The Education of Story Lovers: Do Computers Undermine Narrative Sensibility?

DAVID GORDON & GAD ALEXANDER
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
Beersheba, Israel

ABSTRACT
This article argues that computers, at least in their common or prevalent uses, constitute an important undermining influence on people’s ability to tell, enjoy listening to, view, and read good stories. We discuss the centrality of narrative in defining our humanity and in educating our children, and justify the emphasis on “good” stories, invoking Ricoeur’s views on the hermeneutic level of interpretation. We then address the question of the nonneutrality of electronic wrapping of words and the problematic relationship between computers’ navigational properties and narrative, particularly vis-à-vis Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhizomatic structures. We consider and critique some counterarguments to our claim, specifically those that appeal to postmodern and hypertextual conceptions of narrative, and suggest ways that education can play an important role in counteracting the negative influences we have indicated.

One of this article’s authors was once asked to act as the chairperson of a national committee dealing with the educational uses of computers. He accepted this post despite (or perhaps because of) his relative lack of knowledge of computer uses in education. Being of an anthropological turn of mind, he often found himself taking a participant observer position during discussions. As an outsider, he became fascinated by the culture of computer buffs as it exhibited itself in these discussions. It seemed to be a culture that was rather foreign to him. One of the committee meetings took place the day after this author had, by chance, reread and again admired Agatha Christie’s superb short story “Witness for the Prosecution.” While observing a member of the committee demonstrate a particular
piece of software, he found himself asking himself a totally irrelevant, absurd question: Would (committee member X) enjoy Agatha Christie’s story? The answer was no, for reasons that will be explicated further on. At that moment, this article was born. He shared some of his thoughts with the second author, who is a computer buff, albeit a very critical one. Some of these ideas seemed reasonable to the coauthor, some not. The latter also added his own thoughts, and this article is the result of that dialogue between us.

We will argue for what might seem a rather Luddite-like thesis (but actually is not, as will become clear at the conclusion of our journey): Computers, at least in their common or prevalent uses, undermine people’s ability to tell, enjoy listening to, view, and read good stories. One of the central aims of education should be to counteract this negative influence. Note that we are not arguing for the very strong thesis that computers are the cause of the undermining of narrative sensibility. Rather, we are arguing for the slightly weaker thesis that computers are one of the causes—albeit a very important one—and as computers become more dominant in our lives, their influence is becoming increasingly central.

Addressing this claim requires us first to discuss the centrality of the notion of narrative in defining our humanity and in educating our children. We will then explain why we stress or add the word good in talking about stories. This addition will entail presenting some of our own favorite stories, and also discussing Ricoeur’s views about the hermeneutic level of interpretation. We will then address the question of the nonneutrality of the medium in which words are wrapped, to use Poster’s (1990) phrase. In particular, we will need to characterize the effect of electronic wrapping of words. This will lead to a discussion of the first part of our main thesis: the problematic relationship between computers and narrative. We will also consider and critique some counterarguments to this claim. Finally, we will address the second educational aspect of our thesis.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

At first glance, it might seem rather strange and redundant to once again affirm the importance of narrative in our lives and for education. The “narrative turn” has become very central in the worlds of the social sciences and the humanities—and in popular culture too (Norris, 1985). Everyone “does” narrative: discusses it; uses the term in theorizing; uses it as a research tool; extols its importance for child development, psychological health, and what have you; and recounts and analyses his or her own and other people’s life stories or personal narratives. Narratives are identified not only in literature, but also in history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, law, science, and economics (Nash, 1990; Roberts, 2001). It has become an increasingly unquestioned assumption that “human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures”
(Sarbin, 1986, p. 8). Journals and conferences in which the word narrative features are blossoming. Books like *Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit* (Canfield & Hansen, 1993) are best-sellers. Teaching should be storytelling (Egan, 1986). So why do we feel the need, albeit briefly, to go over this ground again?

There are two reasons. First, over the last decade or so, it has become less clear which particular conception of the term narrative one is referring to. At one time, one could assume that any writer who used the term was basing his or her remarks in some loose way on Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Narratives were structured retellings or imitations (mimesis) of sequences of events (fabulae), and thus had plots, were coherent, progressed in time, and had beginnings, middles, and ends (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Kermode, 1967/2000; Labov, 1972; Ricoeur, 1984; White, 1980). However, in recent times, this conception has been strongly criticized. Postmodern narratives, we are told, have no unity, events are not ordered, time is fragmented, and the division between author and reader has become blurred (Ermath, 1992; Heise, 1997). Narrative, at least in the classic sense, is dead. So when we affirm the importance of narrative, which conception of the term are we referring to? And how can we justify our choice? Why this conception and not the other?

Generally, we use the term “narrative” in its mainstream Aristotelian sense. In particular, it is important, for the forthcoming discussion, to stress the idea of plot as the means of structuring a series of events or actions, the creation through narrative of a gestalt out of a disconnected list of such actions or events. There are three justifications for this.

1. Brooks (1984) has pointed out that “we still live today in the age of narrative plots, consuming avidly Harlequin romances and television serials and daily comic strips, creating and demanding narrative in the presentation of persons and news events and sports contests . . . for all the widely publicized nonnarrative or antinarrative forms of thought that are supposed to characterize our times” (p. 7). In other words, in the “real” nonacademic world, classic narrative structures remain central in our lives.

2. Phenomenological philosophers have shown how narrativelike is our phenomenological experience of time and actions. When we listen to a melody, for example, we do not hear each note separately, but hear them as a structured succession. Consciousness of the present note is linked to a retentional consciousness of the past note (Carr, 1986). Our experience of even the simplest successions contains within it an experience of a gestalt with a beginning, a middle, and an end. We need to judge the relative merits of the phenomenological approach to narrative time, as opposed to the splintered way that time and narrative are presented in some postmodernist literature. Seeing as our concerns are with educational issues of a general nature, a phenomenological perspective is more relevant than one that is, to a considerable extent, the province of rather avant-garde works of fiction.

3. MacIntyre (1985) has linked the Aristotelian notion of narrative to moral and ethical matters. Narratives (in the Aristotelian sense) are what
make acts intelligible. We are also (at the very least) the coauthors of our own narratives. Thus, as MacIntyre wrote, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (p. 216). What am I to do? is, of course, the moral question par excellence. If narratives are Aristotelian in nature, and if personal narratives are essentially moral ones, then we have another justification for our preference for the Aristotelian view on narrative. The postmodernist denial of plot and coherence seems indifferent to issues of virtue, ethics, and morality in any essential sense. However, to educate is to engage in a moral enterprise.

