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CONVERSATIONAL READING: HISTORY AND CONTEXT FOR A NEW GENRE OF VIRTUAL LEARNING

Robert Nelson and Phillip Dawson

Abstract: *Conversation and reading are regarded as essential ingredients of any discursive discipline. However, though clearly central to learning and integral to study, conversation and reading are anything but essential in the sense of absolute, unchanging and eternal. Our article reveals how both conversation and reading mutate and develop historically, serving intuitions of the learner's autonomy and interactivity, which also evolve. This backdrop of change contextualizes speculations about the impact of digital technology upon conversation and reading. Our own invention of a conversation simulator (or conversation sim) reveals that conversation and reading can be integrated in any Learning Management System (LMS). Pointing to a new educational genre, this method for virtual learning demonstrates how automated educational technologies contribute to the ongoing reinvention of reading and conversation: thoughtful absorption in a text and verbal interactivity over a topic.*

Keywords: History of reading, history of conversation, LMS, learning management system, assessment as learning, history of ideas, automated assessment, quiz.

Introduction

Reading and conversation sit in a reciprocal relationship: reading is a one-way process which ideally immerses the reader in the thought of the writer, while conversation is a two-way affair in which the participation of one interlocutor conditions the intervention of the other. But for all their differences, the beguiling quality of both is that they have some magical quality of one another. The absorption sought in immersive reading has shades of a conversation, where the mind of the reader engages with the thought of the writer as if there were potential for conversation. And meanwhile, a good conversation that is headed somewhere has an informational structure and is not merely a chaotic string of reactions but a kind of text jointly constructed by the conversationalists, a little bit like collaborative writing, where the two participants 'read' one another's intentions.

That would be ideal; but history suggests that neither conversation nor reading has grown with the inflexion of one another's virtue. Quite the contrary: they have grown separately, united only by being set against a somewhat tense backdrop of authority. The reason we want to begin—though hardly complete—the historicizing of conversation and reading is that we have invented a way of bringing them together with a learning technology. We call it a conversation simulator or conversation sim, by which elaborate content can be presented not as a simple reading but a participatory cycle of proposal and feedback which rather characterizes conversation. In this article, therefore, we first outline the historical basis for believing that conversation and reading have not been the constants of culture that we might assume; second, we provide an outline of the scholarly approaches to reading and conversation in the context of the digital age; third, we introduce and explain the conversation sim, demonstrating some of its capacities for bringing reading and conversation together; and finally, we conclude

with the hope that new technologies, annihilating neither conversation nor reading, might visit the genius of one with some vivacious inflexion of the other.

Historicising reading

Reading has always been a fragile activity, cultivated best by people with much leisure in epochs of humanist privilege. Reading has often been constructed around pleasure, which dominates our consciousness for good reasons, as in Alberto Manguel's (1998) eccentric and grainy *History of Reading*. As seductive as reading is for us, it sits somewhat precariously between authority and intimacy and, in earlier times, it was situated very much on the side of authority. In the days when reading was largely confined to clerics and nobility, reading was positioned close to the tablets of the law. It is almost synonymous with obedience, in the same way that the very word obedience is about listening, as revealed by its Latin etymology (*ob+audire*, to hear; cf. the same motif in Greek, *υπακούω*).

In the *Old Testament*, reading is often public and directly linked to obedience (*Exodus* 24.7, *Deuteronomy*, 31.10–12, *Joshua*, 8.34–35). It respects the absolute observance of the statutes as a fearful form of ascetic practice: 'he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them, neither to deviate left nor right' (*Deuteronomy*, 17.18–20). Reading is not only public but demonstrative: there is repeated use of the phrase of 'to read in their ears', as if drumming the covenant into the head (*2 Kings*, 23.2, again *2 Chronicles*, 32.18, 34.30, *Jeremiah*, 36.6, 10, 13, 15 and 21); and elsewhere the ears are attentive (*Nehemiah* 8.2–3, 8.8). Reading is performed standing up and it takes a quarter of a day (*Nehemiah* 9.3). 'The reading may be for skilled people but the listening is identical for people of all classes, from prince to the lowest' (*Baruch* 1.3–4). To be 'priest and reader of the law of the Lord' is an epithet given to those who 'read in the broad court before the holy porch from morning unto midday, before both men and women; and the multitude gave heed unto the law' (*Esdra*s 8.41; cf. *ibid.* 8.8, 9, 19, 39, 42).

