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Daniel Certainly Hopes Not!

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**WAYS WITH WORDS, OLD AND NEW**  
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# Do the New Electronic Media Foretell the Death of the Book?

## Daniel Certainly Hopes Not!

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### Abstract

*Books, collectively, are one method of representing and viewing images and perceptions of the world for children and adults alike. Alternatively, the electronic media provides access to diverse ways of representations of the world. The proposition that a choice be made between books, in their most traditional format and ebooks, as provided by the electronic media, is a moot one. Co-existence of both forms of knowledge acquisition may be the optimum aim. Can one assume however, that the pursuit of this aim of co-existence between the traditional notion of books and ebooks for children will be an egalitarian one? What factors may hinder pursuit of this egalitarian aim and increase the 'digital divide'?*

**Keywords:** Homework, Home Readers, Cultural Capital, Digital Divide

### Who is Daniel?

Daniel, a fictional character, could depict any child who has had an underprivileged upbringing. He could be envisaged as a male or female disadvantaged Australian primary school child, aged between 4-13 years. He may have red, black, brown, fair or blond hair, his eyes could be any of the colours ranging from blue through to green and brown, his build could vary from large to small, undernourished to obese.

Daniel is likely to attend a public school categorized under the banner of the Priority Schools Funded Program (PSFP, <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport>). The PSFP, originally titled the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP), was first established in 1973 by the Australian Federal Government for implementation in NSW Department of Education and Training Public Schools, with the intention of focusing on "compensating the deficits" (Germov in Allen, 2001) of working class children

(Connell 1993 cited in Germov 2001, in Allen 2001). This deficit, in terms of economic and emotional stability, was considered to hinder access to the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, in Germov 2001, in Allen 2001) vital for educational success (Connell, 1993 in Germov 2001 in Allen, 2001). The focus of DSP and later PSFP evolved over the years to concentrate on the deficits in curriculum rather than the individual. The current PSFP focus is on improving students' literacy, numeracy and participation outcomes (<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport>). Public Schools are identified for inclusion in the program based on their drawing community's socio-economic status. This program provides additional

financial support used to assist school communities to help bridge the achievement gap for students. Schools and their communities are microcosms of society with their own forms of social and cultural capital (Hayes, 2002) and schools identified under the banner of the PSFP are concerned with the construction of social and cultural capital for their students.

'Cultural Capital' is a term, coined by Bourdieu, cited by Hayes (2002), to represent the collection of non-economic forces such as "family background, social class, varying investments in and commitments to education and different resources which influence academic success". Bourdieu argues that, "The scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family." Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, (1986) claim that social capital is what enables families and communities to get ahead and Hayes, (2002) adds that social capital is a process between people which establishes networks of norms and social trust. One such normal practice, for school students, is that of homework. The practice of home reading, either traditional print or e-books, as students comply with system entrenched assigned homework tasks, is one element that may contribute to comprehension of the tacit understandings and knowledge essential for the construction of cultural capital within the context of the school. The provision of traditional books, which are easily transported home from school, are cheap and plentiful, provide one method of access to text. E-books provide another. In order to debate the posed question – "Do the new electronic media foretell the death of the book?" e-books and traditional books need some introduction.

The E-book- is it just a different form of the traditional book or a truly marvellous concept? E-books offer enormous potential" (Lynch



<http://www.firstmonday.org>) to the beginning and new reader. They can be visually exciting with complicated graphic designs and colour combinations, including moving and still images and sound. They offer the visually impaired options not possible with traditional print books as highlighted in John Ligon's presentation abstract (2004), options that allow far greater access to information than the traditional book. The font size and style can be changed to suit the individual reader, the amount of text contained on a page can be individually determined, skimming and flicking through the e-book is at the press of a button or mouse key. Critiquing can be an ongoing process as the reader engages with the process of navigating through the text in a non-linear way, choosing their own pathways and deviations, no longer following the authors intended routes (Gosling, 1998). E-books of the future have the potential to be like the personal CD player of today, designed as cheap (Haynes, 2004), light, durable and waterproof packages, containing potentially thousands of books, both in number and style (Lynch <http://www.firstmonday.org>).