It is important to stress that despite our preference for the Aristotelian view, we will argue subsequently that the dichotomy between the classic and postmodern notions of narrative is not quite as clear-cut as the present-day rhetoric on this matter would lead us to believe.

The second reason for devoting time to affirmation derives from the two very different ways in which theorists have interpreted the idea of the centrality of narrative. For some, narrative is central simply because we are spontaneously and naturally surrounded by it. As McIntyre (1985) said, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal” (p. 216). Narrative is “simply there, like life itself” (Barthes, 1977, p. 79).

The other way in which narrative’s centrality has been conceived is the following: Narrative does surround us, but in different historical periods, and to varying degrees for different people and different cultures. For instance, the 19th century was narrative’s heyday in the Western world, as expressed in the extraordinary public interest taken at the time in the realist novel (Brooks, 1984). Bruner (1996) reminded us how the ability to understand certain stories or components of stories varies. That narrative ability is developmental has in fact been an important component of the psychological research on narrative thinking (Mandler, 1984).

The first interpretation of narrative centrality brings into question the role of education in teaching narrative appreciation. One could say that if narratives are as natural to human beings as breathing air, then it isn’t really necessary to devote much time to them in the school curriculum. However, if narrative’s salience is variable across developmental stages, historical periods, cultures, and individual differences, and if one believes that narrative sensibility is important, then narrative appreciation must become for us a central thrust of the curriculum. On this view, narrative sensibility is not automatic, and educators have to work hard to sustain and develop it. One can even go so far as to argue that a commitment to educational emphasis on narrative only makes sense if one adopts a variability interpretation of narrative centrality.

Up to this point, we have only assumed, for argument’s sake, that educational emphases on narrative are a good thing. This does not as yet allow
us to conclude that they really are. In this regard however, our work has, in the main, already been done for us by others. The affirmation of narrative’s centrality in education has become the particular province of Postman (1995) and Bruner (1996), and we need do little more than briefly reiterate their theses. For Postman, in order for schools to make sense, “the young, their parents, and their teachers must have a god to serve” (p. 4). By “god,” he means a “great narrative”: “Without a narrative, life has no meaning. Without meaning, learning has no purpose” (p. 7). Bruner (1996), in similar vein, wrote,

(T)he myths, histories, folktales, conventional stories of (a child's) culture... frame and nourish an identity... A system of education must help those growing up in a culture find an identity within that culture... It is only in the narrative mode, that one can construct an identity and find a place in one's culture (pp. 40-42)

These are compelling statements, but they have one limitation: They emphasize the cultural side of narrative, those narratives that are shared by a community or a nation, or even by all people. Yet, there is also an individual side to narrative. People have their own individual stories and their own very personal interpretations and reactions to cultural and literary narratives. These too are of great educational significance. In this regard, MacIntyre’s (1985) aforementioned development of the idea of a life story and its importance for virtue is of great importance educationally. If our moral actions require us to first identify the stories we are part of, we need to learn these stories. As MacIntyre wrote, “Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words” (p. 216; italics added).

Finally, there is an aesthetic side to narratives that needs to be addressed. Aristotle (1996) stressed astonishment as an important component of tragedy. The cultivation of the capacity to be astonished seems to be an educational aim that has not figured sufficiently in educational discourse. It is an important aim, and one for whose realization narrative sensibility is essential.

GOOD STORIES

In Poetics, Aristotle (1996) offers us, quite explicitly, a prescriptive view of narrative. He has a great deal to tell us about the characteristics of the best tragedies, as opposed to inferior ones. For example, they should not begin at any arbitrary point (p. 14); they should imitate a single unified action (p. 15); they should not be episodic (p. 17); they should be complex (p. 20); and they should involve a change from good to bad fortune (p. 21). It is therefore interesting how most of his modern followers tend to eschew discussions of narrative quality in their theoretical writings on narrative. It
is rare to find writing today about narrative that takes an explicitly normative stand. Present-day theorists tend to write about the properties of narratives in general, and we the readers can assume that these proposed properties characterize all narratives. This neutral stance derives apparently from the influence of the structuralists, whose entire research agenda—developing a theory to describe and characterize all narratives—required them to approach narratives in this way. Barthes (1977) expressed this view clearly: “Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural . . .” (p. 79). In addition, the discussion of quality has traditionally been consigned to the literary criticism of particular works rather than being seen as the concern of the general field of narratology.

In discussing the importance of narratives in a field as value laden as education, we cannot avoid addressing the issue of quality. There are “catastrophic” gods, such as fascism, communism, or Nazism (Postman, 1995, p. 6). Is it possible to generalize about the characteristics of quality stories? Here we wish to recreate the inductive process that we actually followed in tackling this question. First, in purely subjective fashion, we simply present three of our favorite stories. These are all very different, this being the only conscious criterion for choosing them, rather than other possible candidates. However, in reflecting upon these stories, we sensed that they had something in common, a feature that we will propose as a tentative answer to our question. An important insight for us was to realize that our initial intuition could be reformulated more rigorously by using Ricoeur’s (1974, 1981) theory of interpretation. This we will do, and then address why we think this reformulation can be generalized beyond the three initial examples.

**Agatha Christie’s “Witness for the Prosecution”**

This short tour de force begins with Mr. Mayherne, the solicitor meeting with his client Leonard Vole, who is accused of having murdered an elderly lady with whom he was acquainted. Vole professes his innocence, and tells Mayherne that he has an alibi. His wife can testify that he was at home the night of the murder. Mayherne talks to Mrs. Vole and discovers, to his dismay, that she hates her husband, that he wasn’t at home, and that she is prepared to testify in court. The trial takes place. Things are looking very bad for Vole, when an anonymous woman contacts Mayherne, saying that she has important evidence. He meets her and learns that she has a set of letters that proves that Mrs. Vole is lying, and shows why. In court, Mrs. Vole is confronted with the evidence and she breaks down, confesses to her perjury, and confirms Vole’s alibi. He is acquitted. Up to this point, the story proceeds in a predictable, “sensible” way. However, in the last few pages, everything changes. Mayherne realizes that the relationships
between the protagonists and the significance of their actions are completely different from those he had assumed. In the final paragraphs, he confronts Mrs. Vole. Then, in the second surprise ending, which we read in the last line of the story, we discover that this reorganization of relationships is also not the correct one. Rather, a third structure is the true state of affairs. The greatness of this story is derived not only from its twists and turns—we expect this in an Agatha Christie story—but also from how remarkably all three structures fit together so neatly, and how, despite our expectations when reading stories by this particular author, she manages to lead us completely up the garden path. This is not a standard whodunit with clues sprinkled throughout the story that allow an attentive reader to work out who the murderer is; rather, it is a seamless superimposition of three intermeshing, contradictory worlds, each matching the facts.

**Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights***

Here we refer to only one scene in the movie. Chaplin is standing on the sidewalk, looking into a shop window. He moves backward and forward, with all of the gestures and movements we associate with the way people examine paintings in art museums. Behind him, on the sidewalk, is the sliding cover of a service chute. Every time he moves forward, the cover slides open and something occurs there to which Chaplin is oblivious. Every time he steps back, we expect him to fall into the gaping hole—but he never does, because at exactly that moment, somebody in the basement slides the cover closed again.

This by itself would be sufficiently comic for most comedians. But Chaplin is a genius, not an ordinary comic. Although not all viewers will notice—the prospect of him falling into the gaping hole is too inviting—Chaplin’s examination of the window is not as simple as it first seems. He is looking directly at a particular object, but it is not this that interests him, but a statue of a naked woman at the other side of the window, which he keeps viewing embarrassedly out of the corner of his eye. Again, it is the balance he achieves in this pantomime between the various levels of the action that transforms this scene into one of the classic moments in film history, one that illustrates superbly Barthes’s (1977) conception of a narrative’s “storeys”: “To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in ‘storeys,’ to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative ‘thread’ in to an implicitly vertical axis . . .” (p. 87).

**Ingmar Bergman’s *The Magician***

For one of us, this film was the watershed experience in his own education for narrative sensibility. He viewed it for the first time as a teenager, and
for many days afterward, he and his friends discussed earnestly—too earnestly perhaps, as teenagers are wont to do—what in heaven it was all about. A troupe of entertainers whose leader is a magician arrives at a mansion. There, among other things, they encounter the skepticism and animosity of the people “upstairs,” who include a priest and a doctor. The magician performs a trick, and one of the gentry contemptuously reveals the mechanics of it. There is a clash, and the magician is strangled. He has died. The climax of the film is the scene in which the doctor sits in the attic with his back to the corpse, writing the death certificate. Suddenly, things begin to happen, to move. The doctor retreats in panic, only in the end to come face to face with the live magician. The death was but a magic illusion.

As teenagers, we were baffled by this movie. The strange nature of the story, the claustrophobic atmosphere it engenders, the angst in the eyes of the silent magician—all of this made it clear to us that this wasn’t really a story about a magician at all. So what was it about? At one point, one of us proposed the hypothesis that it was really the story of Christ. We found this a very satisfactory explanation, and for that matter still do, even if we subsequently discovered the “official” interpretation of the film as one of the series of Bergman’s works about the conflicts among art, religion, and science. The point is that the way the film was constructed made it quite clear, even to unsophisticated viewers like ourselves, that this was a film with a hidden, symbolic dimension, or, as Kermode (1979) might have put it, “it belongs to a class of narratives which have to mean more, or other, than they manifestly say” (p. 7; emphasis in original).

Here, then, are three magnificent stories, each for very different reasons—not only from the narratological point of view, but also from a cognitive one. There is a world of difference, for instance, perhaps even contradiction, between the mental skills one has to use in tracing the plot in the first example, and the in-depth multilevel analysis of one particular scene in the second (Chaplin) example, the latter related to Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of multivocality. The difference between Witness and The Magician exemplifies the distinction between ill-defined and well-structured domains (Spiro & Jehng, 1990). In the well-defined structure of a detective story, it is possible for the reader to figure out in the end who or what action in the fabulae is related to whom. An ill-defined narrative structure is different in this respect. One cannot suggest one best resolution for the plot in The Magician. The film invites viewers to discover different and contradicting faces of its hero.

Each of the stories, then, demands something different from its readers or viewers. Nevertheless, perhaps they have something in common after all. All three stories gain our admiration because, during or on completion of our reading or viewing of them, they incur and confirm our suspicions that these are stories in which there is more going on than originally
meets the eye. In the first, the “more than meets the eye” unfolds within the story itself as it progresses. In the second, it becomes apparent through a more careful viewing of the images and action. In the third, it resides in the way that the film is interpreted by the viewer—very different, yet with a common thread: the “something more” going on.

This was our first attempt to generalize from the three examples. We then realized that our intuition is an everyday way of expressing an idea that has been given a more abstract formulation by Ricoeur (1974, 1981) in his analysis of the act of interpretation of symbols and texts. Ricoeur’s approach derives from his crucial distinction between semiotic and hermeneutic meaning. Semiotic meaning is related to a system of signs as a closed, self-contained linguistic—or, as he calls it, semiological—entity. Hermeneutic meaning relates a linguistic entity to something external to it. The difference between the two can perhaps best be illustrated by comparing the decoding of a message encoded in simple code with the translation of a sentence from one natural language to another. In the first case, after discovering which letter of the alphabet each sign represents, the message can be decoded by substituting the correct letter for each coded sign. For Ricoeur, this would be translation at the semiotic level. Translating a sentence from one natural language to another would be a hermeneutic translation. Here, simple substitution using a dictionary is often disastrous, because each language has its own structures, rhythms, and melodies. The sentence’s sense also depends on its context and on the particular culture of which the sentence’s language is the linguistic expression. Only when all of these—structure, rhythm, melody, context, and culture—are taken into account does a translation have a reasonable chance of capturing the essence of a moderately complex sentence in a given language.

In Ricoeur’s view, interpretation is related to the uncovering of hidden meaning, the latter being an essential component not only of a text, but also of any symbol. Ricoeur (1974) defined a symbol as “any structure of signification in which a direct, literal meaning designated, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, second and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first” (pp. 12–13; italics added). Interpretation is defined as “the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning” (p. 13). Using the above-mentioned distinction, Ricoeur distinguishes between hidden semiotic and hermeneutic meaning. At the semiotic level, a double meaning of a sign is explained as the fact that two different signs or sets of signs can replace or substitute for the given sign. Hidden meaning is simply a less transparent, less obvious replacement for a sign or set of signs, a more subtle relationship between signs. At the hermeneutic level, however, hidden meanings are things said about some extralinguistic reality (in a work of fiction, this would be the
fictional reality to which the work refers) that are masked by a more manifest meaning (Ricoeur, 1970). Hermeneutics sees its task as reduction of illusion. At this level, “the fundamental category of consciousness is the relation hidden-shown” (pp. 33–34).

