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Searching for French Civilization: Reflections on Situating Information Literacy Skills in an Undergraduate French Curriculum

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5 Searching for French civilization: Reflections on situating information literacy skills in an undergraduate curriculum

Carmel O'Reilly[1]

"I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself" (Butler, 2004, p. 15)

Abstract

This chapter questions and reflects on the changing role of the foreign language and civilization lecturer as educator, when information literacy skills are situated in an undergraduate curriculum. As such, it does not set itself the task of providing solutions. Instead, it considers all the complications which occur en route to a greater use of Internet-based information sources within the discipline of French studies. In a departure from standard academic writing, I am inserting myself directly in the argument which follows a trajectory from my initial reluctance towards the Internet and the changes required of me in order to adapt. This chapter uses existing research to outline the current state of play regarding the digital debate within education. However, rather than reaching a specific conclusion, this chapter captures a recent moment of a situation in flux within higher education.

Keywords: information literacy, Internet and French civilization, Google and education.

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1. Introduction

In any debate, we are encouraged to take a position that is either for or against whatever may be under discussion. Of course, it is also possible to disengage from the discussion and take neither position. However, Butler (2004), in a series of essays, provides us with the possibility of yet another option. In her introduction, she explains that the experience of undoing restrictive conceptions of life can initiate relatively newer ones that have greater viability as their aim. Similarly, my own attempts to facilitate students' higher-level skills when using Internet sources, such as Google, for academic purposes, have caused me to undo restrictive notions of what it means to be a lecturer in higher education. Indeed, rather than adopt a position for or against the use of Internet-based information sources within the digital debate, these attempts are in the hope that a relatively newer role that has greater viability may be initiated. Like Butler (2004), my reflections on the experience of situating information literacy skills in an undergraduate French curriculum have revealed me to be "other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself " (p. 15).

2. Digital natives and digital immigrants

In their thought-provoking review of the digital debate, Bennett, Maton and Kervin (2008) discuss two important assertions: "(1) that a distinct generation of 'digital natives' exists; and (2) that education must fundamentally change to meet the needs of these 'digital natives"' (p. 777). We have become accustomed to the notion that there exists a generational divide among digital technology users. This may be attributed to the term "net generation" used to describe the generation born roughly between 1980 and 1994 and after (Tapscott, 1998). Prensky (2001a, 2001b) has given us the term "digital natives" to describe the same generation due to their knowledge and regular use of information and communication technology (ICT). However, current research suggests that it may well be the case that there is as much variation within the digital native generation as between the generations (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 779). Nonetheless, Coverdale (2013), a researcher and practitioner in educational technology, in a

recent posting to his blog, warns against the current default position of "routinely rubbishing digital natives" while maintaining that "[i]t is only right that we continue to expose and challenge terms we believe to be erroneous" (para. 2, 9). Indeed, important questions have been raised about students' everyday ICT skills and their relationship to education. When it comes to assessing a website's suitability for an educational project, for example, existing research reports that students appear to adopt a "snatch and grab philosophy" or that they often make "hasty, random choices with little thought and evaluation" (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 781). The result is a "lack of critical thinking when using Internet-based information sources", which implies that "students aren't as net savvy as we might have assumed" (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 781). Based on existing research, it may be concluded that "education has a vitally important role in fostering information literacies that will support learning" (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 781).

In a kind of virtual echo of this call to action, Catherine Cronin, educator and academic coordinator of online Information Technology (IT) programs at the National University of Galway (Ireland), in a blog posting, outlines a series of challenges facing educators. Among them, she asks this question: "what are we doing to create or link to relevant online resources for students?" (Cronin, 2011, para. 5). While integrating information literacy skills into the civilization element of an undergraduate French curriculum seems like an appropriate answer, the question of exactly how to go about this still remains. In other words, while it is not difficult to give students a reason to use a search engine like Google in order to explore themes of French civilization, it is another matter entirely to consider how they are searching, or (re)searching, the Internet as an information resource. What emerges is an opportunity to extend traditional lecturing beyond the reach of text books into the World Wide Web in an attempt to foster information 'literacies' that will support learning. What follows fast on the heels of this exciting opportunity, however, are a number of difficult dilemmas. Let us first identify these dilemmas, and then consider them in the context of scholarly activity, and in light of existing research.