The familiarity of hand held computer games by children who are today very adept at reading text on a screen may challenge the assertion that "people don't want to read text on a screen." (Gosling, 1998) To beginning readers of the 21st century, reading e-books may be a preferable and quite ordinary thing to do. Clifford Lynch writes of the notion of 'substitutability'. He claims that this notion underestimates and trivializes the future of the e-book. The e-book, he suggests, should not be considered as a substitute because it is capable of so much more than a traditional book. He suggests a future where e-books will house thousands of books. Vaknin (2002) writes of the proponents of the e-book who "protest that e-books are not merely an ephemeral rendition of their print predecessors- they are a new medium, an altogether different reading experience". There is little doubt that the e-book has enormous potential and a positive future as "in a few years at least some high end appliances will house thousands of books simultaneously...portable, personal digital libraries" (Lynch <http://www.firstmonday.org>). Fischer, in *The History of Writing* (2001) discussed the advent of print 500 years ago, which "changed the world". He suggests that the personal computer has now been responsible for promulgating the "electronic society", which he adds, is "scripting our future". Sufficient evidence exists that the e-book is indeed a truly marvellous concept.

Traditional books, with their myriad styles, both non-fiction and fiction, are collectively today one method of representing and viewing images and perceptions of the world for children and adults alike. Traditional books, to many people, are absolutely treasured items that hold the potential to

evoke emotions and conjure vivid memories. Traditional books are central to myriad social functions and cultural practices, particularly to those cultures valuing materialism. Traditional print books provide the resource for private, individual and shared experiences. They are portable, durable –if kept clear of water and fire- and provide a tried and trusted method of recording historical perspectives. Eco (1994) writes of the advantages of traditional print books and highlights that they "do not suffer power shortages and blackouts" and Bolter (cited in Eco 1994), supports Eco by suggesting that "electronic communication travels ahead of you, books travel with you at your speed". Historically, traditional print books have given permanence to the many representations of the world and worldviews presented by authors. Books are 'archiveable'.

Traditional books are physical objects that provide a tangible product with well-established standards, as Clark is suggesting in the abstract of his forthcoming paper (2004), combined with the opportunity of providing for tactile experiences. They can be archived in libraries, stored in classrooms, arranged in home book cases in bedrooms, lounge rooms, kitchens, studies and even toilets. Beginning readers and readers alike find traditional books predictable in format and conventions (Freebody & Luke cited in Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2001). Typically the conventions readers use in Australia, which are taught to beginning readers, involve familiarity with a linear structure, left to right and top to bottom with left to right eye scanning required, pages turning from front to back with the language use generally conforming, in Australia, to standardised English spelling and grammar. Eco (2003)

The case that both traditional books and e-books both have parts to play in providing access to alternative and diverse ways of representations of the world can be proposed. The alternative proposition that a choice be made between books, in their most traditional printed format and e-books, as provided by the electronic media, is a moot one. Dale Spender, the feminist critic, in her publication "Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace" (cited in Gosling, 1998) takes the reader on a history lesson reminding them of the process of change and its inevitable deficits and rewards. She tells of the rise of the book, which "meant the loss of those beautiful, illuminated manuscripts that were the repository of human wisdom". Alternatively Vaknin (2002) writes that the first printed books allowed scholars and laymen access to knowledge and "liberated books from the tyranny of monastic scriptoria and 'libraries' ". Change, over time, is an inevitable process and it is this process of change and the resultant deficits and rewards that are worthy of debate. The notion of change in this instance is not one of substitutability (Lynch <http://www.firstmonday.org>) or e-books as

being viewed as “ephemeral renditions” of their print predecessors, Vaknin (2002) but an altogether different reading experience. Eco (1994) claims that culturally-historically in relation to books “something hasn’t been simply killed by something else” rather “something has been profoundly changed by something else”. Eco (2003) further states that computers may be “diffusing a new form of literacy, but they are incapable of satisfying all the intellectual needs they are stimulating”.