Ricoeur’s view of interpretation provides us with a concept, the hermeneutic level of interpretation, that situates these three stories as exemplars of one basic property: They are stories that “force” us to practice such an unmasking hermeneutic in relation to their plots if we are to fully appreciate them. They are stories that have “secrets” (Kermode, 1979). This is one of the reasons that they are high-quality stories. Of course, we can try to unmask hidden meanings of any story, but not every story invites us to do this as insistently as do good ones (Riffaterre, 1990). In addition, not every story will reveal interesting secrets, and even when we do find hidden meaning, it will not necessarily be of such a nature that it can only be apprehended through the manifest meaning.

Two points need to be noted in talking about hermeneutic unmasking. First, for Ricoeur, interpretation does not lead to the idea of unmasking the hidden meaning. In written discourse, “the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 200). Interpretation is based on clues in the text that “exclude unsuitable constructions” and “allow[s] those which give more meaning to the same words” (p. 175; italics added). The word “those” indicates that there can be different hidden meanings. Certain constructions can be “more probable” than others, “but not more truthful” (p. 175).

Second, the hermeneutic unmasking required in our three stories is not necessarily the kind of sophisticated, close reading practiced by literature critics and students, except perhaps in the case of the Bergman movie. Unmasking can be a far more everyday, unsophisticated activity. One can, after all, buy Agatha Christie stories at airports!

We are not sure that every high-quality narrative invites us to practice an unmasking hermeneutic. However, all of those we could suggest to each other from our own personal experience as readers and viewers certainly did. (We will discuss two further examples of stories we regard as high-quality narratives—Hopscotch and Citizen Kane—further on.) We are also struck by the number of literature theorists whose ideas, albeit using different terminologies, resonate with Ricoeur’s approach. Two examples will suffice: Kermode’s (1979) aforementioned emphasis on the secrets contained in great literature, and McHale’s (1987) use of the term dominant (p. 7). McHale understands this as a system we elicit that underlies the heterogeneous catalogue of properties of a group of literary works. His important unmasking contribution to literature theory is the argument that the great works of postmodernist fiction have a different dominant than modernist fiction, posing ontological rather than epistemological questions.
So, considering that Ricoeur’s notion of hermeneutical unmasking receives significant support from literary theory (and, more modestly, is “in sync” with our reflection on our own literary preferences), we think that containing an insistent invitation to the reader to practice an unmasking hermeneutic can be upheld as a central property of most high-quality narratives.

Of course, it is not the only property of this kind. For instance, good stories have plots with satisfying, coherent structures. They are well told in the sense that the development of the story is involving because of the way that the plot unfolds, or because we become interested in the characters themselves. These latter properties derive directly from an Aristotelian conception of narrative, whereas hidden hermeneutic meaning is a significant addition to that conception.

All of the above characterizations of good stories are relevant to narrative sensibility. The latter is first and foremost the tendency to see the world in narrative terms. In addition, persons with such sensibility simply love good stories, have the ability to discern narrative structures, and have opinions about what distinguishes interesting, satisfying plots from unsatisfactory ones; they tend to engage in hermeneutical unmasking. From the point of view of the argument that we are developing, this latter component of narrative sensibility is the most important, and so the education of sensibility of this kind must attend to the task of encouraging students to practice unmasking hermeneutics.

There are other educational reasons for thinking that this aspect of narrative sensibility is important. Surely we must educate children in ways that will help them to read life’s complexities. Going back to Postman for a moment, such a hermeneutic would seem to be a good antidote for the uncritical acceptance of catastrophic gods. The latter are narratives that depend for their power on the masking of their hidden meanings, complexities, and limitations.

THE ELECTRONIC WRAPPING OF LANGUAGE

At last we can turn to the seventh word in the title of our article: computers. The questions we will ask are: Do computers increase or decrease the chances that students will be exposed to high-quality stories? Do they encourage students to practice an unmasking hermeneutic when reading stories? When we have raised these questions in our university classes, the spontaneous response has often been, “What’s the problem? Just download ‘Witness for the Prosecution.’” This response is a specific example of a deeply held belief in the neutrality of computers as a communication medium. Even for those who concur in general with the maxim that the medium is the message, there seems to be a tendency to see this notion as irrelevant to computers. The latter are seen as a totally flexible medium—
as neutral, highly sophisticated tools that can be put to any use that we may desire.

Of course, theoretically one might be able to download “Witness for the Prosecution.” Is one likely to do this? The answer is clearly no. What one is likely to do is determined not by the flexible possibilities that one can imagine for the computer, but by its common uses and modes. These uses are prevalent not by chance, but because the computer’s structure invites us to use it in this way. One can send personal e-mail Christmas cards to various people in the same way that one used to send handwritten cards. But what the computer invites one to do is to formulate one message and send it impersonally and en-masse to a list of people. It is the common uses of any communication medium that effectively define its nature, and thus define its “message” in the McLuhanian sense (McLuhan, 1994).

Getting back to Agatha Christie, assuming that one were to download “Witness,” would the fact that the words of the story had become electronically wrapped make any difference? We can restate Poster’s (1990) view:

[Persons] are constituted in acts and structures of communication . . . Changes in the configuration or wrappings of language alters the way the [person] processes signs into meanings, that sensitive point of cultural reproduction . . . The shift from oral and print wrapped language to electronically wrapped language thus reconfigures the [person’s] relation to the world. (p. 11; italics added)

NARRATIVE AND THE ELECTRONIC WRAPPING OF TEXT

We have understood narratives as the structured organization of series of events or actions. Good stories, in addition, invite us to practice an unmasking hermeneutic. In this section, we wish to address whether electronic wrapping of text aids or hinders the experience of structured organization, and whether it encourages or discourages unmasking hermeneutics. By “text” we mean any text—not necessarily only narrative texts, and certainly not only written, but also visual and auditory texts.

A most instructive way to relate to the electronic wrapping of text is to analyze the navigational dimensions, or properties of particular areas of computer use (Burbules, 2002). We understand such properties as the way the electronic wrapping of text in a particular type of computer application constrains how we proceed to use that application. We limit ourselves to the most common uses of computers: hypertext (in particular in its best-known use, the Internet), computer games, chats, and in general the ways that we experience the computer as a windowed environment. The question that must be addressed is this: To what extent do the navigational dimensions of these computer uses help promote the experience of structured organization and the practice of unmasking hermeneutics? If we can
show that the common navigational experiences are unilayered and random rather than structured and multilayered, we can say that the time students spend with computers is antithetical to the cultivation of narrative sensibility.