This discipline of reading equates with a dedication to God, because the immutable tablets belong to him; and we feel that some vestige of this holy trust remains in reading practice, where we expect the reading to put us in contact with the wisdom that we lack, often of a pre-emptive kind: we can learn either for profit or to forestall what will otherwise harm us. Reading as the study of fate is expressed by Shakespeare's metaphoric language, where reading is already a kind of prophetic dream—sublime and impossible—as Hotspur articulates: 'therein should we read The very bottom and the soul of hope, The very list, the very utmost bound Of all our fortunes', *1 Henry IV* 4.1.49).

In Hebraic tradition, much jockeying and arguing would have occurred over claims to knowledge, which was rooted in book-learning. Like today, people of learning transact their authority on a somewhat competitive basis, proving that others have either not read or have forgotten what they have read. Jesus uses this line frequently: 'have ye not read in the law?' (*Matthew* 12.3–5, 21.16, 42, 22.31, *Mark* 2.25). Reading is therefore not without anxiety; and a further cause to worry is that one might read but not understand, which is why one says: 'whoso readeth, let him understand' ('ο αναγιωσκων νοιετω, *Matthew* 24.15, *Mark* 13.14), echoed in Petrarch's line suggesting that not every person who reads understands (*ogni uom che legge non s' intende*, 105.46). In ancient Greek, the verbs for understanding (or recognizing) and reading are cognate, only a preposition apart: 'Understandest thou (γινωσκεις) what thou readest?' (αναγιωσκεις; *Acts* 8.28–30). Paul also obtains strong emphasis from the near duplication of verbs: what you read (αναγιωσκετε) or what you acknowledge

(ἐπιγινώσκετε, 2 *Corinthians* 1.13). It is almost like a contract, where an offer is chased by consideration. Thus, through the same language, the text is assimilated within people themselves: ‘Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, *known and read* of all men’ (γινώσκομενη και αναγινώσκομενη, 2 *Corinthians* 3.2).

This metaphorical suggestion that you can read someone’s heart furnished the early renaissance with the idea that inner emotion can be read on the outside, as in Petrarch’s sonnet declaring that you can read on the outside how much he flares up inside (*di fuor si legge com’ io dentro avampi*, 35.5–8). Elsewhere, you can read the depths of the heart upon the face (*del cor profondo ne la fronte legge*, 147.6; cf. 222.12). Not surprisingly, given that the soul itself *reads* as well as sees, hears, speaks, writes and thinks of so many different things (204.1–2).

By the end of the renaissance, reading acquires a subjectivity which allows it to become a metaphor; but even as a metaphor, ‘reading’ really only means *detection*, a motif that centres on honesty. Luciana thinks that dissimulation is logical if you are going to be dishonest. So if you sleep around and ‘truant with your bed’, your transgression should not show up in your face: do not ‘let her read it in thy looks at board’ (Shakespeare, *Comedy of errors* 3.2.18). What one reads in a face is likely to be suspicious, as Buckingham says: ‘I read in ’s looks matter against me, and his eye revil’d me as his abject object’ (*Henry VIII* 1.1.125). Accordingly, you may want to conceal your feelings and not *be read*, as in Luciana’s line: ‘Let not my sister read it in your eye’ (*Comedy of errors* 3.2.9).

It is as if reading moves from the institutional to the metaphorical without an intervening moment of intimacy; there seems no place for what we love in reading, where the transaction with a remote voice seeps through the mind of the reading subject. As readers, we agree to activate the voice in the text. It is we who bring the voice to life, whereas even Shakespeare’s ambitious usage suggests rather a process of divination, a form of scrutiny that yields information, an analytical faculty, which is maintained to the present time, as when spectators claim to be able to read artworks. In such examples, as in the baroque, reading is understood as an act of penetration by the reader: the reader penetrates the text (or the person by analogy to the text). It is the reverse of my sensation of the text penetrating me when I let the ideas enjoy their freedom in my imagination. These meanings remain to be explored in the industrial period in which the contemporary practice of intimate reading evolved. The history of this development would make another project; and it must suffice at this stage to conclude that reading, even in glamorously imaginative periods, did not entail the rhapsodic engagement that we nowadays associate with this key intellectual activity.

Conversation

Analogous observations can be made of conversation. There are curious paradoxes in the respective histories of reading and conversation. Given that spoken language antedates written language by an unthinkable interval, we might expect that conversation has a much longer history. But it is by no means self-evident. People talk in ancient texts, sure enough, but do not refer to their talking as conversation. It does not arrive at consciousness by that name, which suggests that it may not have been practiced in the same way as it is today.

