

4th Frankfurt Scientific Symposium, October 4–5, 2004

Closing Remarks

by Jeffrey Garrett

It's time to wrap up, step back for a moment and reflect upon where we have been.

Let me start by relating to you an experience that a number of us had yesterday evening that I believe can help us put this conference in perspective. We took a bus out to Hessenpark, an open-air museum outside Frankfurt where actual buildings of the 16th through 19th centuries have been collected, restored, and put into an ensemble. Among other fascinating places, we were also able to visit an original German country schoolroom of the 19th century. We saw a complete classroom, entirely intact, as it once had been. There were class portraits—early photographs showing children where traces of hunger and abuse were evident. We saw a log of transgressions and punishments. For example, “laziness” was punished by lashes with a leather strap. We asked: How did education take place in an environment of such adversity?

As a counterpoint to what we have been talking about these last two days, the visit to Hessenpark could not have been better chosen. This was a world so distant from our own, we felt, as to be from a different planet. Yet the experience also highlighted the particular moment in historical time in which we have come together. Among other questions we might ask would be this: What traces will *our* culture of education leave behind? What would an open-air museum of the year 2250 look like?

Maybe there will be no traces at all, because we will succeed at something that not even the Black Death or World War I have succeeded in doing, namely destroying civilization and even the entire human race. We can do that now. But let's assume the catastrophe can be averted and that in 250 years, our successor generations will be interested in contemplating what our schools were once like. What traces will remain of our information infrastructure? Here, I incline to be pessimistic. I would contend that at no point during the last three millennia, not since the old Germans and Vikings wrote their runes on the bark of beech trees, has the record of civilization been so poorly maintained. “Gespeichert, das heißt vergessen,” Harald Weinrich has written¹: “Click ‘save,’ and it's gone,” might be the most accurate English translation.² So-called “durable” URLs are less permanent than the cheapest acid paper.

¹ Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: Kunst Und Kritik Des Vergessens* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997), 257.

² Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, trans. Steven Rendall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 207.

This is the bad news about what sets us apart from our professional forebears. The good news is that we are relieving the process of education of much of its tedium—those aspects of the process that once had to be enforced and drilled in the shadow of the hickory switch and the leather strap. Where Einstein said that genius consisted of 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, maybe we will be changing that ratio to 20–80—just by reducing the perspiration part of the formula. Meaning that the traces that our age leaves behind may not be in the form of written records, but, to a greater extent than ever before, better trained and better educated and better motivated individuals.

It is not just easier, faster access to information that should be our goal—in fact, that is not our goal at all, but rather solely a means to an end. (Is this where the teaching and the library communities diverge?) Alan Bundy made clear in his excellent presentation yesterday that more efficient information seeking is not where our attention should be directed, but rather to the uses to which that information, once found, is then put. This meeting has not been about finding uses for technology, but how best to attain learning goals using the technology we now have. We *do* want the better crafted pedagogical tool, one that incites learning and realizes Lichtenberg’s dictum: that the appeal of learning must reside in itself. Yet there may be situations and environments where faster, easier access is a temptation we must resist. We should recall that speed and ease of access have not always been cardinal virtues in learning environments, for reasons comparable to the need for slow and painstaking execution of experiments in the science laboratory. Paul Saenger, in his brilliant 1997 work on reading in the classical and medieval worlds, *Space between Words*, traces the ancient roots of the old humanistic virtue of making haste slowly, *festina lente*:

“The ancient world did not possess the desire, characteristic of the modern age, to make reading easier and swifter because the advantages that modern readers perceive as accruing from ease of reading were seldom viewed as advantages by the ancients. . . . We know that the reading habits of the ancient world . . . were focused on a limited and intensely scrutinized canon of literature.”³

There is still truth in this today, I argue. Although there is nothing in the electronic text to force a reader to read superficially or to jump about from page to page, the far-too-easy extraction of passages of text from larger contexts—which, after all, form its organic home—can contribute to a climate of distractedness, contextlessness, a culture of the toggle, one might say, that students and young scholars—and not only they—may find difficult to resist. “Making haste slowly”: This, too, may be part of what should be called “information literacy.”

³ Paul Henry Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*, Series "Figurae" (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 11.

I want to congratulate all of our speakers for putting into clearer focus the many aspects of information literacy, including the very fuzziness of the term, both across linguistic boundaries and within them. There has been much said here that we would be wise to ponder in coming months and years. Therefore, we will seek to give it a durability that past Frankfurt symposia have lacked by collecting and posting all papers and all presentations to a dedicated site at Northwestern University, linked to from the conference site here in Frankfurt. And yes, there will be pictures!

And so this closing request: Please send electronic copies of your papers, your powerpoints, any bibliographies and abstracts, to Lindsey Fairhurst at the university library in Frankfurt! She will see to it that they are transmitted to us in Evanston. We hope to have the site up and operational sometime during November 2004.

Thank you everyone for your participation and especially to our hosts for their splendid organization of this meeting and generous hospitality.