

A review of *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* by MaryAnne Wolf  
Written by Andrew Patrick

As an educator, there are sections of *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (2018) that are truly troubling. For example, a recent study found that Americans in their twenties now check their cell phones between 150 and 190 times per day and that they switch media sources twenty-seven times per hour (71). A different report, which examined the effects of this level of digital media consumption, concluded that young people's empathy has dropped by forty percent in the last twenty years, with the largest drop off in the last decade (50). The new book from Maryanne Wolf, celebrated author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2007), is full of these types of depressing findings from the latest neuroscientific research, all of which highlight the rapid changes taking place and the scope of the challenges the present. Yet, Wolf's conclusions are not as grim as we might imagine. She holds out hope that we will be able to develop "biliterate" brains that are equally fluent when interpreting the barrage of information from the digital world and when reading deeply and critically in the physical world.

That digital technologies are changing the way that we read is obvious, so much so that it might seem a more of a cliché than a significant observation. Of course, consuming the news on digital screens is different than consuming it on the printed page. Of course, Facebook and Twitter are different than the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. And of course, we should be concerned about the increasingly isolated information silos that characterize media consumption patterns. Yet, as Wolf points out, the changes in what we read and where we read

it are also driving less well-appreciated changes in fundamental neurological structures and behaviors, with potentially far-reaching consequences.

Starting from basic concepts like novelty bias, the human tendency to attend to new stimulation, and neuroplasticity, the principle that human brain circuitry develops according to the tasks we ask it to perform, Wolf explores the implications for the reading brain in the digital age. Wolf develops the “digital chain hypothesis” to frame the interlocking challenges that confront the twenty-first century reader. She argues that over the last twenty years digital technologies from the internet and search engines to smartphones and social media have driven changes in “*how much we read, how we read, what we read, and why we read*” (72). To summarize, we read a lot, but very quickly and in short bursts, from sources that confirm our worldviews in order to feel like we are “in the know” (75). She believes the consequences of these changes are an erosion of the “quality of attention” that we bring to our reading, a decline in our comprehension, and subtle changes in our reading tastes, away from subtlety and nuance toward brevity and simplicity (70, 75). Taken together, Wolf hypothesizes that the effects of the digital chain are undermining society’s collective ability to read deeply and they ultimately threaten “the continuous expansion of human intelligence and virtue,” if deep reading and critical thinking skills are not developed in future generations (205).

Wolf’s solution to the growing challenges today and the unknown challenges of the future is to consciously work toward “building a biliterate brain” (168). The prescription she offers is based on the way bilingual children develop their language skills and applies the concepts to the print and digital “languages” that will be equally essential in the world that is currently under construction. Like bilingual children who grow up hearing both languages, Wolf

recommends early exposure to both print and digital culture within certain constraints. Reading skills would be developed in both contexts, though with a greater emphasis on the print medium in the earliest years and an expanding use of screens as a digital playground as readers grow and mature. Ideally, biliterate readers would develop competencies in both “languages” and make their own choices about the appropriate approach in each situation. They would have the digital literacy to navigate the massive stores of information available in complex online environments using approaches like skimming, keyword searches, coding, and data analysis, but also be able to approach a printed text with a critical eye, analyze it closely, and develop their own hypotheses and insights. Wolf hopes that by emphasizing biliteracy early in life, these skillsets will emerge separately in the brains of today’s young people and thereby avoid the “atrophy seen in [contemporary] adults when screen-reading processes bleed over into print” (172).

For those of us who work in higher education, Wolf’s analysis of the problems and her suggestions for mitigating them holds several important implications. First, we should take heart in the emphasis we already place on critical reading, analytical rigor, and writing skills. As Wolf emphasizes, all of these skills conform to the “use it or lose it” principle of our mental capacities, so helping students create the habits of critical literacy can set them up for a life of deep reading and reflective thinking (62). Next, we should recognize the ways in which society bombards our students with distractions, on the order of *thirty-four gigabytes* a day, and take steps to help mitigate their impact (72). This can be as simple as offering suggestions to minimize distractions while studying, such as leaving your cell phone in your dorm room, while in class, like turning off the wi-fi on your laptop, or while reading, perhaps by modelling

strategies for active notetaking. The important part is to be intentional about the suggestions and drawing students' attention to the ways in which distractions can be an obstacle to their academic success. Finally, we would do well to challenge our students to think about their own reading habits in order to help them exercise greater control over them. Recognizing that different reading styles are more or less appropriate and useful depending on the text is an important first step in cultivating the biliteracy needed to be equally fluent reading the poetry of Wendell Berry and the latest controversies on social media. If ultimately successful, our deep-reading, biliterate students will be able to see the connections between the two and use the knowledge gained via one "language" to address challenges that are framed in the other dialect.

If you are interested in learning more or just want to thumb through *Reader, Come Home*, please feel free to drop into the Center for Teaching and Learning. We would love to see you.