Hypertext

We begin with the most sophisticated use, and, because the World Wide Web is based on it, one of the most prevalent uses of computers: hypertext. Hypertext is not only a very prevalent computer use, but it is also the one that has been discussed most extensively vis-à-vis its relationship to literature and literary theory (Aarseth, 1997; Landow, 1992; Ryan, 1999).

A central property of hypertext is its use of links. Burbules (1998) pointed out that ease and speed of use make links seem at best secondary, and in most cases, “the link-event becomes invisible” (p. 104). He urged that “important aspects of links . . . be brought to the surface” (p. 104).

However, the point is that in common uses of hypertext, the link event is invisible. In other words, the typical phenomenological experience of hypertext is at odds with the experience of a structured organization of series of events. For this reason, this particular electronic wrapping of language is nonnarrativelike navigationally, and thus also nonnarrativelike in its phenomenological impact on the user.

Burbules (1998), aware of the problematic nature of the phenomenological experiencing of hypertext, discussed the case of surfing, which affects “(people’s) capacity for sustained attention to any single textual source” (p. 108). In his view, the surfing trend has been at work for a long time in popular culture, but “the structure of hypertextual . . . resources on the World Wide Web is already *taking a shape that acknowledges such readerly dispositions*” (p. 108; italics added).

We turn now to the question of hypertext and unmasking hermeneutics. In reading much of the literature on hypertext, particularly in the early years (e.g., Bolter, 1991; Heim, 1993; Landow, 1992), we were struck by the emphasis placed on the “democratic,” nonhierarchic nature of this medium. Links, we are often told, are like footnotes in a linear text but with a number of crucial differences. The hypertext “note” is a new text (lexia) that may be longer than the original lexia, may allow us to move from it to further lexias, and may be altered by the reader. Thus, there is no way of privileging a particular lexia and designating it the “main” text. The relationship between author and reader is also blurred.

Moulthrop (1994) has related this characteristic of hypertext to the concept of *rhizome*, as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). A rhizome is a plant extension that has diverse forms, “from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers” (p. 7).
Deleuze and Guattari contrasted this type of structure to the arborial one: “A tree has one central root, which fixes an order. The rhizome has no center. Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other. It is a multiplicity and not a unity” (p. 7). Deleuze and Guattari used the notion of rhizome as a central metaphor in their analyses of aesthetic, linguistic, social, political, and psychological phenomena. They make the point that a rhizome

is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure . . . genetic axis and profound structure are above all infinitely reproducible principles of tracing [original emphasis]. All of tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction . . . The tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings . . . (p. 12)

The notion of tracing is here being contrasted to a “mapping”; rhizomes have the logic of maps rather than tracings. If Deleuze and Guattari were only presenting a neutral typology—trees vs. rhizomes, tracings vs. mappings—there would be no problem with their distinction. However, this is not what they are about. For Deleuze and Guattari, what they term tracing “is so dangerous” (p. 13). They concentrate on the negative, limiting consequences of tracing to its “betrayals” (p. 13). 

When hypertexts are presented as a rhizomatic transformation of the nature of textual structure (as opposed to the arborial), this is usually seen in a very positive light, which highlights the freeing-up potential of rhizomes. Here we wish to point out one negative consequence from the perspective that we have been developing in this article. If hypertexts are rhizomatic, a direct consequence of hypertext’s rejection of hierarchy, then this particular electronic wrapping of text is another example of postmodernist repudiation of what Jameson (1991) called the “fundamental depth models” of our culture, which are being “replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces” (p. 12). The repudiation of depth undermines narrative sensibility. The manifest/hidden dimension of a text—the discovery of its secrets, the unmasking of the hidden—are central to hermeneutic interpretation of texts and the enjoyment of quality stories. They require the idea of the genetic axis and deep structure of arborial configurations. As Burbules and Callister (1996) put it in commenting on the rhizomatic nature of hypertext, “a reading with no center is no reading at all” (p. 33). Rhizomatic properties are antithetical to hermeneutic unmasking of narratives. For this reason, a state of affairs in which our students’ worlds are dominated by rhizomatic texts like hypertext will weaken the development of their narrative receptivity.

Burbules (2002) indicated two further navigational properties of hyperlinks that are relevant to our discussion. First, he stressed their one-to-one nature. Hyperlinks move us from one point in a Web page to somewhere
within another Web page. This is a binary semantic relation. The crucial point is, “if we view meanings as multiple, multilayered, and semantically complex . . . this binary form may have a limited capacity to represent such complexity” (pp. 76–77; italics added). We add that this form also makes the task of identifying different hidden meanings more difficult.

Second, Burbules pointed out a navigational property of hyperlinks that is of particular relevance to narratives of the “Witness for the Prosecution” type: “(H)yperlinks are, given current technologies, static: the same link will always take users to the same URL, unless the author changes the underlying HTML code” (p. 77). The whole point of a story like “Witness” is that the relationships—the “links,” if you will—between the protagonists are not static, but at the climax of the story are suddenly understood by the readers to be different from those they assumed obtained. In other words, we have a mismatch between navigational properties of a medium and semantic structure of a story.

**Computer Games**

It is difficult to generalize about computer games, considering the great variety developed in this burgeoning field. Nevertheless, many computer game theorists claim that the most common games do exhibit some narrative characteristics. Cover (2004) has maintained that even the most basic senso-motoric coordination games are based on some kind of plot, even if the story can be summed up in a few sentences (e.g., you are a good guy, these are the bad guys, they are trying to kill you).

In the case of more complex game situations, designers have become aware that narrative coherence and the interactive nature of games often contradict each other. The former is impossible to maintain in a truly complex system of links of the sort that characterizes the interactive dimension of the game. Ryan’s (2001) advice is to try to limit the number of decision points in the game: “(O)nce the user has made a choice, the narrative should be able to roll by itself for an extended period of time; otherwise, the system would lead to a combinatorial explosion, or fall back into randomness, the deathbed of narrative coherence.”

Game producers seem to have had this insight in mind in offering textual or movie introductions, or a narrative interlude between interactive scenes. In a recent game like Diabolo 2, the introduction looks like a very impressive, classically structured movie.