One often imagines that the Platonic dialogues are a form of conversation, which in one sense they clearly are; but they belong to a genre of philosophical inquiry and testing which is more of a discipline than a conversation. As in Buddhist pedagogical cultures, the master puts the student through his or her paces. It is a common mistake to imagine that the word dialogue refers to two people speaking (hence the term

monologue or the neologism ‘polylogue’ to pluralize the polarity of dialogue, as in *Wikipedia, sv.*, or the French page *polylogue.org*. But dialogue derives from the preposition for through (δια -), which has nothing to do with two (δύο). The concept does not involve numbers. A dialogue can be held by one person, a bit as with the English word discourse or discussion. Despite efforts to distinguish these concepts on the basis of their criticality (Brookfield, 1999, ch. 1) in many ways the conversational stands out because of its organicity.

Historically, however, it was not always so hospitable to flux and banter. Like reading, conversation—once it is remarked upon as something other than talking (like the Greek ‘ομιλία)—is also somewhat institutional. Conversation does not always or immediately mean the gorgeous interchange that we think of, akin to leisure and ideally centred over coffee. In the renaissance, conversation also means something more like social intercourse, people frequenting one another’s ambience and making up their company. The word can sometimes even be translated as company, consorting with or having contact or even dealings. So in a letter introducing one of his stories, Bandello notes that Augustus Caesar was constrained to confine his daughter and niece within certain places and to ‘prohibit their contact (*conversazione*) with men’ (1.36).

In the next story, Bandello speaks of a sick person with an abominable and horrible contagious disease, contact with whom (*la cui conversazione*), the whole world abhors and flees (1.37). This form of meeting is spurned for clinical reasons, not because the person is so boring that you would run a mile. And in the story after that, a character says that in eight days he would have a clear opinion of the future ‘if I bring myself to mingle with them (*conversar con loro*) or spy on what they do and the regions that they pass through and the churches where they go’ (1.38). In all of these cases, the word can still be satisfactorily translated by our ‘conversation’; but the meaning is not as intimate as in our epoch.

Throughout the renaissance, the idea of conversation might better be translated as socializing. No one in the renaissance would ever say: in our conversation, you said... One does not say ‘in conversation’—as Nietzsche would say (*im Gespräche, Jenseits* 266 and 333)—as if conversation is a vessel with contents. From the outset in the fourteenth century, conversation is a practice rather than a live text where things are said and remembered. Conversation wants to be decent (*conversar honesto*, Petrarch 354.10) which is also a reflection on the calibre of the participants. It can be very suave (Bandello 1.15) or mirthful and pleasurable (*gioconda e piacevole*. 1.24). And just so, in a letter to signor Ettore Fregoso, conversation is described as yielding delightful and joyful recreation (*lieto e gioioso diporto*), with witty and pleasurable speaking (*parlari piacevoli e faceti* 2.48). But even so, the meaning is often associated with the act of being in a certain company, and is sometimes coupled with ‘frequenting’, as in the comely garden of Girolamo Archinto in the Brera region where a fine company of gentle spirits had assembled for discussions (*ragionamenti*) and Bandello praises the conversation of ‘a young man of excellent letters whose *conversazione* delights and is desired the more one frequents it (*più è frequentata*, 1.54).

Of all writers, Bandello the priest was also in a good position to criticize certain holy men and their conversations with nuns:

speaking all day long and conversing with the nuns, they take on a domestic familiarity with them; and for this reason sometimes the conversation which ought to be totally spiritual becomes carnal and turns into the ‘resurrection of the flesh’. 3.61

By Bandello’s day, conversation had already been defined as a key element to be managed skillfully in courtly practice. For example, Francesco Guicciardini declares that

he does not want to exclude people from common discussion and from conversing together with charming and lovely domesticity (*conversare insieme con grata e amorevole dimestichezza*, *Ricordi* 184); and so too in Baldassar Castiglione, the themes of conversation and familiarity are linked (*Cortegiano* 1.3), though again, this urbane author insists on the efficacy and delightfulness of conversation (1.14 and 2.7) as a *sine qua non* of the courtier (2.17, 2.18), some of which has to do with speaking to people of unequal rank (2.25). But true to the pattern noted, one talks about conversation rather than talking within a conversation (2.31).

