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Learning in a Time of Abundance: The Community Is the Curriculum, by Dave Cormier (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024)

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Book Review: *Learning in a Time of Abundance: The Community is the Curriculum*

Author: Dave Cormier (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024, 179 pages) ISBN: 978-1-4214-4779-7 (hardcover); 978-1-4214-4780-3 (e-book)

Review by: Terry Anderson, *Professor Emeritus, Athabasca University, Canada*

In this easy-to-read text, Dave Cormier romps through a spectrum of ideas, behaviours, and customs that are changing as we transition from a world of information scarcity to one of information abundance. What makes the book shine and distinguishes it from more serious academic texts is Cormier's personality. His quirky insights come in sidelines and examples that make even a serious and sometimes grumpy book reviewer smile. For example, using a marketing campaign for an imaginary Internet-based cupcake company, he states that people under the age of 45 are most likely to buy cupcakes online—he then qualifies this assertion by noting that he has "no idea if this is true, but you probably don't know either" (p. 82).

Rather than beginning with the conventional idea that education creates or at least generates learning, Cormier argues that formal education has attempted to fundamentally define what learning is and how it is to be measured. This is true, even as most of us (teachers included) have many different ideas what learning is. Is it about attitudes, facts remembered, procedures memorised, tricks mastered, knowing what to avoid, the ability to get along or lead others, or more? For the last two centuries formal education has had a monopoly on learning and has built structured systems to assess and reward certain types of learning. But all of these systems were built during an era of information scarcity and one devoid of AI-derived answers. "That time has come" (p. 21). Cormier argues that education, as a social system, evolved in an era of information scarcity—and those days are long gone.

This is not an academic tome—at one point he decries as a form of backward thinking the necessity to show that all claims in the book are cited—as if citing previous work offers only a guarantee of unoriginality. This is just one example where Cormier picks at a contradiction in our fractured information context, but ironically his comment seems contradicted when he later talks about the need for developing trusted sources of information. But this is not a fatal error; his provocative examples serve to reinforce the notion that information abundance rarely delivers certainty and that living with a healthy level of uncertainty and doubt is perhaps the most important literacy for the 21st century.

The work covers viruses, intentional distortions, ghosting, the propensity we all see for disparaging and sarcastic comments, and a host of other concerns that arise when we put a printing press, with global distribution potential, in the hands of everyone. The world of abundance is not just a wealth of content to help us learn almost any conceivable topic but also an abundance of opinion, conspiracy theories, distortions, and untruths. Cormier shows with examples that we need new skills and theories to help us

discern the relevant, make sense of the worthy, and disregard the senseless.

Cormier notes how, in many ways, social customs and practices have undergone massive change in networked times—we do not share a movie on the plane any more, we are too busy with our screens to receive the creative benefits of boredom, we text before calling, we know to never put down our friends but to lash out at strangers, that private (photos or comments) wittingly or unwittingly becoming public—and all of this before the looming intrusion from artificial intelligence. The single voice of truth we used to take comfort from in textbooks and CBC newscasts is now drowned, or at least struggling to stay afloat in a sea of misinformation, "fake news" satire, gossip, and diversion. Sure, we have to make room for other voices previously ignored, but do we elevate them to or even dare assess them on any agreed upon category of correctness? All of this without even talking about practical implications—such as the topical interest in banning smart phone usage in classrooms.

When I saw this book published, I reflected on my personal and professional acquaintances with Cormier. I know Cormier from MOOCs, from his blogs, from rare face-to-face visits at conferences, and from his social media posts. I also know Dave as an able university administrator, as an outspoken expert of a variety of emerging digital technologies, as an amateur carpenter, as a university teacher, and as a family man. All of his many digital traces attest to these skills and are marked with great off-the-cuff and reliably ironical humour. But when I saw the book was subtitled "The Community Is the Curriculum," I thought I would find the type of book that Tony Bates or even myself might have written on the latest adaption of technology to the curriculum for online courses. I was surprised by the content, and not unpleasantly.

Cormier does not shy away from culturally relevant and sensitive issues—commenting on pronouns, Syrian refugees, Truth and Reconciliation, climate change, and more. In short, this is a book about learning to both serve and survive in a context that is stuffed with information but starved of both certainty and wisdom. It provides a host of good advice, warnings, and some quirky personal revelations that will both inform, educate, and amuse most of us—teachers included.

The book focuses on the myriads of ways that the networked enabled information abundance alters our social, political, family, and professional lives—even of those who are not teachers. That is not to say that this book has nothing to say to teachers in formal education. Cormier argues that, too often, formal education has focused on content and has derived questions that have answers; though these answers may be convoluted and hard to determine, there are both correct and incorrect answers to these questions. Today, students and teachers are forced to struggle with messy problems—were vaccination and lockdowns justified? Is the two-state solution for the Middle East the best way forward? Should indigenous science be taught as comparable to traditional notions of science? Should we continue to burn natural gas and supposedly use the profits to transition to nuclear or renewables? For these questions there is neither information scarcity nor an undisputable correct answer, despite the legion of social media adherents aggressively arguing for their answers. Even "common sense" solutions often prove inadequate. Thus, the book outlines the need for three illusive but necessary 21st century literacies. The first is surprising: It is a requirement for humility. There is uncertainty hiding at some level in almost all of our decisions and elephant-sized uncertainty in many of the most important decisions we have to make. We will make mistakes and get it wrong—often. The second literacy is the need to cultivate sources of informed trust. No source, guru, or teaching is always correct for all time, but many sources have miniscule bits of worthy

information to share. The final literacy is to always think about the values that we hold and share that are always at play in our thinking and discourse. We all come from upbringings and experiences that have taught us to look at the novel and new through the lens of our past experience. Thus, we are personally filtering information, and this is often a filter of values. We often conclude that this information must be true because it resonates with our personal beliefs or those of our parents, church, or best friends. But these are not sources of truth; they are merely biased conclusions, hopefully informed by experience. The need to be aware of these biases is to be literate.

Cormier concludes and summarises the book with seven recommended practices. The first highlights the need for constant fact-checking of the information that is sought or which seems to arise from context. He shows us the need to be especially leery when we feel a strong affective connection to something we read or view. Our feelings may be impairing our own powers of discernment, and that is time for deep fact-checking. The second practice ironically tends to refute his earlier discussion of the value(lessness) of formally citing reference in academia. This second recommended practice is to leave traces of our sources so that others can fact-check and perhaps dig even deeper into the information that we are sharing. The third practice strikes at the heart of formal schooling as evident by the use of tools such as Turnitin and the salient apprehension of many teachers as they realise how AI tools make a mockery of their learning assessment practices. This third practice is to cheat—to collaborate with friends and to use sophisticated tools to complete educational tasks. By doing so, we will not be cheating but will rather be learning more effectively. I will leave the final four practices to your curiosity, which will hopefully inspire an impulse to order the book. In the spirit of sharing of abundance, I also suggest you make a recommendation to your local library to purchase this book and, of course, to pass the book along to a friend or a Little Free Library when you are done with it.