BOOK REVIEW


by Ellen Rose

Toronto, Canada: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2014. 124 pp.

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Reflection is to human existence as breath is to life: essential. With a concept so central to how modern society understands itself there is, according to Rose, much to think about in terms of reflection’s role within individual and societal pursuits of knowledge and understanding—especially since the advent of digital information technology. Herein lies the intention of Rose’s On Reflection: An Essay on Technology, Education, and the Status of Thought in the Twenty-First Century—to understand reflection in relation to a growing trend within education, and society at large, that devalues and diminishes the significance and purpose of reflection in our everyday lives.

For Rose, reflection is a “habit of mind,” a “way of being” that requires the preconditions of “solitude and slowness” in order for deep and sustained thought to occur (p. 107). However, in a “digital-cellular-online-robotic-information-saturated-hypersociety” (p.4), Rose argues that reflection is increasingly looked upon as a pursuit of the elite. As she states:

The reflective individual is held ‘in contempt’ by contemporary society for failing to contribute anything of utilitarian value to the work that must be done—and that is a grave offense in a society like ours, which gives so much precedence to productivity, efficiency, and tangible results. (p. 6)

Tracing the changing meaning of the term, Rose examines how thinkers such as Dewey, Schön, and Prensky have usurped the term’s original meaning and adapted it to the contexts of our lives. She contends that these thinkers’ equation of reflection with action-based and pragmatic pursuits of knowledge alienates individuals from philosophical pursuits by widening the gap between “real life and reflection” (p. 13–14). While Rose offers some interesting insights on the tension between progress and conventional reflection, her tendency to generalise the juncture of information technology and reflective thinking overlooks some of the more subtle occasions where reflection and technology coincide in education, enriching our capacity as reflective beings. In short, this book is a provocative read but in my view lacks a well-balanced examination of technology’s impact on human lives.
Rose’s work not only argues for reflection, but also takes issue with conventional notions of progress. To elaborate on this tension between reflection and progress, I turn to the opening of the film, Surviving Progress (Crooks & Roy, 2011), where Ronald Wright (2004), author of A Short History of Progress, discusses in an interview how conceptions of progress are often linked to increased complexity, which is not necessarily beneficial for human beings. Wright explains his point through his concept of the “progress trap,” which yields short-term benefits but leads to long-term disasters (Crooks & Roy, 2011). He elaborates by discussing the evolution of hunting techniques of the now extinct mammoth. The Stone Age hunters who discovered how to kill two mammoths instead of one made progress, but for the groups who learned how to drive entire herds off cliffs at once made a kind of progress that hindered their long-term well-being. In the short-term, the latter groups had more meat for more people but in the long-term, this technique led to the decimation of the mammoth population, which destroyed the people’s major food source as well as their way of life (Crooks & Roy, 2011). Wright notes that physiologically, little has changed between the bodies and minds of the Stone Age hunter and the modern day human.

Similar to Wright’s point on complexity and progress, Rose argues that current conceptions of progress leave little room for the deep and sustained thought essential to conventional reflection, which by extension, erodes our long-term capacity for intellectual thought. The connection I make to Rose’s work is that if we redefine the role, purpose, and benefit of conventional reflection within our everyday lives, in some way, we come closer and closer to snaring ourselves in an inescapable “progress trap”. In an information-saturated-hypersociety our lives become increasingly complex with the endless ways we can connect to each other via technology.

However, Rose’s tendency to over generalise the relationship between reflection and technology to make larger, at times arbitrary, points takes away from the book’s ability to offer a well-balanced perspective. Rose claims that “information technology is inherently inimical to reflection” (p. 94). This statement requires a closer examination. On one hand, Rose captures how the 24/7 wired world has eroded the duration and quality of an individual’s attention span. On the other, she overlooks the reflective process required in some technology to make meaningful observations of one’s self in relation to the world (Casey, 2011). For instance, there is little or no discussion in her book about the function of blogs in relation to reflection; the multimedia used by this writer in order to create a reflection on a theme, idea, or aesthetic. Yet, she commits several pages to lamenting the decline of intellectual discussion at conferences due to PowerPoint and YouTube.

Another popular digital technology within formal and informal learning environments is programs used to create digital stories, which Rose does not address in her book. As a media educator with National Film Board of Canada for four years, I worked closely with young students to explore and reflect upon their sociopolitical positions in relation to society, using digital storytelling programs to create deep and sustained reflections. Rose’s tendency to generalise the relationship between technology and reflection overlooks these occasions where the two coalesce, in particular in relation to how digital storytelling brings together the separate mediums of text, image, and sound in order to reflect a wholly new idea. This is an occurrence that subscribes to Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of reflection, and which Rose also uses to frame her own thinking on conventional reflection. Heidegger understood reflection as thought, which at “first sight does not go together at all” (as quoted in Rose, p. 19), and Merleau-Ponty conceived of reflection as thought in which “meanings sometimes recombine to form new thought” (as quoted in Rose, p. 19). The connection I make to these thinkers with regards to an individual’s use of technology is that while image, text, and sound are themselves not thoughts, the user conventionally reflects by bringing together seemingly unrelated parts via the medium of such a mode as digital storytelling. In workshops with students, their product was often irrelevant; what mattered was that these students, for the most part, engaged with this technology in an attentive and sustained manner. The two examples above demonstrate instances where technology and reflection are not inimical but rather, an occasion for reflective thinking.
The above two examples also reveal the arbitrary lines Rose draws around reflection as a “way of being” (p. 102). Early in her book, she asks a question about the difference between deep thought and superficial thought, conceding that “sensory data” offers little in the way of an answer (p. 19). The example she provides concerns appearance—the person sitting quietly may simply be creating a grocery list whereas a lone jogger “may be in a state of mind more clearly approximating what [she] would call reflective” (p. 19). The arbitrary lines Rose draws generalise by not providing space to consider the occasions where technology and reflection do coincide. For example, blog writers who use technology as a means to store their deep contemplations, or, a young student creating a digital story in order to convey a complicated idea she has about her identity. Rose draws these arbitrary lines when she attempts to define when and where someone can engage in conventional thinking. I am aware that my point teeters on what Rose critiques as the all-inclusive approach to reflection, however, my aim here is to highlight that although not everything we do can be considered reflective, it is arbitrary to try and define the parameters of a very subjective experience.

According to Rose, “reflective time is necessarily slow [and is] associated with the increasingly rare qualities of care and attentiveness” (p. 3). For me, the above statement does not necessarily mean that reflection is inimical with technology. The stronger, more consistent argument to be made here is that it is necessary to unplug and retreat at times from our “digital-cellular-online-robotic-information-saturated-hypersociety” (p.4) so that when we reconnect, we do so with an intent that is mindful of our habits of use—which demands care and attentiveness to how the various technologies affect our lives. For the most part, Rose recognises the latter: that is, society’s use of technology often occurs without awareness as to its peripheral impact on the seemingly unconnected aspects of our lives.

I want to conclude this review by discussing some of the additional points Rose makes that I appreciate as an educator, particularly her point about teachers as stewards of technology. Teachers, she argues, need to carefully manage the integration of technology into their classrooms. The strength of this point, something valuable to all educators, is that teachers who use technology should also create time to discuss the how and why of a technology with their students, thereby cultivating with students, a reflective relationship towards the use of technology. I think this book offers a valuable conversation for anyone interested in technology’s impact on education and thought. The book does need to be read with a critical and thoughtful eye so as to understand when the tendency to generalise overlooks the nuanced relationship between reflection and technology.

References