Similar observations can be made through the writings of Montaigne ('if his conversation importunes you', *Essais* 3.3), where the French mirrors the Italian usage in a transactional or operational emphasis. And so, for that matter, does Shakespeare's English: 'your converse and business' (*Othello* 3.1.40). Space does not allow us to scour the whole of baroque literature, much less what followed; but it seems that throughout the *ancien régime* there is nothing which describes that organic incubator of content which we think of today, and which may have been expressed by Nietzsche when he says of two interlocutors: one seeks the midwife for his thoughts (*Geburtsbelfer für seine Gedanken*) and the other seeks someone whom he can help; thus a good conversation arises (136). It is not surprising that somewhat patchy traces of conversation are to be found in pre-industrial literature, given that western culture has long been devoted to defining and clarifying; and conversation is organically mobile, inventively self-cued and resists definition or clarity. But like the richness of reading, the endless pregnancy of conversation can be contemplated through attempts to replicate or simulate it.

Reading as early technology of learning

The written word was one of the first educational technologies, and it is changing. Reading, which has remained much the same activity for as long as there were books, has also evolved, not just in the volume of participation but the headspace that it supports. Though existing for millennia, books became more accessible in the renaissance with the invention of printing; then reading was greatly cultivated with Protestantism, where it would no longer be confined to a humanist elite but seemed integral to a pious life. Reading received further emphasis in the industrial period, where it was linked to key competencies, a tool essential for many occupations, especially with the rise of technology and tertiary industries. Consequently, to be illiterate is a terrible problem, because essential intelligence cannot be transacted without reading and writing.

If we are to move toward a critical scholarship of educational technology, there is a need for an examination of the histories and contexts in which technologies are used ([Selwyn, 2010](#)), and reading as a learning activity should not be exempt from this analysis. Although reading may be considered the most banal of educational technologies, in various disembodied forms, reading has also become a key to global youth culture on the Internet. It is a paradox, because the viral growth of chat (instantaneous communication by reading and writing) arises with a suspected decline of immersive reading ([Buzzetto-More et al., 2007](#); [Piscioneri and Hlavac, 2012](#)), which is the absorption of delicate narratives that form the basis of the humanities. We must also accept that our students may experience or conceptualize reading differently to us ([Weller, 2010](#)), and may be strategic in their close reading choices which a clever LMS design might be able to influence ([Adlington and Wright, 2012](#)).

So with the simultaneous resistance to reading and its exponential spread into personal interaction, we are both charmed and alarmed. Historically, reading and other forms of communication have neither been in a direct nor a reciprocal relation. The

growth of printed books did not discourage face-to-face education. Few lecturers in any epoch had cause for concern that the availability of books—many of which might be more learned and succinct than a lecture—would have a corrosive effect on the classroom. The very word lecturer means reader, whence the two words may be put together in a somewhat monitory or instructional sense (Shakespeare, ‘I have heard him read many lectures against it’, *As you like it* 3.2.365; ‘read no other lectures to her’, *Taming of the shrew* 1.2.148; ‘we read lectures to you’, *Coriolanus* 2.3.243; ‘To read a lecture of them?’ *Richard II* 4.1.232.); and shortly after Gutenberg, it might have appeared that the lecturer would become redundant, given that the contents of a lecture could often be absorbed more economically by means of print media. But over the centuries, the lecture theatre has lost little of its prestige and has remained the key spatial motif of humanities education, even though as a mode of dissemination it seems to lag technological progress by a half millennium (albeit supplemented with slide-shows), requiring people to huddle in a place and time of the university’s choosing, at considerable personal and environmental inconvenience.

Lectures

Lectures have the allure of the performative. The reason for their obdurate appeal against so much technology might have to do with the witty and enchanting way in which knowledge and thinking are activated and dramatized in real time by the lecturer. You do not know, as you do with a text, that the next words have been adequately formulated. Thoughts lie somewhat in the balance, and the audience enjoys a kind of thrill in apprehending the lecturer’s rapid ratiocination in delivering what may have been planned optimally but not yet scripted. The audience thus witnesses the lecturer actively rehearsing thought, going through a tense but pleasurable cognitive process and hence demonstrating its energy and joy. It might also be argued that vivacious lectures delivered by means of videos embedded in an LMS (learning management system) invite a similar performative engagement with the viewer.

Learning Management Systems

While the lectern is still tenanted by charismatic scholars, a revolution has occurred around them in the advent of the LMS. Lecture-content can now be deposited in one form or another, tutorial-content disseminated, readings given out, discussion-forums held, small work-groups convened and even certain types of test administered. The uptake of these packages has been swift and few university courses are without their support.