Traditional books and e-books are merging rather than one superseding the other. Symes and Preston (1997) suggest that an approach to education that doesn’t engage technologies is certain to become “ineffective and redundant”, yet the idea of new technologies- the e-book, abolishing a previous role- the traditional book, is much too simplistic (Eco, 1994). Co-existence of both forms of knowledge acquisition, traditional books and e-books, each with a valid role to play in the weave of our social and cultural fabric, at this point in time in the early 21st century, may be the optimum aim. The social and cultural contexts presented at any given time, will determine the style of book required, some contexts will require traditional print books, others e-books. In order to determine if co-existence is indeed the optimum aim, sustained and informed debate is required to highlight the myriad diverse perspectives, opinions, deficits and rewards surrounding the question- Do the new electronic media foretell the death of the book?

### **Aiming for an Egalitarian Approach to Debate on the Co-existence of Traditional Books and e-Books may be Hindered by a Number of Factors**

The computer illiterate parent/caregiver will be unlikely to actively promote computer literacy for their children in the home context.

The non-promotion of traditional books by the school, the wider community and the media would likely have an impact on desirability. Traditional books then would have to be actively promoted as important, valuable and desired. Conversely, the promotion of e-books as superior and more desirable than traditional books will affect the image of e-books positively and traditional books negatively.

### **Unfair and Inequitable Representation from Alternate Perspectives in the Debate**

In this paper a focus on unfair and inequitable representation will be highlighted. In order to be effective, debate must have alternative perspectives represented. One perspective that is often unrepresented is that of the Australian underprivileged child, who typically attends a state public school, classified as fitting the criteria for inclusion into Priority Schools Funded Program (PSFP). Of the students attending PSFP schools, the

underprivileged children are often un-represented by family and community in educational arenas, both at the school and the community level and above. They frequently don’t have a voice in educational debate.

### **Daniel, a Previously Introduced Fictional Creation, is Being Given a Voice in the Debate**

Daniel could be a likable 7-year-old Australian male child in grade 3. He is represented here as a middle child with 4 siblings, loving parents who have very unsatisfactory recollections of their own past school experiences resulting in them both hating and mistrusting schools and teachers. Flinders and Lewis (1994) in their article titled, “Why Some Parents Don’t Come to School” support this assertion with comments such as;

“their own personal school experiences create obstacles to involvement.... Parents who have dropped out of school do not feel confident in school settings....limited schooling makes it difficult for them to help their children.”

and further suggested that these unsatisfactory school memories and experiences contributed to “their voices rarely being heard at school.”

Desmarchelier in Maxwell, (1998) quotes census figures that indicate the clustering of single parent, working class (Germov, 2001) families in low-socio-economic areas who tend to renting rather than purchasing homes of their own. She further writes of the diversity of experiences that influence and indeed shatter the harmony of the ideal family. Daniel’s fictional family may exhibit a number of the characteristics suggested by Desmarchelier:- poverty, high rates of unemployment with a dependence upon welfare, parents coming into and out of the children’s lives, the loneliness of sole parenting, inappropriate child rearing practices such as yelling and fighting, living in low- socio-economic rental accommodation often with transient habits, moving from rental place to place. Daniel as a member of such a fictional ‘working class’ family, affected by the some or all of the above characteristics, is likely to experience difficulties in the school setting. The so called ‘working class parents’ according to Germov, (2001) value education yet their children still found school an alienating experience. Daniel is not a solo player in this game. He represents many, many children.