So games often do offer what we have called a structuration narrative experience. What about hermeneutic unmasking? Adventure games and quests are the most relevant to this issue because of their reliance on a storyline. The plot usually contains several branchings, and players can proceed and explore the rest of the plot only when they make the right
preprogrammed selection. The rules of the game force the player to be attentive to details, and to decide what is essential for the progress in the plot. In this respect, one can compare the mental activity a player is engaged in with that of a person reaching a decision about an optimal path in a maze, or with a reader of standard whodunits (i.e., a search for hidden semiotic meaning). However, the uncovering of hidden hermeneutical meaning is quite another matter. In most instances, the narrative of the game is simple and flat, and the focus is on the interaction and resolution of the plot, which does not necessarily call for multiple readings and decodings.

One could argue that adventure games use motifs, heroes, and episodes that have religious, mythological, or fairytale origins. In Diabolo 2, for example, we find a mix of evil and good spirits and gods, such as Mephisto and Baal. But a hermeneutic unmasking of this underlying symbolic level is not necessary to play the game, and is unlikely to be of interest to many players. Games are designed to enhance navigational and motoric excitement in order to immerse the user in the game. And this immersion is usually counterproductive to any kind of unmasking effort.

Chats

Although chats on the Internet are a very popular medium, especially among teenagers, they seem, to a large extent, unrelated to our concerns. Chats are not narratives, but conversations involving a group of incidental participants who usually don’t know each other. In most cases, the conversation level is quite shallow and geared toward impressing in a way that resembles cocktail party meetings (Turkle, 1995). The participants communicate to receive and deliver information, to find new friends, and to enjoy the freedom and the minimum commitment of the chatting place. The topics discussed tend to be talk show items in which everyone can add his or her comment.

From our point of view, the significance of chats resides in the nature of the interface. Because they occur synchronously in real time, there is a time-sharing constraint that affects the way the messages are displayed. The users who attempt to express written ideas with someone else at the same time find themselves posted on the chat window only when space permits the inclusion of their contribution. Any interruption in the flow of the typing is used by the software to “time share” and introduce contributions of other members. It is very hard for any single participant to dominate the stage and create a coherent argument. This creates a very jumpy rhizomatic feeling for the readers—in other words, the navigational experience of chats is similar to those of the other computer uses we have discussed.
Windowed Environments

We wish to rewrite a particular paragraph in our article. The manner in which the operating system is set up on our particular computer, and the way that we have organized our files are such that our preferred operations are: We click on the My Documents icon on the desktop. Two windows appear, the first almost covering the entire desktop area, and the second, a small label of it in the strip at the lower edge of the desktop. We click on an icon in the larger window, the folder named Articles. The large window disappears, and in its place appears a new one, with its labeling window next to the label of the previous one. We click on the icon of one of the subfolders: Current Articles. A new window replaces the Articles one. Then we click on the file Education of Story Lovers, and a draft of this article appears.

We have actually performed a very orderly search through a hierarchical tree of folders, subfolders, and files. But this is not the visual navigation experience we have had! Visually, we have jumped from one ephemeral window to another. And even in cases in which a window doesn’t disappear but remains on the desktop partially covered by a new window (a cascading arrangement), moving from one to the other is still experienced as a sudden jump from one thing to another.

There is another way of getting to our Education of Story Lovers document. We place the cursor on the Start icon at bottom left, and click. A smallish window appears above it. We move to the Documents icon. Without needing to click, another window appears next to it. We move to the My Documents icon. Another window appears next to this one. We move to the Articles icon, and so on. Within seconds, the desktop is almost covered with a mass of windows. Again, this is a tree. But the visual experience is of a rapidly growing, unstructured rhizome! In fact, it is impossible for anyone unfamiliar with this particular My Documents folder to discern its structure through a perusal of the desktop. Some of the windows cover others. Sometimes a subfolder window is to the right of a folder’s window, sometimes to its left.

Experiences of such a kind are familiar to all users of windowed environments. Compare them with the visual experience of examining a Talmudic page, often considered a superb example of an ancient hypertext. Here, the central text is in the center of the page. Surrounding it are the various interpretations of different commentators. The structure of the page—its tiered, intertextual logic—is very clear. In contrast, we claim that the flat, ephemeral, rhizomatic experience of navigating (jumping around) a windowed environment is unstructured and discourages an unmasking hermeneutical orientation.

In summary, the navigational properties of the common uses of computers that we have addressed are far more rhizomatic than arborial. Thus, we fear that they undermine the development of narrative sensibility.
their usual manifestations, these uses at best contribute to a structuration experience and the development of skills necessary to uncover semiotic hidden meaning. Of course, some of these uses may have the potential to do more. As Burbules (2002) wrote in relation to hyperlinks, the problem is that “Users can reinterpret these associations [between links], can question them, can add to them their own meanings . . . but all these responses require some additional effort” (p. 77; italics added). In most cases, users do not make the effort of their own accord. Is it worth trying to encourage users to make the additional effort? The final section of this article addresses that question.

COUNTERARGUMENTS AND OUR RESPONSES TO THEM

Before moving on to spelling out the practical educational implications of our analysis, let us address four possible criticisms of our argument for the first part of our major thesis.

Narrative in Postmodernist Literature

In the first section of this article, we explained why we have, by and large, adopted an Aristotelian view of narrative. Our explanation did not directly address the arguments against this conception of narrative put forward by postmodernist literature theory—and, by implication (or so it initially seems)—by postmodernist literature itself. Heise (1997) argued that postmodernist literature presents a very different view of the nature of time (e.g., a split between alternative, often parallel temporalities) and of human character than that expressed in modernist literature. These different conceptions lead to a new type of narrative. These postmodernist works both reflect and have had influence on profound cultural changes in our era, particularly with regard to the nature of time.

If this postmodern world were to demand a different conception of narrative than the one that has guided our analysis, then Heise’s (1997) book would constitute a profound criticism of our thesis. In actual fact, this is not the case. When she turns to particular literary works in the book’s later chapters, her interpretations, while undoubtedly highlighting a “new” notion of time, do not belie the aspects of narrative that we have been emphasizing here: the structuring of series of events, and hermeneutic unmasking. According to Heise, “It is precisely (the) kind of juxtaposition (of several universes in postmodernist fiction) that opens up interpretive possibilities for the reader and manifold layers of textual self-referentiality that cannot appropriately be called determinist” (p. 66; italics added).