With a pessimism towards educational technology recently justified by Selwyn (2011) we entered the Learning Management System as skeptics, believing that these systems could do little but dump a sclerotic version of performative and organic intellectual content, whose dead electronic hand would serve, at best, to highlight the vivacity of the live presentation. The lecture that has already been given and is recorded in televisual lock-off is tedious, dead, like cold coffee, able to match neither the adrenaline surge of a lecture in real-time nor the crafty surprises engineered in the *mis en scène* of film and television.

With the ‘trojan mouse’ (Brown, Paewai & Suddaby, 2010) of an institutional migration to a new LMS, we have been prompted to revise and reconceptualize pedagogy, because the LMS offers new insights into reading and conversation. Our approach has concentrated on the overlap between reading and conversation and is structured around student-computer relations rather than student-teacher relations or

student-student relations; because student-teacher and student-student forms of conversation are the least like reading. Like other scholars who recognize that ‘texts produced in association with digital technologies are hybrid, fluid and multimodal’ (Lea & Jones, 2011, p. 380) we see the transformative potential of a new genre of writing and an experience of reading that paradoxically clinches the very elements of reading that are most vulnerable in the electronic age. However, the virtues of the LMS would not have arisen in our imaginations had we not first been suitably pessimistic, *à la* Selwyn, about the greater potential for digital mortification.

The LMS presents an opportunity to build a community, for students to talk to one another and for us as lecturers to participate in discussions. Although clearly good and Socratic, from the moment it became available, this facility also brought difficulties with it, some of which only exaggerate structural difficulties before the LMS. Discussion forums are useful but, in structural terms, we are only using the computer as a kind of accelerated post-office. For the individual academic, the arrangement augments the already overburdened inbox with prolific chatter that self-generates on a level that is difficult to influence. Either you allow much dubious content to self-propagate or you constantly have to intervene, like a paranoid constable, monitoring discussions that are either wide of the mark or out of hand or boring with florid platitudes, inducing a depressing effect on bright students who are alarmed at the communicative promiscuity of mediocre students (at least in their view). Large enrolment courses frequently see thousands of discussion posts expressing a mess of confusion and repetition.

In a tutorial, a slower student who is about to bore the speedy students can be thanked, with the case summarized to its benefit, so that a high standard of conversation is maintained. Feedback can be provided quickly, tactfully, and in a manner that directs learning toward the intended outcomes. Asynchronous discussion tools coupled with mountainous workloads diminish the ability to intervene as a person writes, and as a result this proactive diplomacy of the tutor is difficult to achieve. The indisposition is like the problem of having either too little discussion (which makes any electronic lecturer anxious) or too much. A good tutor in a classroom can handle either situation by means of encouragement and the creative use of pauses or much smiling, or alternatively—when everyone wants to speak at once—a loud voice that says: ‘please, let’s hear what Jessica is saying’. However, a counterpart to the live language of blandishments, appeals and calls to order is challenging, albeit not impossible in the electronic classroom (Salmon, 2006).

Electronic conversation has to be handled tactfully, because digital communication chaotically exaggerates signs of impatience or sarcasm, and indelicate phrases can rapidly escalate to rudeness (Lu, 2010; Bordia, 1997). The result is a horrific burden—as Shakespeare would say, ‘of a most facinerious spirit’—the like of which has never descended on academics in the history of the university.

To escape from this threat, we wanted to create our own conversations, which in a sense we have always sought when we aspire to be an engaging writer, where we trust that our train of thought follows the spirit of a conversation, with one idea coming up behind another, a bit like the gentle rhythms of a conversation (‘the converse of breath’, as Shakespeare says, *Loves labours lost* 5.2.745). A vivacious text always presents an inflected voice; so in a sense it already simulates aspects of the conversational. But now—and this is our theory—we can do better in creating a form of text that simulates conversation. The computer will allow the reader (let us say our students) to take part in the flow of ideas, not by adding material but by choosing from various options. We think of this as a *conversation sim*. It simulates some of the more decisive conditions of taking part in a conversation (Nelson & Dawson 2012).

Conversation simulation

Using the multiple choice quiz tool of any LMS, it is possible to construct a conversation that presents a sequence of statements. We might begin with an unanswered problem or a proclamation that represents some embarrassment, of which there are thousands of in cultural subjects, and which any tutor is likely to float at the beginning of a class. The tutor waits for an answer; but frequently either none is forthcoming or an errant response is given; so the tutor then manipulates the group to get the desired elements of a good answer. So in the conversation sim, the computer then proposes a rough answer to the question. As in the tute room, it might be very shrewd or somewhat naive. The next step is for the student to decide: is it a good answer, a poor answer or perhaps a good answer and perhaps not. Receiving the student's verdict, the computer then returns feedback on whether the student's decision seems prudent or otherwise and gives reasons. Essentially, the conversation sim takes this structure:

problem → proposal → decision → reflexion

See Figure 1 below for an example graphical representation, using an MCQ plugin on Wordpress; this is available live at <http://conversationsim.org>

Can subterfuge be honourable?

