

"LEARN WHAT YOU ARE AND BE SUCH". ~ PINDAR – ENDURING PURPOSE OF EDUCATION



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This article draws together preparatory work for Episodes 26–28 of [FOSIL, Education and School Libraries](#) (Hutchinson & Toerien, n.d.), a podcast series that is now in its fourth year. It also marks out the main focus of my developmental work on FOSIL in the coming academic year.

All schools are public schools, in that they produce a public. The question, then, according to [Neil Postman](#) (1996, p. 18), is “What kind of public does [schooling] create? A conglomerate of self-indulgent consumers? Angry, soulless,

directionless masses? Indifferent, confused citizens? Or a public imbued with confidence, a sense of purpose, a respect for learning, and tolerance?”

This is one way—perhaps the only true way—to measure results in education, and *these* results aren’t promising.

This is why, then, the fundamental task of education actually is, heeding [Pindar](#) (c.500BC/2012) above, “to guide the evolving dynamism through which a [person forms himself as a person]” (Maritain, 1943/1971). In order to make sense of this, we need some understanding of what this *evolving dynamism* is, as well as the *process through which a person forms themselves as a person*.

[Dallas Willard](#), longtime Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, observed that the “ultimate freedom we have as human beings is the power to select what we will allow or require our minds to dwell upon” (2002, p. 95). Now, what we will allow or require our minds to dwell upon, is who we are, or are in the process of becoming. This truth is empowering, in that we *can* determine who we are in the process of becoming by what we choose to think about, or *dwell on*. This truth is also sobering, in that we *must* do so, whether consciously or not. And this is why [Jacques Maritain](#) (1952, p. 3, italics added) warned that

Nothing is more important than the events which occur within that invisible universe which is the mind of [a person]. And the light of that universe is knowledge. If we are concerned with the future of civilization, we must be concerned primarily with a genuine understanding of what knowledge is, its value, its degrees, and *how it can foster the inner unity of the human being*.

This, now, brings the importance and value of our fundamental task as educators into sharp

focus, especially in relation to the mind and the thoughts it thinks. However, before considering the four factors involved in the realm of thought more deeply—ideas, images, information, and thinking—it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of what is at stake.

Willard (1999) addressed this at some length in *The Unhinging of the American Mind—Derrida as Pretext*, his paper for the second Monist Colloquium on “causes of the current condition of the university system in the United States.” In this important paper, which is broader than American universities at the turn of the century, Willard argues that without recourse to knowledge of reality as provided by the various academic disciplines, and the texts through which that knowledge is communicated and preserved, people become vulnerable to desire and will/ brute force

as social processes come to be managed by people who simply know how to get their way among a mass of those who no longer believe that they can, with the aid of their culture’s texts and the traditional disciplines, determine how things [actually] are in nature, art or morality, regardless of how anyone wishes them to be or how people with social authority present them.

From our vantage point some 25 years later, the consequences of this condition that Willard warned of—“unpredictable at least, and at worst disastrous”—are *disastrously* evident. Elsewhere, Willard (2002, p. 106) links these disastrous consequences to thinking, and specifically crooked thinking:

Crooked thinking, unintentional or not, always favors evil. And when the crooked thinking gets elevated into group orthodoxy, whether religious or secular, there is always, quite literally, ‘hell to pay.’ That is, hell will take its portion, as it has repeatedly done in the horrors of world history.

So what, then, is crooked thinking in relation to thinking, and the place and role of thinking in the realm of thought? And, further, how does

this relate to the inquiry-centred instructional identity and role of the school librarian? These questions require our most urgent attention if we are to offer our children hopeful pathways into their future, and I offer some early thoughts here.

According to Willard (2002), there are four main factors involved in the realm of thought, which are **ideas, images, information, and our ability to think**, of which the two most powerful are ideas and images.

- “Ideas are very general models of our assumptions about reality” (p. 96). As such, ideas govern how we think about and interpret things. Because ideas are abstract, and impossible to easily define and articulate, they often present themselves to us as reality itself and so exert a practically invisible influence on our lives. For the purposes of this article, an example of a powerful idea is **love**.
- Ideas have associated images that occupy our minds. Whereas ideas are abstract, images are concrete or specific and are charged with feeling. Consequently, images “have a powerful emotional linkage to governing idea systems [and they] mediate the power of those idea systems into the real situations of ordinary life” (p. 99). Images derive much of their power from their immediacy and emotional charge, which is problematic, in that images are manipulable, and highly so in a digital environment. Taking our example above—and drawing on many hours of revision with my son in Year 8 for his end-of-year Theology exam—two contrasting images of love are [Cupid on Valentine’s Day](#) (which ignores his troubling past, or perhaps not), and [Jesus on the cross of his crucifixion](#). These two very different images of love give rise to very different expectations of what it means **to love and be loved**.
- “Without correct information [facts], our ability to think has nothing to work on [and consequently a] lack of [such] information results in everything from unpleasant burdens to stark tragedies” (p. 203). This gives rise to a twofold challenge: the sheer

quantity of accurate information, and the rapid proliferation and dissemination of mis-, dis-, and mal-information in a digital environment.