What Daniel doesn’t represent is a child from a middle class, privileged or stable upbringing, many of whom are present in his school. Daniel doesn’t represent a child who is taken on regular visits to local libraries and cultural outings. Daniel doesn’t represent a child who is supported in his/her educational endeavours by his/her parents. Daniel doesn’t represent a child with computer access at

home. Daniel doesn't represent the child with hand held computer games or Play Station or X-Box or Nintendo. Daniel doesn't represent the child who has unquestioned telephone access- it was often disconnected. Daniel doesn't represent the model of the ideal family as proposed by Amato cited in Desmarchelier in Maxwell, (1998) where children were encouraged to explore and manipulate their environments, were frequently engaged in conversation, where parents held high educational expectations and participated in joint activities with their children, rewards for competent behaviour were given, assistance with school work was given, children were continually encouraged to do well at school and marital relationships of parents were relatively free of serious conflict.

Daniel, (and those he represents), would have had very little opportunity to further his educational potential in the home context. BUT in the school context, he would have myriad opportunities to be involved in technological and pedagogical practices which all contribute to his multiliteracy (Cope & Kalantzis, cited in Bull & Anstey, 2003, 2004) development. At home Daniel may have little opportunity to practice the technological practices introduced in the school context. His opportunity to explore this technological school developed knowledge in alternative contexts to school would be virtually impossible.

Daniel, may find reading a struggle- he may be a reluctant reader at a young age. BUT a beacon of hope is always flashing in the background; It would not be atypical to represent Daniel as a child who very much enjoys reading his home-reading books. These little traditional print books, both fiction and non-fiction texts, would be likely to be sent home by the class teacher every afternoon, two on Fridays to span the weekend. They would usually be returned, often crumpled, grubby and smeared with Vegemite or peanut butter, by the majority of children, in any one class, to be swapped for yet another little book capable of being read independently. The careful selection of books at a child's independent level (determined after assessment involving the taking and analysis of a number of Running Reading Records- Clay, 1993) is a crucial element in maximizing the opportunities for success. In an example such as Daniel's he would have to be able to cope with the practice of home reading on his own, as support for this school generated task would in some instances be unforthcoming from his parents or elder siblings.

Often the home-reading books may not be returned to school. This scenario would be viewed in a positive light rather than as problematic. Hopefully the books would be scattered throughout the house, to be picked up by all the Daniels for re-readings and/or explored by younger siblings. The hope would be that they contributed to the Daniels' first book collection, to act as reminders to pick them up

and flick through them, to sit down and read them while eating breakfast.

For Daniel to reach his age-stage-ability related potential in the area of reading he would have benefited from regular reading practise in addition to the reading being undertaken at school. Scharioth's (Ed, 2003) book review of *Guide des livres d'enfants de 0 à 7 ans* by Perrot and Pochard (2001) reflects upon the roles and functions of traditional books for the very young and comments on the authors' suggestions that "early contact with books can offer long-lasting stability and thereby positively influence a young person's affective and intellectual growth." Much evidence from researchers (Holdaway, 1979, Meek, 1982, 1991 and Strickland & Morrow, 1989) exists indicating that a language enriched home environment supports a child's literate future. Daniel's home environment would be likely to be devoid of technology that would enable e-book or CD use, Internet use or word processing. Desmarchelier, (cited in Maxwell, 1998) discusses the family from poorer areas where the tendency is not to provide their children with homework facilities such as desks, lighting and computers. In Daniel's fictitious family the phone may be frequently disconnected due to unpaid bills- one might wonder how an Internet connection would be managed given that the phone bill couldn't be paid and the family did not own a computer.