Question 1 of 4

A problem

Two researchers in social medicine have devised a plan to investigate the hidden milieu of online anorexic communities. They are extremely secretive and members on pro-ana sites are suspicious and exclude all forms of research. One of the investigators adopts a pseudonym, uses the language of youth and projects all the neuroses to gain acceptance. How ethical is this methodology?

A response

It sounds ugly but we have to remember that anorexia is a serious condition, akin to suicide, and unless we understand how it is handled, we cannot advance medical science.

Maybe

No

Yes

Figure 1. A conversation sim running on Wordpress.

There are four voices in the conversation. An example is the following from a senior unit dealing with research ethics. The title for the lesson is 'Beyond ethics as drill'. It begins by stating a problem in the voice of a somewhat confused and worried person, implicitly a researcher who has no time to read the university's compendious *Doctoral Handbook* or refer to the *Research Integrity Policy* every time a decision has to be made about a candidature:

I'm a bit worried that research is a field in which we're harangued by rule-keepers and process-police. Not that I'm an anarchist, but can you point me to some principles, so that I don't need to be

indoctrinated and then monitored forevermore in an uneasy relationship with dogmatic regulations that I'm sure to forget?

The question is fair and somewhat necessary, and not necessarily overstated. In spite of the wayward and slightly grumpy voice, it has a degree of credibility, suggesting that learning rules by rote is not sustainable and hence seeking broad principles instead that underlie the rules. No response is required of the student at this stage, because another voice contributes a proposal. In a patient and supportive conversational acknowledgement of the problem, it says:

That's a very good question. It would be better if we didn't have to observe rules but rather possessed a sense of fairness which would obviate the grand regulatory preoccupations and make the several committees redundant.

At this point, the student has to decide if this response deserves a 'yes', a 'no' or a 'maybe' or alternatively 'agree', 'disagree' or 'partly agree and partly disagree'. As soon as one of these options has been selected, the computer returns feedback, carefully inflected according to the choice that the student made. In all cases, it suggests that probably the prudent answer would be 'maybe'. It goes on:

In principle, perhaps; but the problem is that the sense of fairness that you invoke is somewhat open to disparate interpretations. Sometimes, we don't see that our behaviour is unfair. And sometimes, ideas of fairness—however we scrutinize them—differ sharply among researchers, and not necessarily because of our respective private interests. So we prefer to think of a common process to negotiate and socialize what is fair in each circumstance.

A quality of all good conversations in cultural subjects is that (a) they are open ended, (b) they invite plural perspectives and (c) they handle doubt. As Nietzsche says, 'in conversation, assigning right or wrong to either interlocutor is more a thing of familiarity (*Angewöhnung*): the one like the other has sense' (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 334). So the computer repeats the initial problem and presents the student with another response, which is quite different to the first:

The core principle is that no one should get hurt by our research. It's not a lot to ask. The rules, as you contemptuously describe the delicate network of consideration, are about protecting people from harm.

Once again, the student has to decide if this response deserves a 'yes', a 'no' or a 'maybe'. The feedback is also coy about agreeing with the student if he or she gives assent to the response. Again, speaking in the first person, the computer argues for a 'maybe'.

I guess at a pinch you could call it a core principle; but there's a prior value, namely that our research should do good: it should be to the advantage of humanity and other living creatures or valuable planetary systems.

It does not clarify everything. A conversation seldom does. It does not go on to explain that avoiding harm is only a small part of doing good, or that sometimes you can do a great deal of good while enduring a teensy bit of harm. Conversations are organic and inventively cue themselves by the last thing that has been said. They take up directions because something has just been uttered which triggers an imaginative

response and calls for a further argument or a different theme to be introduced. So in our example, the next encounter takes up where the last left off, as if remembering the point from the computer's feedback. So once again, the initial problem is rehearsed and another response is given again:

An equally strong principle is that the world should benefit by our research. It comes to the fore especially when our work handles people with fewer privileges than we have. Our research benefits us but it doesn't necessarily benefit our subjects. In one reading, this is mere exploitation and, even though undoubtedly legal, is unethical.