The integration of information literacy skills into the civilization element of the French undergraduate curriculum is part of the ongoing *Get Smart! initiative*

at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) within the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism. The *Get Smart! initiative* uses a range of innovative learning and teaching interventions in an attempt to develop personal and professional skills in first year undergraduate students attending DIT (O'Rawe, 2010). One of the key elements of the initiative is the development of information literacy skills. Language education is an integrated component of undergraduate studies within the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism. Civilization studies are an element of the first year undergraduate French language modules. In a first assignment, students are required to search the Internet in order to answer questions about French current affairs, history, politics and culture. While there are marks for answering these questions correctly, a percentage of their overall mark in Civilization is attributed to how they have searched the Internet in terms of the webpage cited in support of their answers. Basic themes of culture and civilization are explored in class in the form of lectures supported by reading material and discussion. These include, for example, French identity, the geography and regional organization of France and the diversity of the French speaking world.

The first dilemma encountered involves the false assumption that all undergraduate students belong to the net generation. As such, they must be digital natives who require little, or no help, nor indeed teaching, when they are required to search the Internet in order to find information. It may as such be a case of misplaced instinct, as Coverdale (2013) suggests when he observes that "it seems digital natives 'took off' in wider academic (and non-academic) discourse because it tapped deeply into what seemed to instinctively describe significant differences in the emerging practices of digital technology users" (para. 4). As already indicated, we generally ascribe the notion, and indeed the term of digital natives, to Prensky (2001a). It is used to describe those born roughly after 1980. For those born prior to this time, which includes most teachers, Prensky (2001a) has introduced the term "digital immigrants" suggesting that the technological fluency of the former is almost alien to the latter. However, informal feedback from my own students suggests the absence of a single and distinct student body representative of a whole 'net' generation who can competently and confidently take control of the steering wheel when

going on the Internet, as Tapscott (1998, p. 26) insists. Rather, what seems to emerge, is the "complexity of young people's computer use and skills" in keeping with existing research, the findings of which suggest "that technology skills and experience are far from universal among young people" (Bennett et al., 2008, pp. 777-778).

While some students in 2012 demonstrated good technology skills and experience, both in terms of finding the correct answer and accurately citing the website which they had consulted, a significant number seemed to be completely lost. This prompted a different approach the following year. Once a theme was explored in class, for example French identity, students were given three sample questions from the previous year's assignment in order to practice searching the Internet in advance of their assignment. The lecture and subsequent discussion covered topics such as the French national anthem, the French Revolution, French national symbols, their meaning and origins, and the French population and citizenship.

Example: digital narrative

> These are an example of 3 sample questions, translated from the original French into English:
>
> 1. The famous French motto is Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. One of these qualities has been personified in a famous painting. Find the title of this painting and the name of the painter.
>
> 2. What links Nicolas Luckner to the French national anthem?
>
> 3. A child born in France to two foreign parents does not have French nationality. However, this does not apply to a country with which France has historical ties. Name this country.

A small minority of students got all 3 answers correct; most succeeded in getting one or two correct; others got all 3 wrong. Indeed, as might be unexpected, some

students claimed to be so daunted by the task that they attempted none of the 3 questions.

The answers were as follows:

1. 'La Liberté guidant le peuple' by Eugène Delacroix.
2. The French national anthem was dedicated to Nicolas Luckner.
3. Algeria.

Once the answers were delivered, a brief demonstration of how to go about a successful Internet search for these answers followed. Seeming a simple enough task, and indeed, a good idea at the time, the demonstration of how to conduct a successful scholarly Internet search proved challenging in more ways than one and not only for the students. Downes (2007) advocates using Google precisely because

> "a person using Google does not obtain information from a centralized source; rather, by typing a search term into the simple interface on the main page, users obtain information from anywhere around the world, from any of tens of millions of sources" (Downes, 2007, para. 4).

On the surface, this sounds exciting, useful and potentially helpful. However, Michael Gorman, when he was president-elect of the American Library Association, made a clear distinction between information and knowledge. He differentiates between information, which he describes as "data, facts, images, quotes and brief texts that can be used out of context" and recorded knowledge, which he claims to be "the cumulative exposition found in scholarly and literary texts" and which must always be taken in its context (Gorman, 2004, para. 6). In a follow up piece in the Library Journal, Gorman (2005) describes Google as a "notoriously inefficient search engine" providing thousands of 'hits' (which may or may not be relevant) in no very useful order" (para. 3).

Indeed, the class demonstration yielded so many choices that it was difficult to make a selection. When different search words were entered, a different set of

options appeared. It was time consuming and even seemed to be time wasting. What was interesting was the number of enthusiastic, yet different, suggestions made by students, to either choose a site that they recognized had yielded the correct answer from their own search words, or to choose an entirely different site to see if that too yielded the correct answer. What was particularly challenging was the kind of chaos this created. There was a clear loss of control as I surfed my way from site to site, scrolling down, scrolling back up, opting for this link over that one, picking up speed in order to follow one link, then another, as the suggestions from students came rolling in and answers finally were found.