- Thinking “is the activity of searching out what *must* be true, or *cannot* be true, in the light of given facts or assumptions” (p. 104). Not only, then, does thinking extend the information we have, enabling us to accurately piece together the bigger picture—to coherently “assemble mosaic tiles of information” as [Jonathan Rauch](#) puts it (2021, p. 4)—it also “undermines false or misleading ideas and images [revealing] their falseness to those who wish to know” (Willard, 2002, p. 104). Human flourishing, on both a personal and civilisational level, should it need to be said, “depends upon people thinking well” (p. 105).

Given how important it is to get our thinking about ideas straight, it is worth dwelling on this a little further. [Bertrand Russell](#) (1959/2012), when asked what lessons from his long and extraordinarily rich life he thought were worth sharing with future generations, identified two things—one intellectual, and one moral. The intellectual thing, which is foundational to the moral thing,* he said, was this

When you are studying any matter, or considering any philosophy, ask yourself only ‘what are the facts, and what is the truth that the facts bear out? Never let yourself be diverted, either by what you wish to believe, or by what you think could have beneficial social effects, if it were believed. But look only and solely at: What are the facts?’

[Charles Sanders Peirce](#) (1955, p. 54)—who Russell (1959, p. 276) considered “one of the most original minds of the later nineteenth century and certainly the greatest American thinker ever,” and Willard (1999) considered the “last first rate [Anglo-American] philosopher who was a coherent realist”—made the link between thinking straight and inquiry explicit, and established inquiry as an educational imperative

Upon this first, and in one sense this sole, rule of reason—that in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think—there follows one corollary which itself deserves to be inscribed upon every wall of the city of philosophy: **Do not block the way of inquiry.**

With this in mind, it is enlightening and instructive to revisit [Douglas Knight](#)’s profound observations about libraries and librarians in his Foreword to *Library Services for the Nation’s Needs: Toward Fulfillment of a National Policy* (1968). Accordingly, libraries, regardless of type, serve two major and unique functions, which are, firstly, as space in which the minds of our students encounter ideas contained/maintained in our collections, and, secondly, as space in which those ideas are then extended in the minds of our students. Our concern, then, must be twofold, which is, firstly, with the ideas, and the information about those ideas, in our collections, and, secondly, with what happens to those ideas in the invisible universe that is the mind of our students, and how this interaction fosters their inner unity.

The encounter of mind and ideas, and the subsequent extension of those ideas in the mind, is both the result and part of the inquiry process of coming to know and understand the world and ourselves in it as the basis for responsible participation in community. This, in turn, requires close and effectual collaboration between those in the classroom who can teach the mind to inquire, and those in the library who can teach the mind **how to inquire**. This, then, is why Knight concludes that the librarian “is a teacher whose subject is learning itself” (1968, p. ix). While there is much left to unpack here, it is abundantly clear that the school librarian occupies a central place in the realm of thought, and, consequently, can and indeed must play a decisive role in fostering the inner unity of individual students, upon which human flourishing depends.

In closing, and still with this in mind, it is worth reminding ourselves of [Jesse Shera](#)’s profound charge in his landmark book, *The Foundations of*

Education for Librarianship (1972), that librarians had yet to develop “a theory of the role of the library in the student’s intellectual experience [specifically in relation to the] characteristic information needs [of inquiry] as a method of instruction and an environment for formalized learning” (p. 177). Now while we cannot simply ignore Shera’s historical context, this theory, it seems to me, is yet to be clearly articulated, if not still to be developed, and certainly for the school library. This, I believe, is our increasingly urgent task, and will be the main focus of our upcoming work.

Postscript: While I do not have space here to develop my thoughts on GenAI more thoughtfully, I share a growing concern. **Kellyanne Conway** (in)famously made history on 22 January 2017, when she used “the phrase ‘alternative facts’ for demonstrable falsehoods” (‘Alternative Facts’, 2026). Not long after, **Timothy Snyder** (2017) reminded us that “post-factuality is pre-fascism”. If only this warning had mattered more. As information professionals whose work is vital to the “Constitution of Knowledge” (Rauch, 2021), our alarm, and outrage, appears to have been short-lived—less than 10 years after this fact, we have largely embraced a technology that has not yet reliably risen above the level of “bullshit machines” whose “superpower is [precisely] their superhuman ability to bullshit” (Bergstrom & West, 2025), a technology developed, moreover, by bad-faith actors. This, I am increasingly inclined to believe, is compromising us as a profession that must remain grounded in and champion academic integrity. And, to the extent that **Cory Doctorow** (2026) is right to worry that “AI is the asbestos we’re shovelling into our civilization’s walls, and our descendants will be digging it out for generations,” we, and our classroom colleagues, will be found to have been complicit. **Robert A. Heinlein’s** encouragement/ warning in *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* (1958/1978, p. 128) reads differently to me now: “Dad claims that library science is the foundation of all sciences just as math is the key—and that we will survive or founder, depending on how well the librarians do their jobs.”

*The moral thing, Russell said, was that “love is wise, [and] hatred is foolish.”

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