Morris and Literacy

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The London described by William Morris in his Utopian novel *News from Nowhere* is marked by the absence of schools. In fact the narrator’s guide, Dick, fails to understand what a school is:

“School?” he said “yes, what do you mean by that word? I don’t see how it can have anything to do with children. We talk indeed of a school of herring and a school of painting and in the former sense we might talk of a school of children — but otherwise,” he said laughing “I must own myself beaten.”

He is equally puzzled and bemused by the word ‘education’:

“I know enough Latin to know that the word must come from educere; to lead out and I have heard it used, but I have never met any body who could give me a clearer explanation of what it means.”

Nevertheless, Nowhere is a world in which people are not only adept at a variety of practical skills but are also highly literate. Throughout the book we meet adults and children who love books and read for pleasure. For example, in the tobacconist’s, we meet two children:

“... a brown-skinned boy of about twelve who sat reading a book and a pretty little girl of about a year older who was sitting also reading behind the counter; they were obviously brother and sister.”

William Morris’ Utopia is one in which learning is valued by everyone, young and old, as a lifelong process. Yet there are no schools and no apparent systematic approaches to learning. How do all these people acquire their love of books and learn to read? Dick seems to be rather glib about the whole process:

“Most children, seeing books lying about, manage to read by the time they are four years old; though I am told it has not always been so. Then, he says, they decide for themselves what course their learning will take.”

If this were said by a teacher in our society, politicians, journalists and parents and many other people who in fact are often very ill-informed about the process of learning would immediately accuse them of irresponsibility and blame them for the fact that in our society many people are failing to learn to read.

A recent ALBSU (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit) report suggests that up to nine million adults in this country experience difficulties with reading, writing and basic mathematics. Many more achieve a level of literacy which is barely more than utilitarian. They can decode print well enough to follow instructions, read timetables and absorb uncritically the view of the world presented in the tabloid newspapers. However, it is the teachers who make such apparently irresponsible statements about the way children learn to read who are demonstrating an intuitive and informed
understanding of the learning process. Educational research can show that Nowhere is in fact an ideal learning environment – the kind of Utopia that the best teachers struggle to establish against overwhelming odds in their classrooms in our world.

Firstly and above all, this is because it is a society which is non-coercive. Albert Einstein made the point that:

"It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of enquiry; for this delicate little plant aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail."7

Societies other than ours recognise the importance of non-coercion in the development of their children. The Semai of Malaysia emphatically deny teaching their children and rather like Dick insist that “our children learn by themselves”. They tell anthropologists

"We don’t worry about our children. We don’t mess with them. They grow up here in the jungle like animals. We look after ourselves, they look after themselves.”8 They reject the idea of training as such because it is coercive and coerciveness is seen to be violent and destructive. As Einstein points out, nothing kills children’s and adults’ enthusiasm for learning so much as being forced to do it.

This coercion does not have to be the overt pressure put on children by Dickensian schoolteachers. We live in a world in which there is immense pressure on people to learn to read. It is the first of the three ‘R’s for the acquisition of which there is in Britain at least, and in many other parts of the world, not only a compulsory education system but, with the introduction of the National Curriculum, a detailed and systematic approach to teaching with a heavy emphasis on the delivery of results. Reading is the key to educational success. As Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan point out in their book On Learning to Read:

If the child did not know it before, it will soon be impressed on him that of all school learning, nothing compares in importance with reading; it is of unparalleled significance.9

If at school you do not learn to read, you are considered to be a failure, whatever else you might be good at.

In News from Nowhere children are not under any pressure to learn to read. There are no schools, no special systems for acquiring literacy skills, and reading is not presented as a skill which is more important than others to acquire. If anything, children are discouraged from learning to read

As a rule (the children) don’t do much reading, except for a few story books, till they are about fifteen years old; we don’t encourage early bookishness, though you will find some children who will take to books very early; which perhaps is not good for them; but its no use thwarting them; and very often it doesn’t last long with them and they find their level before they are twenty years old.9

The children of Nowhere enjoy a degree of freedom and independent from adult control that would be unfamiliar to children in our Western industrialized society
but perhaps not to the children of the Semai. Reading is just one of the many playful activities that they may opt to do during the course of a day.

