



Books Are Better for Learning



“Print lends itself better than digital media to developing the brain by building deep structures in it,” says Dr. Hans-Georg Häusel. “Panorama” met the German psychologist and neuromarketing pioneer, who is convinced that books are better for learning.

“Panorama”: A few years ago, a Norwegian high school conducted an experiment on 72 students in which one group of tenth graders read two texts of 1,400 and 2,000 words in print and another group read them on a computer screen. The results showed that the group that had read the texts in print understood them considerably better. As a neuroscientist, you’re unlikely to have been surprised by the findings of that experiment.

Dr. Hans-Georg Häusel: No, I’m not surprised at all. We simply need to recognize that digital, like every segment, has its pros and cons. However, print is always superior when it comes to deep learning.

Why is that the case?

There are various reasons. The first point is that as soon as you see a smartphone or iPad your brain switches into reward mode.



Print is always superior for deep learning.

It gets restless. The big problem is that the brain seeks a quick reward and its attention flags. There are studies showing that people who use digital media highly intensively – of course, young people especially fall into that category – develop symptoms resembling those of attention deficit disorders. In other words, when using such devices, their level of attention drastically decreases because they are always craving the next reward. But you need to pay attention in order to learn because you have to concentrate. The second point is that print media are better for the eyes. You have a clearer overview than with, say, a smartphone. You can read better with print.

Does the haptic element of print come into its own even for highly specific tasks such as learning?

Yes, because you shouldn’t forget that our whole body originates from movement. Our brain developed from our body and not the other way round. In other words, our body didn’t grow from our brain. Instead, our brain developed through movement. Our brain is much better at learning things that are associated with movement. When we touch something, our brain switches to a different mode, so our whole perception is significantly better with print than with a small iPad.



Books are essential and digital is optional.

What’s interesting about the example from Norway (at least from a layman’s perspective) is that even teenagers, i.e. classic digital natives, understood the text better in print than on the computer.

It’s something of an exaggeration, but we can say that teenagers are already a bit spoiled by this whole digital environment. Nevertheless, their brain is forced to pay greater attention (which is always good for learning) by print than if they were using their native medium, i.e. a digital device. Print is simply more brain-compatible in many cases.

So would you definitely recommend books for standard learning?

Books are essential and digital is optional. However, if you stick solely to print, then



you miss out on the advantages of digital. And if you neglect print and focus only on digital, then you’re depriving yourself of the firm foundations of learning. I’m absolutely convinced of that.

Textbooks and other learning materials are just one segment of the printing industry, albeit an important one. However, in numerical terms, daily or periodical print products, such as newspapers and magazines, are of more significance. You commented recently in an interview that “a lot of people are embracing the digital world like lemmings and forgetting about the effectiveness of print”. In what way are print products effective?

We know from both brain research and motive research that as soon as we pick up a smartphone or tablet, our brain switches off because it goes into “goal mode”. The user wants to attain a goal relatively quickly. The brain seeks a reward. That generates a kind of stress.

Is that not the case with print products?

No, it’s quite different when you pick up a printed newspaper or a magazine. Your brain switches into relaxed mode and absorbs content differently.

Is print better than the Internet or television at evoking emotions?

Print is a multi-sensory environment. You hear the pages rustle and can smell the book. And you’re in action when you turn the pages. TV has the advantage of combining music, images, and motion. Digital, on the other hand, is unsuitable for many messages.



Print products are better for in-depth information.



If I need an academic book, then I don’t buy it as an e-book.

Can you give any examples of that?

If an advertiser takes out an annoying banner ad on a smartphone for a luxury product, then it downgrades the product, because the brain is context-sensitive. That’s why I recommend a major luxury ad campaign in a premium magazine environment.

Do advertising customers and their advertising agencies make use of your scientific findings?

Not all that much. Advertisers are often young people with little idea of how people’s brains work, and such digital natives are too inclined to draw conclusions about others based on themselves. My studies have shown that even young readers have a greater feeling of relaxation with a print lifestyle magazine than with an iPad edition. Even digital natives say that they love to curl up on the sofa in the evening or at the weekend with a cup of tea and a magazine.

Do you think print will stand a chance among young people in the future?

I’m skeptical as to whether they will be keen to read newspapers, i.e. information that gives the reader a sense of control, on paper, but young readers are certainly open to print for topics like lifestyle, technology and fashion in attractive magazines, i.e. when it comes to “reward information”. There will still be children’s books for reading aloud. “The Little Prince” as a bedtime story on an iPad won’t send children to sleep.



Dr. Hans-Georg Häusel

The German psychologist Dr. Hans-Georg Häusel is a neuromarketing pioneer and a leading expert in brain research in the fields of marketing, sales, and management. He has written several bestsellers on the topics of brain research and sales. His book “Brain View – Warum Kunden kaufen” [Brain view – what makes customers buy] was selected by an international jury as one of the 100 best business books of all time. The Limbic® model that he developed is one of the best and most thoroughly researched instruments for identifying conscious and subconscious life motives and buying motives, as well as for neuropsychological target group segmentation and personality assessment. Hans-Georg Häusel is a member of the executive board of the Nymphenburg Consult AG Group, a lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences in Business Administration Zurich, and is on the editorial board of the science journal “NeuroPsycho-Economics”.

Does it increase the education divide if parents give their children tablets instead of books?

We have that divide already. Digital or analog is also a question of education and social class. In houses with books, there’s a totally different way of reflecting on the world. Children need print to really understand things.



Please see our website for an extended version of the interview with Dr. Hans-Georg Häusel: www.mullermartini.com/Häusel/E