A good example is her analysis of Cortazar’s *Hopscotch* (1966/1987). Cortazar invites us, the readers, to choose two alternative itineraries (or orders of reading chapters) in reading his novel. This is the near-hypertextual side
of his work. Let us examine a few sentences from Heise’s (1997) analysis: “The alternation between basic and ‘expendable’ chapters obeys a fairly regular rhythm” (p. 87); “If the symmetries and recurrences of the first reading suggest that Oliviera is trapped in a past that is never quite concluded . . . the dispersion of the second one indicates, by contrast, that neither past nor present can be held on to” (p. 88). Heise’s concern for structuring and the unmasking of hidden dimensions is central here. Consider the following: “Clearly, this game (hopscotch) functions as a central metaphor for the novel itself and its suspension between two different types of temporality” (p. 107). One cannot find a better example of an unmasking hermeneutic than that!

**Hypertext Fiction and Nonlinear Texts**

Hypertext fiction can suggest a possible critique of our thesis: Hypertext in general, and hypertext fiction in particular, have certain properties that articulate a number of literary, cultural, and educational values relevant for our time period (at the very least). It could be argued that these values are so important that they outweigh the losses entailed by the renunciation of structuration and unmasking required by emphasizing hypertext fiction, at the expense of traditional literature. What might such properties be? And do they really demand that we renounce structuration and unmasking?

Three properties seem to surface in many analyses of hypertext literature.

*Intertextuality*

Developing intertextual skills of various sorts is undoubtedly an important educational aim. Hypertext is also a medium whose intertextuality is clear, simple, and user friendly, and thus eminently suitable as a teaching tool for intertextual understanding. However, linking intertextuality to hypertext fiction is problematic; that a hypertext narrative uses links between lexia does not transform it into an intertext.

*Democratization of the Text*

Democratization is probably the property most often mentioned in discussions of hypertext fiction (Lanham, 1993). One must, however, unpack the various different meanings of the word ‘democratic’ that are being used in such discussions. Collapsing them together has not led to increased clarity. First, hypertext fiction is democratic because of the decentering of the author and the complicity of the reader in constructing the text, both by choosing his or her reading path through it, and, in some cases, by pro-
vision of the author for the reader to become quite literally joint author of the text. The argument goes that it is important to empower readers to create their own narratives in an age in which the author is supposed to be insignificant.

Second, hypertext is also democratic because it does not privilege any particular path through the narrative, nor does it privilege any particular lexia in comparison with any other. These latter two uses of the term democratic are very different from the notion of empowering the reader. It is only in relation to them that hypertext fiction could be conceived as demanding that we renounce structuration and unmasking.

As our criticism of rhizomatic structures makes clear, it is not at all obvious that the democratization of lexia and paths is necessarily a positive quality of these literary works, and that some of the best are less democratic than one would initially assume. Democratization in this sense means rejecting all hierarchies within the text—which is, in our view, an unjustified negation of the idea of an unmasking hermeneutic. Democratization also habituates the hypertext reader to think in either-or terms. The frequent either-or decisions that have to be made tend to work against any effort to see a complex multilayered reality.

Nonlinearity

Nonlinearity is without doubt an important component of postmodern culture. Unfortunately, students’ usual experience of nonlinearity is limited to the level of MTV video clips. There is an urgent educational need to help students experience and appreciate high-quality nonlinearity. Hypertext fiction is one important source for this. Authors of hypertext fiction do emphasize nonlinearity in their creations. Nonlinearity like this can challenge many traditional conventions of narrative writing. Again, however, the question arises: Do such nonlinear fictional works, by their very nature, deny the possibility of structuration and an unmasking hermeneutic? Douglas’s (1994) interpretation of Joyce’s Afternoon (1993), generally regarded as the first hypertext novel, is illuminating. Douglas describes her experience in moving four times through this text. In her first reading, she deliberately chose a very simple strategy for deciding between alternatives, “primarily through its defaults” (p. 165). The further readings entail more complex choices. She tells us of the ambiguities that each reading presented to her as interpreter. However, the fourth reading dispels many of these.

[O]nce I have reached [the farthest reaches of this narrative movement] I am able to look back over the entire narrative and perceive it as a chronicle of Peter’s denial. . . . In other words I perceive the “structure of the work as, at once, both dynamic and whole.” . . . The more I read the narrative, the closer I approach its center. (p. 171)
We have here a description of interpretation that clearly exemplifies a structuration and unmasking orientation.

It might be thought that we have won a Pyrrhic victory. We have shown that hypertext fiction can give us high-quality narrative in the sense that we use the term. We thus seem to have undermined our own major thesis that electronic wrapping of text has negative effects on the development of narrative sensibility! Not really. Although we began by characterizing our thesis as Luddite-like, we emphasized that this was, to a large extent, poetic license. We have continually stressed that what bothers us is not computers as such, but the dominant navigational properties in common or prevalent use. *Afternoon* is not a standard use, a fact that comes through rather sadly in Joyce’s (1998) own lament about the latter, in which he touchingly asks if we “have a chance,” considering the impact and power of the more usual ways of using the World Wide Web.

### The Celebration of Surface

An important argument against our central thesis essentially rejects the necessity for depth and Ricoeur’s unmasking hermeneutic in interpreting narratives. One version of this counterargument derives from the way that the notion of surface is celebrated, for example, in Michael Joyce’s non-fictional work. Joyce (2002) claims that “jumping around” characterizes even the most ostensibly linear reading of a text. Always “our minds drift, swirl, veer, connect, unlink, wander, and settle like doves in flight” (p. 95). So, for Joyce, reading from the surface “is a way of valuing something even more than reading at depth,” for “there is a joy in moving over surfaces” (p. 94).

The problem is that Joyce does not define the central notion of surface at any point in his article. He hints that surface is related to browsing and nonlinearity, but that is all. We have seen that linearity is not a necessary condition for depth. In Joyce’s (2002) article, he engages in what we can only describe as a deep analysis of the positioning and significance of the commas in a poem by Czesław Miłosz (1988). Joyce too believes that depth is more interesting and intellectually valuable than surface. No one who was not deeply attracted to depth could write the way he does.

### Unmasking Hermeneutics and Its Elitist Orientation

Most people do not encounter texts that invite them to discover hidden levels of meaning—with or without computers, the World Wide Web, or what have you. Thus, we can be accused of subscribing to an elitist orientation to education, attempting to fob off our own esoteric interests (who goes to Ingmar Bergman movies anyway?) on unsuspecting teachers and students.
Our response is unequivocal here: If unmasking and enjoying hidden meanings are important (and we think we have shown that they are), then they are important for everyone. True, our cultural world may encourage superficiality without considering the complication of computers. However, the computerized environment is becoming increasingly central in young people’s lives (Smith & Curtin, 1998). So if the common uses of computers encourage superficiality, something must be done about that educationally, for all. To this we now turn.