This time, the voice of feedback in the computer is positive, praising the student for clicking 'yes' and quizzing the student for equivocating and disapproving for saying 'no'. It elaborates the suggestion, declaring:

Yes. Our research clearly benefits us—because we hold down good positions and get publications, grants and gain authority—and we have lots of incentives to do what we do. But if nothing flows back to our subjects and their community, we researchers are a kind of carpetbagger.

The voice of the computer here is also the voice of the lecturer, which (in the case of questions of ethics in research) implicitly speaks for the university. So it is quite a cheeky apparatus, with a degree of presumption folded into the advice. Every tutor experiences this rush of trepidation in assuming the voice of the university when interrogated by students about processes, and there are always temptations to toy with the rules. Perhaps the slightly wayward turn of phrase deconstructs the high institutionality of the utterance; after all, questions of ethics are seldom capable of a totalized answer, as if comprehending all perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders. So, through the writing, the computer has to equip itself with a non-robotic sentiment.

Most importantly, the element of doubt is insisted upon throughout the process. First, doubt is projected by the question expressing some aporia; second, doubt is directly acknowledged by the presence of a 'maybe' or 'partly agree and partly disagree', which gives credence to the idea that an answer may be neither right nor wrong (not just that we cannot decide); and finally, doubt is accommodated and celebrated by the proliferation of responses to the original dilemma. In the structure of a conversation sim, there are always four points of riposte. And so the final response to our issue of research ethics is the following:

Ethics should be constructed around 'dos', not 'don'ts'. Unfortunately, regulations are structurally negative; and, as with occupational health and safety provisions, they're seen in terms of embarrassment-prevention, liability, consequences, audits and risk-management. Alas, this wily anticipation of failure sometimes seems to lack good faith: it equates with brand-protection and perverts the positive and enduring point of ethics.

The computer is happy if you agree to this assertion.

Yes. Paradoxically, this negative inflexion is a risk in any university. And that's where we look to you to show research leadership. The concept of ethical research yielding a benefit to the people or creatures or ecosystems that we deal with as subject matter needs all the good faith it can get. It's the larger and socially generous dimension of research leadership.

While all of this conversation has been occurring, the students have just been reading. It is a form of reading quite different from following the dialogue of a play, for example, where multiple voices answer one another in a conversation on stage. The playwright has orchestrated the dialogue to be vivacious and inflected with wit and drama, no doubt enjoying the morbidity of characters who have a predictable defect in their thought and projection. But the structural difference between the play and the conversation sim is that the reader of the play, like the audience in the theatre, has no input beyond following the banter, beyond the subliminal gasps or groans or laughter. In the conversation sim, however, the student becomes the third interlocutor (admittedly somewhat taciturn) in a chain that ends with the lecturer's wisdom.

Understanding the quality of learning from a conversation sim is challenging; the medical education community finds with its own simulation approaches that designing and executing studies that measure the transfer of simulated skill to actual practice is difficult (McGaghie, et al. 2010), but there is some evidence for approaches that privilege the narrative (Bearman, Cesnik & Liddell, 2001). If assessment's ultimate goal is to develop students' lifelong ability to make judgements within the assessed domain (Boud, 2000), then practice with a conversation sim may have merit: although the student has no real voice; their entire experience is one of passing judgement, which is itself assessed.

It is clear that the conversation sim is neither a proper conversation nor a reading in the sense of immersive reading. It is, however, a useful hybrid which has some of the advantages of both reading and conversation, and it has a special application in the context of an LMS, where it can also be linked to student-student discussion. First, we rehearse a kind of conversation where the participant is guaranteed to be on-topic. There is no chance of an irrelevant response or a mediocre thought that depresses everyone in the virtual space. The whole encounter is entirely within the lecturer's control and nothing is left to the probability of having excellent students as opposed to bombastic or lazy ones; and the monitory attendance of the lecturer is unnecessary, as the class can be 5 or 500, with no greater effort, in the same way that books can be read by any number of people in a way which does not affect the quality of anyone's experience of the text, which can be as rewarding for the millionth reader as the first.

Second, we conduct a kind of reading in which the reader is not entirely passive. Admittedly, the text blocks are short and err to sound bytes in their construction. It is not deep reading. But that is not to say that it does not prompt deep thinking. The only limitation is the writing skill of the author in proposing ideas in condensed poetic antitheses. The genre encourages the invention of aphoristic counterpoint, as if an extension of the ancient genre of *apophthegmata* or the *pensées* of the renaissance and baroque. So the nature of writing in a conversational vein also becomes a subject of interest throughout.