Gorman (2004) has received much attention for his distinction between information and knowledge, with one commentator claiming this to be "a reasonable, if pedestrian, observation" while also suggesting that it is "slightly nannyish advice", similar to, "be sure to eat your vegetables when you use Google" (Drum, 2004, para. 2, 3). However, it is Gorman (2004) who highlights the importance of speed over the time-consuming discernment of content in Google searches (para. 5). Then again, Gorman (2005) also maintains that the searcher obtains "heaps of irrelevance in nanoseconds" insisting that we be mindful of the fact that "rubbish is rubbish, no matter how speedily it is delivered" (para. 4). Certainly, the students wanted a fast, efficient search, which I must confess, the class demonstration did not deliver. Still, unlike Gorman's (2005) suggestion of "heaps of rubbish" (para. 4), the answers to the civilization questions were indeed there to be found. What is needed it seems, is the skill to better refine the search terms used. Also, a great deal of patience is required in order to read, discern and determine what may, or may not, be useful.

3. The Google effect on research

Another dilemma occurs when we take into account that not only do different search terms yield different results, in terms of the listed resources available to explore, these listed resources are not fixed and so may also be subject to change. While Downes (2007) is critical of Gorman's (2004) dismissal of Google, precisely because it does not deliver well-ordered searches, he is willing to accept

that Gorman's (2004) recommendation for libraries and librarians over digitized books is a modest one (para. 14). Nonetheless, Downes (2007) does highlight the 'constantly changing' nature of Google because "new resources arrive; new words produce new search results" (para. 9). What has proven to be a challenge for a class demonstration precisely because a site that was sourced in advance by a particular set of search words, may or may not yield the same results a week later, is for Downes (2007), a distinct advantage of Google. He observes that "it is not just a catalogue or index; it becomes, through its dynamic listing of resources, a way for people who don't know each other to communicate" (para. 9). Indeed, it seems that the dynamic and constantly changing nature of Google may even require communication in order to stabilize what appears to be the ever-shifting ground of information that it supplies.

Certainly, informal feedback from students prompted one to suggest that the class Facebook page might be used to post possible answers to the civilization questions which could then be further explored by others. Similarly, Cronin (2011) has highlighted open, participatory and social media among the challenges facing educators in terms of technology use. She suggests that "not all student work must be submitted directly and privately to the lecturer – opportunities for openness, sharing and collaboration should be considered" (Cronin, 2011, para. 6). Still, the teacher in all educators must surely wonder if that is not a lot like copying, while the explorer in every educator must surely wonder if it is not a really good idea! Somewhere between these two possibilities lies the truth of the matter. A little experimentation is required in order for us to decide. Mary Gallagher, an academic at University College Dublin and author of a most interesting analysis of Irish Higher Education, concedes that we need to understand more about the challenges and potential of digital technology in education. This includes, she advises, being "open to the palette of possibilities of new ways of being human, new ways of relating to each other and to the world and its diversity" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 225). She goes on to recommend that educationalists and educators in particular "need to be open to the promise of other kinds of attention than the deep and slow solitary attention and endurance required to read a book carefully, in depth and in detail, from end to end" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 225). Yet, she cautions that

even so, they clearly need to adhere "to the importance of thoughtfulness and attentiveness; they need to remain true to deep thinking, thinking unafraid of complexity or of contradictions" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 225). Indeed, a certain degree of vigilance and endurance may suffice for us to remain true to core values in higher education while embracing the potential of Google.

A third and final dilemma arises when we consider what may be the emotional side of technology use by students in terms of their varying attitudes and dispositions. While existing research cited by Bennett et al. (2008) points to potential differences in skill associated with social, economic and cultural issues *vis-à-vis* specific disciplines of study, these areas are yet to be investigated comprehensively. Similarly, Bennett et al. (2008) insist that "not yet explored is the relationship between technology access, use and skill, and the attitudinal characteristics and dispositions commonly ascribed to the digital native generation" (p. 778). Informal feedback from students in terms of the civilization element of their first year assignment yielded a range of emotions, attitudes and dispositions. At one end of the spectrum, there was the feeling of pride that a student may be technologically adept at finding correct answers to specific questions about French culture. Curiously, some students reported a fun-family experience, availing of the help of parents or siblings, much like a treasure trail. However, others reported much impatience and frustration when answers were not found, or indeed, when searching provided what could be considered a false trail leading to wrong answers. Probing the matter with questions about how the search was conducted produced what appeared to be embarrassment, or perhaps guilt, maybe even shame, among those students who may not be as technologically adept at using the Internet as might be expected of them because of the associated implications of their digital native status. While these observations and reflections are informal, they seem to indicate the importance of further research into the attitudes and dispositions of young technology users in a scholarly context. Indeed, further research seems to be necessary in order to best situate information literacy skills in the undergraduate curriculum.