Frank Smith in his book Reading points out that there is nothing special about learning to read.

No special, exotic or particularly difficult learning skills are required. Learning to read involves no learning ability that children have not already exercised in order to understand the language spoken at home or to make sense of the visual world around them.\(^{10}\)

All learning is about problem-solving. This is something we are born doing, and so we do not have to train children to learn, or even account for their learning; we have to avoid interfering with it.\(^{11}\)

Experts tend to agree that children learn through play. Margaret Meek points out in her book Learning to Read that if reading looks like play to a child, it will be taken seriously.\(^{12}\)

One of their favourite games is copying the grown-ups. In ‘News from Nowhere’ Dick points out that

... children are mostly given to imitating their elders and when they see most people about them engaged in genuinely amusing work ... that is what they want to be doing.\(^{13}\)

Young children, in imitation of adults, will often play at reading, turning over the pages of a favourite story book, telling the story even though the print is not yet comprehensible to them. I have observed children in my own classroom imitating the way I read aloud to them.

It is through play that children work out the secrets of the adult activities and experiences into which they long to be initiated. Both Margaret Meek and Jeff Hynds (whose excellent day course on reading I attended at the Institute of Education a couple of years ago) stress the importance of perceiving children as apprentice learners.\(^{14}\) In order for the learning experience to be successful, they need to have around them adults who enjoy books and whom they would want to imitate. Such adults are quite clearly on hand in the world of Nowhere, but not in our schools. The one or two adults contending with a class of forty children are not able to relax with a book where they are visible to the children.

Children also need to have on hand attentive and interested adults or older children to whom they can turn to for support. The harassed class teacher responsible for forty children all roughly the same age is not able to do this as successfully as people who live in a society where everyone performs the role of teacher as and when they are called upon to do so. In Nowhere, the apprentice reader can easily get someone to tell him what are the best books on such a subject or to explain what he doesn’t understand when he is reading them.\(^{15}\)

Among the Semai people too, this spontaneous learning support is extended to the children:
'Seeing the child's interest or in response to its initiative, the adult may show it how
to do something better or may make a small version of the appropriate tool.'[16]

Frank Smith, Margaret Meek and others agree that all that is needed when learning
to read are

'... the availability of interesting material that makes sense to the learner and an
understanding and more experienced reader as a guide.'[17]

Often, young children have acquired the sophisticated pre-reading skills such as
being able to re-tell a favourite story or correct you if you change anything as you
read aloud to them, which are a necessary prelude to deciphering the text. These skills
may be lost when children are presented with the meaningless texts of a phonic or
other systematic reading scheme. Frank Smith demonstrates in his book 'Reading'
by examining the role of visual perception, memory and language development that
such approaches obstruct the process of learning to read because "it makes nonsense
of what should be sense".[18]

According to Bruno Bettelheim, the key to learning to read is the spontaneous
desire to become literate on the part of the child and

emphasis on the technical aspects of learning to read which characterizes the
teaching methods used... is detrimental and often actually destructive to the child's
ability to enjoy reading and literature.[19]

He goes on to point out:

'What is required for a child to be eager to learn to read is... a fervent belief that
being able to read will open up to him a world of wonderful experiences, permit him
to shed his ignorance, understand the world and become master of his own fate.[20]

In Letter to a Teacher, the children of the School of Barbiana describe how some
boys from the town very disaffected with school developed their enthusiasm for
learning in this very way:

'In any case, sex was the only subject that would wake them up at first. We had
an anatomy book at school. They would lock themselves up to study it in a corner.
Two pages became totally worn out.

Later they discovered other interesting pages. Later still they noticed that even
history is fun.[21]

According to Dick, books are easily accessible in Nowhere and we can perhaps
safely assume on the basis of William Morris' gift for story telling and his interest in
the world about him as well as his interest in illustration and printing that none of the
books left lying around, accessible to the apprentice reader, are likely to be phonic
reading schemes. Perhaps we can also assume that in Nowhere adults do not have, as
I have, to listen in despair as children read aloud to them in a turgid monotone and
then find themselves totally unable to talk to the adult about what they have just read.