Conversational reading

As freely acknowledged, a conversation sim is not a real conversation, nor does it directly facilitate student-teacher or student-student interaction. But how apologetic we need to be for the gap remains unclear. Any form of reading is conversational only to the degree that it provides the illusion of a conversation, given that there is only one interlocutor in the room. How often and under what circumstances are writing and reading a simulation of conversation, as in the dialogues of Plato but more conspicuously in the long tradition of plays, which are so frequently read rather than performed in the theatre?

Most writing is somewhat conversational, because we seem to have a kind of interchange between text and us. The text tells us something and hopes to persuade us. Meanwhile, we judge and assimilate, just like when someone talks, and look for our moment to formulate a response. In reading, we know that there is no reciprocity beyond the intimacy of imaginary convergent thought, nor can there be any reinforcement from us: the text is deaf and we are dumb.

But just as we should not underestimate how dynamic reading is, so we should not overestimate how organic conversation is. Much conversation is a case of two people scrambling for a toehold on one another's soliloquy, which was satirized memorably by La Rochefoucault:

One of the things that causes us to find so few people who appear reasonable and agreeable in conversation is that there's hardly anyone who doesn't think about what he or she wants to say rather than responding precisely to what has just been said to him or her. The most adept and diplomatic adopt an attentive mein, while you see in their eyes and their spirit a distraction from what you're saying to them and a keenness to precipitate a return to what they want to say. (Maximes 139; see also La Bruyère, Des jugements 9 (VII))

But even when we strike a lovely conversationalist who asks lots of questions and supplements what we say and finishes our sentences out of sympathy for our views, a similar process occurs which we might recognize from reading. The two processes have much in common, because in either case the mind is caused to follow and build a thought which otherwise might have no place there.

In either reading or conversing, we subject our minds to an external influence that causes us to think differently, even if momentarily, and to take on the voice and headspace of someone else, which is perhaps the underlying reason that the ability to handle contradiction has been suggested as the basis of readerly pleasure ([Barthes, 1975](#)). The mind is normally autonomous and somewhat given to dictating its own thoughts beyond the stimuli that constantly attend through the senses; but language in either a fixed or organic form invites, to some extent, an alien organization of thought, someone else's thought inside your own. It is then up to us to determine suitable parameters for this intrusion, so to speak; a wider conspectus of doubt and riposte subtends the content and takes care of discrepancies between the mind's prior inclination and the influence that it becomes host to.

Both reading and conversing are clearly rich processes which are healthy for all kinds of reasons, presenting cultures as well as individuals with a powerful motif of growth in consciousness. But they are also (a) inscrutable processes and (b) remarkably recent in any sense that contemplates their overlap. Having outlined how both reading and conversation have been traditionally circumscribed by archaic social institutions, we feel that we have usefully identified a stimulating nexus that could be further cultivated through digital technology.

Toward new forms of reading and conversation

We contend that our understanding of both reading and conversation is historically determined; consequently, our current epoch, which offers new opportunities to simulate conversational structures through technology, provides scope for development in these bastions of education and intellectual life. It is likely that new kinds of reading and conversation will arise in the future; and with technological developments becoming so widespread, it seems reasonable to imagine that the educational computer might become the host to new conversational structures between teachers and learners.

Setting up a conversation sim is easy, once the academic has conceptualized his or her content in terms of searching questions. We have exploited the multiple-choice format, because it accommodates longer slabs of prose and the options remain one-liners: yes, no or maybe. But other engines inside an LMS will afford other benefits. Similar conversational reading also can be structured by perverting the 'survey' option or 'feedback' or 'choice', depending on the LMS. They will all allow a sequence approximating our string

problem → proposal → decision → reflexion

though the reflexion may not be so easily adjustable according to the decision that the student made. As in a real conversation, where the interlocutors need to work out how long they will occupy the other person's time, there are choices of length to be made within the genre which determine the appropriate tool. In essence, though, the computer offers the same structure, where the reading process has a response within it. Historically, that is something new and points to a curious convergence with conversation that has much potential.

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Numbers to classical and biblical texts follow the standard reference system derived from the canonical editions used in lexicography. Different editions and translations have disparate pagination, whereas the canonical numbering is consistent. Similarly, the numbering used in renaissance and baroque texts follows the order of canto/ stanza for epic poems, act/ scene for plays or book/ story for novelle or essays.

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