

McLuhan the Teacher

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In a global information environment, the old pattern of education in answer-finding is of no avail: one is surrounded by answers, millions of them, moving and mutating at electric speed.

McLuhan
Laws of Media

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO CHARACTERIZE McLuhan—prophet and sage, celebrity and provocateur, conservative and radical. But it is his homelier role as a lifelong classroom teacher, and by extension a pedagogue in the public square, which better reveals him and his work to us today in a digital culture that feels like one of his carriage house lectures come to life. Such a humbler status demythologizes him, recovers his technological humanism (Kroker), and puts us where he would want us: amid the media unlimited, the bittorrent surging, aware that we are only as good as our questions. This present exercise in re-definition starts with the observation made by his most celebrated student, a witness to McLuhan's early teaching at St Louis University in the 1930s. "Above all and in all and through all, Marshall McLuhan was a teacher," Walter Ong wrote in an elegiac essay published shortly after McLuhan's death (129).

I want to explore the implications of Ong's words and to argue that through understanding McLuhan's pedagogy—be it as ordinary classroom practice, as a model of inquiry characteristic of his intellectual process, and as a means of making sense of his public intellectual status—we come to realize how much being a university teacher shaped his life and work. We can also learn a practical lesson in how to better teach media ecology to a generation of students who have an innately phenomenological approach to media. To borrow a groovy McLuhanesque idiom, Generation Y is already “with it.”

McLuhan's most recent biographer, novelist and critic Douglas Coupland, describes his classroom style:

Marshall was a terrific professor, and it takes little energy to imagine him in his prime, burying students in cascades of ideas—not infrequently, ideas he generated on the spot.... He found it much more preferable to do his thinking in real time, out loud, with an audience or a classroom as his catalyst. *Conversation* is what he called it. (138, emphasis in original)

McLuhan needed students, collaborators, even talk show hosts and audiences, with whom to converse, think, and write, as evidenced by those lively sessions at the Centre for Culture and Technology and his numerous co-written books. This preference followed his signature intellectual method of startling connections and juxtapositions: “McLuhan's pedagogical project was to materialize the web of human relations ... through radical forms of collage” (Marchessault 6). McLuhan is “still teaching and always will be,” because his probes, puns, and other forms of critical montage outlive him to become part of the cultural environment he described (Ong 135).

But it is his failure as an educational consultant, namely his 1959 commission from the U.S. National Association of Educational Broadcasters to write a media studies curriculum for Grade 11 students, that ironically brings the pedagogical McLuhan most clearly into view. Notwithstanding the gnomic complexity of the NAEB report, it served as the first draft of McLuhan's most intelligible book, 1964's *Understanding Media*. The pedagogical role invited by the NAEB compelled him to render his vision in high definition, as coherently and comprehensively as he ever would, and allowed us to know him best through this text.

The very possibility of McLuhan's media ecology followed from his identity as teacher. He believed artists were a sensory avant-garde, acutely responsive to instances of transition within or between media cultures;

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this was a status he extended to non-artists too. In McLuhan's opinion, the artistic and the learning processes were one and the same, as both extracted signal from background noise and made "experience visible" (Marchessault 5). The capacity to teach and learn is therefore analogous to the special powers he granted to artists. Pedagogy thus brings all of us potentially—conspicuously creative or not—into the company of those who might see value and form amid the maelstrom.

McLuhan's training at Cambridge under I.A. Richards and his New Criticism disposed McLuhan the teacher to adapt methods derived from literary criticism to the study of media. He argued for a "new kind of media education" (Marchessault 5) that went beyond the Leavisite mission to study popular texts alongside the canon to anticipate what is now termed "public pedagogy." Public pedagogy is the function where institutions not typically identified with formal education, such as media, families, and governments, serve to educate and can likewise be examined on pedagogical terms (Cremin; Giroux).

Because a major premise of his work was that culture was a curriculum—"the unofficial instruction carried on by commerce through the press, radio, movie"—McLuhan's media presence was not just the product of his unlikely ascent to celebrity (McLuhan 43). It was also a pedagogical intervention. He got out in front of the media's own pedagogy so as to draw our attention to the fact that such teaching was going on—that we were being taught how to live at electric speed—and while there, staged a decades-long countercultural teach-in before the eyes of a bewildered world.

Acknowledging the importance of teaching to understanding McLuhan encourages us to put ourselves in his place, to see our identity with him and media ecology as not just intellectual but pedagogical too.

Teaching media ecology is not like teaching other traditions in literary or communication theory. Media ecology reminds us that it is not enough to think about media culture, since much of it is registered at the level of perception; its vibrations must register on the ear, the eye, the skin. The persuasive force of McLuhan and other media ecologists is something that needs to be felt as much as thought. This was an insight made possible by McLuhan's own remarkable neurology and biography that made him supersensitive to epic yet unseen changes. He was the phenomenologically perfect being for the time.

The GenY or Millennial students (born 1982 to 2000) in our classrooms are the purest product of this tear in time and space that we call digital culture and are the perfect audience for this experiential approach. The first

lesson in teaching them media ecology is to make the lessons immersive. Take students outside and have them recite poetry aloud and collaboratively so that they can experience acoustic space, or have them participate in simulations that model CRTC policy making. The second lesson is to encourage wild connections, demonstrating that media ecology is among the most ambitious and scalable of theories as it glides from the particular to the universal in the span of a sentence (Tropp 7).

The third lesson is to convert the classroom into an anti-environment. Anti-environments are those means—McLuhan’s favourite form was his notorious cornball jokes—by which the implicit assumptions within any phenomenon are exposed, permitting us to step outside the perceptual ground and see the figures and structures freshly. A deconstructive touch is called for, exposing the assumptions that organize higher education and the university classroom and encouraging students to deschool (in Ivan Illich’s phrase) themselves.

Teachers are gifted imposters who publicly and confidently profess while privately knowing themselves to be imperfect vessels. What’s more important than the rightness or wrongness of a teacher’s ideas is the intellectual productivity of his or her insights. This is something with which McLuhan the teacher would identify and approve.

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