Margaret Meek stresses the importance of adult cooperation in supporting the
developing reader particularly between parents and teachers. In Learning to Read,
she points out that conflict over methods and lack of trust between adults who have
an influence on a child's life creates confusion in the child's mind:
... the only real threat to a child's progress ... If the child is in any doubt about what the adults want him to do, his view of the task of learning to read will become shaky and unstable. 22

Nowhere is a society where the distinction between parents and teachers does not exist because there are no schools and all the adults take a spontaneous and practical interest in the progress of children as and when they are asked to do so. It is also a society, like the Semai community, based upon cooperation and collective decision-making processes. Fundamental to the success of such a community is communication between people and a shared understanding about how they behave towards each other. For example, the members of the Semai community are in agreement that coercive behaviour is unacceptable. Our society on the other hand is torn apart by the many and conflicting views about how we should best lead our lives. Often these are based on ill-informed and spurious notions of human behaviour. Most schools reflect the divided nature of our society. Communication between parents and teachers is often difficult to achieve. Parents, for a variety of reasons such as cultural background and language, often find schools intimidating. Teachers can often be insensitive to the needs and interests of parents. There is often little communication and agreement among teachers themselves as to how the children they are responsible for might best learn to read.

But then, it is not the purpose of school to create critical, thinking, literate adults. Our schools are a microcosm of the class-divided society we live in and not only do they reflect the world outside, but they also re-inforce and perpetuate the values of that society. As far as reading is concerned, this presents itself in a number of ways. Firstly, Nowhere is a society where there is free access to all resources including books. We do not have such free access to books in our society. State schools have very little money to buy books in the quantities and of the quality recommended by those who have studied how children learn best. Jeff Hynds recommends that there be a selection of one to two hundred books in each primary classroom. 23 I was lucky if I could scrape together thirty. Public libraries often have wonderful children's sections and inspired librarians in charge who can tell stories and put up attractive displays which make children want to borrow the books they advertise. But in recent times, they too have suffered swingeing financial cutbacks. Many local libraries are only open two days a week and have to restrict the number of books schools are allowed to borrow at any one time. Secondly, it was never the intention of schools in the state system to promote the development of a truly literate population such as exists in William Morris's world. Legislation enforcing universal literacy in England came in 1871, somewhat later than other parts of Europe, although many people had found ways of learning to read. Popular literacy spread more quickly in Europe after the French Revolution, as did efforts to prevent the production of inflammatory reading matter about democratic ideas. As more and more people taught themselves to read and as the newly industrialized society demanded docile workers who were able to read and write, schools seemed to be the way to achieve both mass literacy and social order:

After 1871, schools taught reading and disciplined the pupils. Schools also defined that counted as literacy in terms of what the pupils had to read and the words they learned to copy. Reading in the buildings provided by School Boards did not include the same texts as those read by young gentlemen in the traditional 'Public' schools where education was associated with social privilege. 24
In more subtle ways, the education system that we know today continues to perpetuate the class-divided nature of our society. We only have to tune-in to Radio 4 and listen to those people fortunate enough to have succeeded within the education system airing their opinions about books to thousands of listeners. What is remarkable is not the profundity of what they have to say, their wisdom and scholarly insight or a refreshingly original approach, but their social confidence which is based on educational success and mutual self-confirmation. Their confused and often superficial understanding of the society we live in dominates and sets the standards for the institutions, the media and the politics of the world we live in. It is from their ranks that many teachers are recruited.

It is enlightening to hear the views of those who have failed within the education system. Several adult literacy students I have worked with blamed school for their inability to read. They went to schools where classes were too large and teachers too harassed to deal with their needs, where children who were failing were made to sit at the back of the class and where as one young man said “if your face doesn’t fit you’ve had it.” It is at school that many children find confirmation of the fact that as young people, they have no real say in the society they live in. It is very few teachers who relate to children as equals as the adults to in News from Nowhere. Yet, Margaret Meek points out that if a child is to learn to read successfully, then the learning experience has to be a genuinely collaborative one:

To learn to read, children need the attention of one patient adult, or an older child, for long enough to read something that pleases them both. A book, a person and shared enjoyment: these are the conditions for success.

