of the greatest art in history. For any gaps that remain, Google is available to answer our questions. With this all-you-can-eat buffet of available information, what does it mean to be educated? More to the point, what does it mean to educate a young person?

A cursory glance at our schools would seem to indicate that we think educated persons are those who know a lot of information. Homework assignments require students to study and memorize information and tests primarily measure how much information students have retained. The majority of both students' and teachers' time in school is spent on information, and our primary measures for success in school are related to information mastery.

Indeed, mastery of information can be an important trait of an educated person. Knowledge — information stored within the mind — is a key component of an accurate and coherent picture of what the world is like. A solid understanding of history, for example, helps us to see beyond the immediate context of the moment and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. A good grasp of science helps us to recognize shoddy reasoning and to avoid the offerings of charlatans and swindlers. Not only this, but knowledge also gives us new eyes with which to view the splendor and beauty that God has created. The phrase in Genesis 1:16, "He made the stars also," takes on new meaning when we learn that there are at least one billion trillion stars in the observable universe. Knowledge is also important if we are to avoid superstition and deception. From ancient Greece to medieval Europe to modern Tibet, history is littered with examples of people who fell into superstition and false religion through ignorance.

We must reckon with the fact, though, that virtually all the information students learn in school is readily and freely available online. Why, then, should we spend so much time, energy, and money to continue with the current educational system? Why not embrace the Information Age and teach students just to "Google it" when they need to know something? I see four compelling reasons to continue having teachers in the classroom.

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First, there is a clear distinction between having information available and really knowing the information. By making facts readily available, technology fools us into thinking we know more than we actually do. By enabling anyone to feel like an expert, technology erodes our respect for authorities who have spent their lives mastering a subject. Doctors, for example, find their orders ignored because an online quack with a large following has recommended a different course of action. Church leaders

find their interpretations of Scripture scrutinized with lenses shaped by online message boards. This is not to disparage the development of critical thinking skills, but the fact that anyone can be a self-proclaimed expert means that no one has any authority. Students must learn to recognize their own limitations of understanding and be humble about the vast array of information they have available to them. We need teachers to model this humility and to counteract the authority-subverting influence of technology.

Second, we have a natural tendency to seek confirmation of what we already believe to be true, rather than to seek ways to correct our misapprehensions. Technology compounds that problem. To wit, the internet can provide confirmation of any viewpoint one wishes to hold. Information found online can support the idea that human influence is causing global warming, or the idea that global warming results primarily from natural causes, or the idea that the earth is not warming at all. Information found online can support the idea that vaccines are a necessary part of population health, or that they were helpful at one time but are no longer necessary, or that they are snake oil being foisted upon an unsuspecting public in order to keep them sick and make them slaves to the pharmaceutical industry. Many search engines personalize their results based on past search history. This means that we can, without realizing it, create echo chambers for ourselves in which we hear only confirmation of our prior beliefs and are protected from anything that could potentially challenge those beliefs. Unless we consciously seek voices that disagree with us, the information we find online will only harden our beliefs — including those that are in error.[1] We need teachers who are grounded in the truth of Scripture to model a healthy search for knowledge, seeking rather to learn from those who disagree than to exalt themselves by winning every argument.

Third, information must be interpreted and evaluated in order to be useful. In 1995, just as the internet was beginning its fundamental transformation of society, an astronomer named Clifford Stoll wrote a *Newsweek* article rejecting the idea that the internet would fundamentally transform society. He complained that even basic information was difficult to find online and scorned the idea that we might ever buy books and newspapers electronically, let alone do any other kind of commerce over the internet. Critics scoff at Stoll's shortsightedness, but in so doing they miss a keen insight he offered: "What the Internet hucksters won't tell you is that the Internet is one big ocean of unedited data, without any pretense of completeness. Lacking editors, reviewers or critics, the Internet has become a wasteland of unfiltered data. You don't know what to ignore and what's worth reading." Search engines have gotten very good at giving us the information

we seek and have made some attempts at filtering the data for quality and accuracy, but they cannot harmonize the cacophony of voices or give us any sense of the relative importance of particular facts. We need teachers who have a clear-eyed vision of the world and who can help their students sift information, rejecting the trash and keeping what is valuable.

Fourth, the skill of thinking deeply about a subject, and exploring the parts of it that we naturally would miss, is worth honing. Technology, with its seemingly infinite amount of information readily available, invites us to graze on information, choosing only what is easily accessible, whereas true scholarship offers a full-course meal, requiring patience and persistence to complete. It is more work, but the results are more rewarding and more enduring. It may be easy to find the details I seek concerning a pill I find in the hallway, but unless I can fit that information into a larger framework of knowledge, I will very quickly forget it and be no better off than I was before. If, on the other hand, I spend time under the tutelage of a master — someone who teaches the subject well — the information I learn about that particular pill will be part of a grand structure of interconnected parts. And *that* knowledge will not quickly be forgotten. We need teachers who can inspire their students to delve deeply into their studies and to do the hard work of synthesizing what they are learning.

Education requires that we teach knowledge. But we must not be content to stop there. Truly transformative education shapes the loves of students, not just their ideas. Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount that what we love shapes the kind of person we become. We cannot serve both God and money, but neither can we serve both God and anything else. James K. A. Smith argues in *Desiring the Kingdom* that the practices and habits of daily life shape these loves more powerfully than do the faith statements we assert. A student who affirms that technology has a negative influence, but who spends significant time with electronic media, will find himself loving the very thing he says he should avoid. There is no technological substitute for a teacher who loves Jesus and who is willing to share that love with a group of students. The daily presence of a Christ-loving teacher, combined with the influence of godly parents and a strong, stable church community will give our young people the best chance they have of catching a vision for the Kingdom and giving themselves to the work of the church.

If our education is reduced to the amount of knowledge we have accumulated, then Google is enough. If, instead, the knowledge we gain plants a seed of reverence that will grow into flowering love, then we need teachers to guide the process. Ultimately, the goal of an educator is to produce more than just graduates who know a lot of information, but lovers of God and followers of Jesus.

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[1]Of course, we can go too far the other direction and question everything. This danger is probably as great as that of our bias toward self-confirmation, but its exploration is beyond the scope of this article.