As technical equipment users are well aware, the probable and common technical difficulties and associated expense one encounters when using such equipment can provide challenges for the even most computer literate and technically competent users. Computer use is not without its own dependencies;

- a dependence upon a reliable power source as Eco's (1994) promotion of traditional books supports by suggesting that traditional books do "not suffer power shortages and blackouts", and Vaknin (2002) highlights the difficulties of; portability due to finite battery life, appropriate lighting conditions and the availability of appropriate infrastructure- electricity.
- an assumption that the user possesses a certain degree of skill,
- the essential provision of efficient technology, e-texts are device dependent- e-books or computer drives, Vaknin (2002).
- the potentially prohibitive associated costs, "will people pay considerable sums in order to obtain the e-book?" asks the author (unknown <http://www.springfieldlibrary.org/gutenberg.futu.html> of a paper titled *Is This The Future of the Book?*
- and perhaps most crucially the ready access to technological advice-where changes in technology render many e-books unreadable, Vaknin (2002).

Such issues, if Daniel's family were to own a computer, would likely result in the computer becoming a dust gathering icon in the corner of the room due to the scarcity of money and lack of familiarity with computer technology.

So, without small, portable traditional books to take home in his backpack each night Daniel would not have the opportunity to practise and improve his code breaking and text participant reading skills (Freebody, 1992, Luke and Freebody, 1999). Without developing the code breaking skills Daniel's text user and analyst skills (Freebody, 1992 Luke and Freebody, 1999) would not be as fully developed and his progress at school may be significantly hampered. Daniel would not have the opportunity in his home to "see marks on a surface and hear them talk of realities visible and invisible" (Man, 2000). These little, carefully selected texts would be the key to Daniel taking his first steps and maintaining progress in reading, they would be responsible for encouraging a love for and enjoyment of reading and would help to present school, beginning with his classroom, as a place that was predictable, safe and not too hard to take.

An even more powerful, covert force is being played out here. Through the process of reading these small printed traditional books at home, Daniel would actually be receiving instruction in the "hidden curriculum" (Chan & Rueda 1979) operating in all socially and culturally constructed educational institutions. He certainly would not have received the 'system expected' support from home as outlined in the NSW Department of Education and Training Homework Policy, ([http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student\\_admin/homework/home\\_pol/PD20020003.shtml](http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/homework/home_pol/PD20020003.shtml)):

Parents and caregivers can help by:

taking an active interest in homework

ensuring that there is time set aside for homework

encouraging and supporting students to complete homework

providing, where possible, a dedicated place and desk for homework and study

encouraging their children to read and take an interest in current events

But by being able to engage in an independent task at home he would be beginning to comprehend the tacit understandings and knowledge- the hidden curriculum- to be gained from engagement in regular homework tasks (Apple cited in Allen, 2001). Compliance by a child, with these school-devised tasks in the home context, is rewarded by deposits of social and cultural capital. This social and cultural capital enables valuable transactions to take place in the school context. Seddon (2000) remarks on the current rhetoric around education, which encourages educators to build social capital in students in order to reinvigorate communities.

So for the fictional child, Daniel, the ongoing encouragement of a teacher to engage with a 'do-able' independent reading task at home, with small traditional print books, would go some way to negating the effects of him not receiving the educational and moral, some would say essential, support from family. The opportunity to read at home would contribute to him building a repertoire of social and cultural capital, (Bourdieu cited in Germov, 2001 & Seddon, 2000) and which could, in turn, unconsciously help to raise awareness of the existence of a hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum (Apple, 1982 cited in Allen, 2001) that imparts the covert message that those who are 'good' and do the expected homework, are better able to 'fit in'.

Daniel's future has the potential to be empowered indirectly by the enjoyment of books and success with the reading process. He may have the potential to cast a positive influence over any children he fathers, as he would have gained some powerful understandings of social and cultural capital that carries weight in the school context. This power, which could be achieved simply through being encouraged to read small simple portable traditional books, has the ability to contribute to breaking the cycle of school – home disconnection and distrust faced by his family.

The traditional notion of the book provides a window into the world for children like Daniel. The potential for further alienation of the child from the low-socio-economic background in educational debate is likely if needy children are not provided with continued access to traditional printed books for the foreseeable future.

What would Daniel have done without traditional print books?

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