It is at school that girls learn that they are inferior beings to boys. Studies have shown that boys receive a disproportionate share of teachers’ time and attention. This is not necessarily because many teachers prefer to work with boys, but because, as in my own experience, the boys can often be the most vociferously demanding of our attention and the most disruptive. To be a girl ‘bookworm’ is not considered normal. News from Nowhere is not a book that is remarkable for its insights into sexual politics; nevertheless, in it, both women and men and girls and boys read.

William Morris, perhaps unaware of the fact that at the time of writing that he was already living in a multi-cultured society with a growing Black and Asian population, had a somewhat Euro-centred approach to linguistic diversity. Nevertheless, Nowhere is a society which openly acknowledges itself to be which is linguistically and culturally diverse. People in Nowhere come into early contact with other languages and cultures and speak more than one language, as a member of their community explains

... sometimes even before they can read [the children] can talk French, which is the nearest language talked on the other side of the water; and they soon get to know German also, which is talked by a huge number of communes and colleges on the mainland. These are the principal languages we speak in these islands, along with English or Welsh, or Irish, which is another form of Welsh; and children pick them up very quickly, because their elders know them; and besides our guests from oversea often bring their children with them, and the little ones get together and rub their speech into one another.
In our society, Black and Asian children soon discover that the cultural and linguistic experiences that they bring to school are viewed as being of little value, and the culturally diverse nature of our society is barely acknowledged. I spent a number of years working as a support teacher for bilingual pupils in secondary and special schools in two London boroughs. Ours was an uphill struggle to get many of our colleagues to accept that by recognizing and valuing the children's home languages we were actually enabling them to tackle the task of learning to read English with confidence.

One of the ways in which we encouraged children about reading was through storytelling, which often extended into drama and movement. As Margaret Meek points out in 'On being Literate', Storytelling as a habit is both universal and lifelong. She points out:

We learn to tell stories in early childhood from those who first tell them to us. Stories are part of our first conversation; they create our first memories. The habit of storytelling pervades our explanations, hopes, fears, dreams, plans and every recollection... Each incident of every day is a possible tale for us to tell to others as to satisfy our deep need to understand the nature of events and our part in them.

Literacy is simply storytelling with a book – being read to enables children to discover the rules of narrative, the sequencing of events, the rhythms and structures of sentences, characterization and so on. Long before they ever attempt to read alone and to themselves they have discovered that language can create worlds, and in order to gain access to these worlds independently they are stimulated to discover the mechanics of the reading-process itself. By travelling through those worlds of the imagination, we are able to understand and inform ourselves about, come to terms with, and perhaps change, the world we live in. Storytelling has been the traditional means whereby generations of people passed on their accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the world to others. This strong oral tradition also exists in the world of Nowhere where people seem to have plenty of time to talk to each other. In our increasingly mechanised and alienated society, in which government ministers seek to reduce the complicated process of learning to 'basics' and express open hostility to using what they mistakenly refer to as the “real books method” in schools, we cannot afford to dismiss News from Nowhere as just a story. Instead, those of us concerned about the minds of future generations should perhaps remember the words of Margaret Meek:

... we must begin by giving up the idea that we as adults tell stories to children and the truth to ourselves.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.212.
4. Ibid., p.206.
5. 'The Dangers of Illiteracy', The Sunday Times, 10 April, 1994.
11 Ibid., p.7.
13 Briggs, op. cit., p.208.
15 Briggs, op. cit., p.207.
17 Smith, op. cit., p.5.
18 Ibid., p.4.
19 Bettelheim, op. cit., p.8.
20 Ibid., p.49.
22 Meek, op. cit., p.62.
23 Hynds, see reference 14.
27 Briggs, op. cit., p.208