POSSIBLE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES

We wish to discuss three possible educational responses to the analysis up to this point. The only likely hope for their effectiveness is to implement them in an integrated, coordinated manner.

1. Transforming narrative into a central focus of the curriculum.

The suggestion is, in effect, to take the positions of Postman (1995), Bruner (1996), and MacIntyre (1985) to their logical conclusions and to conceive of schools as places guided by grand narratives. In addition, such schools would devote a great deal of their time to teaching different content (not only in literature, media, and social studies, but also in areas like science and mathematics) through the medium of reading, viewing, and discussing fine stories; encouraging children to write stories; encouraging students to become true joint authors of hypertext fictions; and encouraging students to tell and ponder their own life stories and those of their families and communities, linking these life stories to moral issues (Egan, 1986). Of course, all of the above activities can be found in schools. We are simply adding that these activities and characteristics of schools should become more dominant and coordinated.

2. Teaching for critical computer literacy.

Reflection and critique of the navigational properties of computers and their problematic impact upon us—particularly vis-à-vis the development of a taste for flat and shallow narratives—could be part of a critical pedagogy aimed at raising these issues to consciousness (Burbules, 2002). The problem is that critical pedagogy of every sort has been far less influential within the real worlds of schools than it has been within academia. In our view, this second possible response can only “have a chance,” to echo Joyce’s (1998, pp. 172–173) phrase, when coordinated with the third response.

3. Charging the schools and the education system with the task of creating more mindful, narrative-oriented computer-based learning opportunities.
The problems created by certain dominant computer uses should not encourage us to focus on whether the computer is friend or foe of narrative. Instead, we should address the question of how computer uses could be changed or augmented so as to scaffold a multilevel view of narrative and provide a navigationally appropriate platform for students’ engagement with high-class narratives and narrative forms.

There are many ways that this can be done, and there are also isolated examples of it having been done in the past. Here we limit ourselves to three illustrations.

First, the aforementioned work of Spiro and Jehng (1990) offers an extremely interesting way of coming to grips with the issues we have raised. Computers have a distinct edge in stopping and reviewing a particular scene during a normal film screening. With digital control, it is possible to directly and instantly access one particular scene, or even a particular frame in a film. This is one of the reasons that Spiro and his coresearchers chose to develop the concept of cognitive flexibility through a hypermedia or videodisc version of *Citizen Kane*. They wanted to provide students with access to each scene via digital control, which provides a way to reassemble (reedit) scenes in any desired order according to predetermined themes or an organizing leitmotif. This means that the interface has the ability to support the construction of new narratives within the life of Kane, or to provide new ways to look at the film and be sensitive to its multivocalities. Although Orson Wells did a remarkable job planning and editing this film in its linear form, a computer hypertext version of it facilitates multiple readings of its many facets.

Developing further curricular hypertext material of this sort seems to us to be a productive educational endeavor.

Second, Joyce’s (1993) hypertext story *Afternoon* is not a pure hypertext because it contains conditional links (Aarseth, 1997); in some lexias, certain words lead to different lexias depending on the sequence of previous lexias visited. Readers are barred from reaching particular lexias until they have followed a specific sequence of other lexias. We agree with Harpold (1994) that this navigational property makes a tremendous positive difference to the quality of one’s reading in the hypertext medium.

One way to increase the mindfulness of narrative-oriented computer use in the classroom is to use and develop more “impure” hypertexts of this sort, which are dynamic in the sense that Burbules (2002) uses the term (i.e., a particular link does not always take users to the same page).

Third, education could provide computer programming with a market for the development of computer uses that exhibit navigational properties of the sort that Burbules (2002) hinted at in his article—not only dynamic links, but also links that enable us to move from one point to a number of points at once (for example, a mouse that supports two cursors at once, which can be placed on two icons and simultaneously clicked). Of course, there is the danger that developments like this could lead to extreme rhi-
zomatic structures, with everything in principle linking to everything. But if they had built-in constraints that militate against random linking, they would create computer environments with the potential to offer experiences quite similar to the aforementioned experience of reading a Talmudic-like text. In such environments, unmasking hermeneutics could well become a far more likely option. These environments would enable new sorts of educational software, relevant to our concerns, to be developed.

The question, again, is this: Is it really worth the effort needed to develop ideas of this kind? There are many reasons for pessimism. There is the possibility of a negative counterreaction of the students. As many well-meaning educators have discovered, when a school adopts a computer game, the students stop using it. There may be a possible mismatch between school and Internet cultures, which could lead to another decrease in the influence of the educator.

One may question whether teachers and schools are more immune than others from the very tendencies that we have been describing and suggesting ways to counteract. It may well be that schools are simply not the right sites for resistance to the press toward one-dimensional shallowness in our culture.

Perhaps most important and worrisome of all, the proposals that we have made encapsulate values at odds with much of the standards discourse that has become so pervasive in our times. It is hard to imagine many secretaries or ministers of education finding time between worrying about international comparative achievement tests in science and mathematics on the one hand, and school league tables and accountability on the other, to worry about a possible decline in narrative sensibility.

Yet, Foucault may have been right when he wrote in favor of local resistances. One must also remember that we began our article by pointing to the narrative turn. There are still enough people who simply love a good story for us to believe that it is worth the effort.

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NOTES

1. However, in this regard we must stress the difference between “Witness for the Prosecution” and the more usual type of whodunit, which the reader can unravel. The cognitive requirements in unraveling a standard whodunit are similar to
the ones used by students in moving from a verbal math problem to the exercises that enable them to solve it. This is deciphering at the semiological level, whereas Witness is an example of hermeneutical deciphering, as Ricoeur uses these terms.

2. One can also approach this issue through an analysis of the logic of computer programs. Manovich (2002) has done this, claiming that this logic is that of databases, and arguing that databases and narratives are “natural enemies” (p. 225).


4. One of Deleuze and Guattari’s main targets is classic psychoanalysis: “Psychoanalytic competence . . . confines every desire and statement to a genetic axis or overcoding structure, and makes infinite, monotonous tracings of the stages on that axis”(p. 13). Their approach is in direct conflict with that of Ricoeur (1970), for whom Freudian analysis is an example of a productive unmasking hermeneutic.

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