

March 7, 2010

Skim This Article (or Just Skip It)



By Robert J. Cabin

As is the case with much of the other interesting material that crosses my path, I almost never manage to finish reading any of the articles I start in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. I even wind up skimming some of the most relevant and compelling articles in the journals I subscribe to within my discipline. Why? Because I lead the typical, frenzied life of an academic.

I know that many of my colleagues work much harder than I do (the birth of our second child was the the straw that finally broke me of my desire and ability to be a workaholic), and I am well aware that many highly qualified, underemployed would-be academics would kill to have my job. So while I never feel sorry for myself, I do often wonder just how much of what is written these days is ever read in its entirety, and how often even those of us working in higher education ever manage to slowly and carefully think through and resolve our most important issues.

If my experiences are representative, the answers to those questions are not encouraging. For example, in my work as an associate editor of an academic journal, I have increasingly found: 1. fewer people willing to do peer reviews; 2. fewer people completing their reviews (let alone completing them on time); 3. more people turning in brief, superficial, poorly written reviews; and 4. more authors responding to their reviews in a manner that suggests they either didn't read the reviews carefully or didn't have time to focus on them thoroughly. Although I'd like to feel dismayed and outraged by those trends, the sad truth is that I too have found it increasingly difficult to complete my own editorial and peer-review work on time, and have felt forced to do more skipping and skimming than I care to admit.

My recent experiences as an author have done much to assuage my guilt for those sins. For instance, my last grant application didn't make the cut because one of its reviewers didn't have time to read more than its title and abstract page. Moreover, none of the four successive editors assigned to me by my former publisher ever managed more than a "quick skim" of my manuscript. (I appreciated their honesty but was left wondering what exactly such "editors" do these days.) While the editor at my prospective new publisher has been somewhat more responsive, the first thing she told me was that because nobody would buy (let alone read) a 400-page book anymore, if I wanted to work with her press I'd have to cut my manuscript by at least 50 percent.

Even within academe, I'm often struck by how many of us are willing to argue over documents we haven't actually read. I wish I had a dollar for every faculty round-table discussion and journal-club meeting I've attended in which at least half of the attendees had not read the papers we assigned ourselves. And just the other day, the chair of a committee I serve on interrupted a heated debate to ask whether we had all read the relevant

sections of a document after our previous discussion of the topic at hand. "Yes," we all groaned irritably, eager to get back at it. "Well, that's quite interesting," she observed dryly, "because I still haven't managed to find the time to write up and send that document!"

DESPITE all this, we professors keep demanding and, too often, getting more sources of information: research databases and meta-search engines and video archives on our libraries' home pages; fatter textbooks bundled with ever more supplementary bells and whistles; faster and more powerful computers to harness our ever-expanding bandwidths and cybernetworking capabilities. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that while many of us no longer have the time to think, read deeply, and at least attempt to write well, many of our students no longer have the ability or even desire to do such things. Given that so many of their lives are overflowing with a combination of "real world" commitments (taking six classes a semester, working part time, competing in collegiate sports, caring for ailing grandmothers) and seemingly involuntary virtual additions (texting, Facebooking, gaming, and God knows what else), is it really any wonder that so many are unable or unwilling to grapple with the plain old texts we assign? On bad days I wonder whether we should just give up, and text and tweet and 'tube courses from now on.

Nevertheless, I still dream that someday we will collectively slow down and start demanding less. For starters, how about less e-mail and fewer meetings for faculty members, and smaller course loads and fewer curricular requirements for our students? How about, say, once every other month we turn it all off on our campuses for (gulp!) an entire day--no computers, no Internet, no personal gadgets. Instead we might engage with one another and our surrounding communities the old-fashioned way--and even read and thoroughly discuss a book in its entirety.

I could go on, but I really must get back to work. All I ask of you, readers, is that you don't wreck my argument and ruin my irony by responding thoughtfully. Please send me a half-baked e-mail message instead--and make sure to work your entire argument into the subject line, because it's unlikely I'll ever find time to read your actual message.