

Microsoft Billionaire Answers the Question: How Important are Reading and Knowledge in the Age of Computers?

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It is sometimes argued that electronic media, such as video, computers and interactive, multimedia compact disks, have diminished the importance of reading. Knowledge, it is said, is available on the information highway for the taking. No need to store information in your head, it is already stored outside your head in media that will talk to you, show you pictures and respond to your every need for information.

But is this true? Are reading and literacy becoming *passé*? Can knowledge in the head be substituted by knowledge stored in visual media? Is knowledge power - even if you have to look it up every time you want it? Can the ignorant cruise the electronic information highway, surf the numerous data bases of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and access numerous Gopher file servers to obtain needed information?

Educators, too often, are wont to dismiss knowledge and information as mere facts (witness the outcry against E. D. Hirsch's best-selling book on *Cultural Literacy*, which outlined in detail the importance of knowledge in literacy). Facts, principles, ideas, the *contents* of education, come and go, they say, or they are culturally biased we are told, so we have to teach content-free *processes* of thinking and reasoning that go beyond the facts or data of the moment. But can the ignorant truly engage in the "critical thinking" and "higher order, problem solving skills" that policy wonks are touting as the workplace skills of the 21st century? How can you think critically about something you don't know anything about? How can you learn much about an even moderately complex subject if you don't have much knowledge to bring to the learning situation?

The Secret of Chief Executive Officers: Knowledge is Power - And You Get It by Reading!

The San Diego Union Tribune of February 21, 1995 carried a news insert called COMPUTERLINK, a special section that deals with computer hardware, software, interactive media, and telecommunications.

This particular issue included a column called, "**Ask Bill.**" The column is written by Bill Gates, the multi-billionaire Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Microsoft, the world's largest computer software company. The question and answer format of the column this day began with the following exchange.

"**Q.** As the father of a teenager who, in my opinion, spends too little time reading as opposed to programming, I wonder if you would speak to the benefits of gathering information by reading (in all kinds of media) and the benefits of acquiring good reading skills?"

A. It is pretty unlikely that people will become knowledgeable without being excellent readers. Multimedia systems are beginning to use video and sound to deliver information in compelling ways, but text is one of the best ways to convey details.

I try to make sure I get in an hour or more of reading each weeknight and a few hours each weekend. I read at least one newspaper every day and several magazines each week.

I make it a point to read at least one news weekly from cover to cover because it broadens my interests. If I read only what intrigues me, such as the science section and a subset of the business section, then I finish the magazine the same person I was before I started. So I read it all."

Bill Gates' comments reveal his insights into the need for reading, and reading broadly, to develop his knowledge beyond its present stock. He reads at least one newspaper a day. In San Diego, in a telephone survey, CWELL researchers found that only 30 percent of adults in the lowest level of literacy, level 1, read a newspaper six or more times a week. Indeed, one in five read a newspaper less than once a week. More than 70 percent of those in the highest literacy level, level 5, read a newspaper six or more times a week.

Gates is in good company with other corporate executives in his recognition of the importance of becoming knowledgeable and the importance of reading for developing knowledge. Since the early 1900's, the Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation has conducted appraisals of adult's aptitudes and knowledge for work in a wide variety of industries. One of their special areas of assessment is vocabulary knowledge. Their 1993 brochure offering their services states that "Your vocabulary score is an indication of your general knowledge. Vocabulary level is the best predictor of overall success in school and of performance on the SAT-Verbal and other similar tests. A large and exact vocabulary is also a characteristic of successful people in many occupations. For these reasons we measure your knowledge of English vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is *not* an aptitude; anyone can learn words and increase his or her vocabulary."

In 1984, the Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation conducted research in which over 450 presidents from among 5,000 of the largest businesses in the nation took a vocabulary test designed by the Foundation. Compared to the average score of the typical clients served by the Foundation in its job skills assessment, over 50 percent of the company presidents scored at or above the 75th percentile. Given that the typical client of the Foundation had close to 16 years of education, the executives were highly knowledgeable in vocabulary.

In 1990, the Foundation tested the vocabulary knowledge of over 370 managers from Fortune 500 companies and found that, although their vocabulary knowledge was not as great as that of company presidents, they were quite a bit more knowledgeable than typical Foundation clients.

In both of these studies, presidents and managers were asked if they thought that vocabulary building would be a useful activity for someone seeking to advance in the business world. Over 98 percent in each group said it would be moderately or extremely useful. Some 56 percent of managers and 59 percent of presidents said it would be extremely useful.

When asked if they had ever made an effort to increase their vocabularies since leaving school, over half of the presidents and managers said they had made deliberate efforts to increase their vocabulary knowledge. Company presidents were asked what they did to increase their vocabularies and over a quarter said that just general reading was used and over half said that general reading plus some method like use of a dictionary, vocabulary books, and so forth were their main methods for developing their vocabularies.

For the rest of us the message is clear: if you want to travel far on the information highway, if you want to get ahead, you need to read, read, read!