It is important to note that all students performed remarkably well in the civilization element of their first assignment which required them to search

online for answers. This may or may not be attributed to the use of a class Facebook page which may or may not have been used to post answers which could then be shared by the group. Academically, this is difficult to track and assess. Furthermore, it raises the question as to whether the civilization assignment is a group project or one that is performed by individuals, which was originally the intention. This in turn raises the thorny issue of whether or not technologically adept students are doing the work, and leading the way, while less technologically adept students are carried by them rather than by themselves. The marking scheme is limited to correct answers and accurately cited relevant websites which contain the answers. The marking scheme does not allow for determining which students actually do the work. Indeed, many students made at least one reference to the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Some went so far as to cite Wikipedia almost entirely for their correct answers. Again, the marking scheme does not allow for specific websites, rather it allows for an accurate citation which yields the correct answer.

Downes (2007) makes a useful suggestion that may be applicable to this situation when he observers that 'content creation' is neither limited to YouTube for example, nor indeed is it limited to the writing of an article. Contrary to Gorman (2004), who considers Google search results to be un-ordered, Downes (2007) insists that "the content created by Google searches, which manifests itself most evidently as the ordering of search results, also results in a demographic trail" (para. 16). It may be interesting to consider such a trail as an accurate account of how students conducted their online searches.

The explorer in me is tempted to pursue this line of enquiry. However, the academic begins to protest because the integration of information literacy skills seems to invite the ever-encroaching roles of librarian, and IT expert, to come even closer to what is traditionally considered to be teaching territory. Rather than class-based learning about civilization themes, provided by an academic, it seems that the students must be facilitated in their own learning by a combination of academic, librarian, and IT roles, in order to search online in a scholarly way. Indeed, I seem to be "other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself " (Butler, 2004, p. 15).

4. Implications for education

Certainly, the situating of information literacy skills in the undergraduate curriculum has implications for educators. The question remains to what extent must education change in response to these implications. A literature review undertaken by the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom cites a number of relevant studies about the net generation and digital natives (Jones & Shao, 2011). For example, one of the studies from 2008 focused on the Google generation, that is, those born after 1993. It reported "that the information literacy of young people had not improved with wider access to technology" (cited in Jones & Shao, 2011, p. 17). Another study from 2010 argues "that although digital native students may feel comfortable in a digital immersed environment at home, they often lacked information literacy skills or understanding of issues such as plagiarism and copyright" (cited in Jones & Shao, 2011, p. 17). Nonetheless, some critics continue to insist that our contemporary educational system needs revamping so as to be more in tune with the corresponding changes in today's university students. For example, "[i]f you are an experienced teacher, you almost certainly have students filling up your classes who are, in many ways, different from those in the past. You probably feel a need, or some pressure, (and may have even started) to do something different for them" (Prensky, 2010, p. 5). Similarly, we may be advised that "a powerful force to change the university is the students. And sparks are flying today. A huge generational clash is emerging in our institutions" (Tapscott & Williams, 2010, p. 29, cited in Jones & Shao, 2011, p. 43).

Yet we may also be advised by Jones and Shao (2011) that "there is no evidence that there is a single new generation of young students entering higher education and the terms net generation and digital native do not capture the processes of change that are taking place" (para. 1). Indeed, there is much evidence in the above mentioned study to suggest that "the gap between students and their teachers is not fixed, nor is the gulf so large that it cannot be bridged" (Jones & Shao, 2011, para. 4). Jones and Shao (2011) go on to observe that the relationship between students and teachers is, for the most part, based on the "requirements teachers place upon their students to make use of new technologies and the way

teachers integrate new technologies in their courses" (para. 4). Thus it seems reasonable to first identify where gaps exist between teachers and students, before attempting to make suitable changes in curriculum and teaching practice, in order for educators to respond appropriately to the development of information literacy.

But how do we identify the situation where gaps exist between teachers and students? The renowned educational philosopher, Maxine Greene, recommends something she calls "wide-awakeness":

> "Without the ability to think about yourself, to reflect on your life, there's really no awareness, no consciousness. Consciousness doesn't come automatically; it comes through being alive, awake, curious, and often furious" (cited in Teaching Wide-Awake, 2008, para. 2).

While it is always a pleasure as an educator to admit to feeling alive, awake and curious, it is with a certain amount of humility that I admit to feeling, at times, particularly furious in my attempts to integrate information literacy skills into the French undergraduate curriculum. It is reassuring to consider that this may well be part of the experience of making suitable changes in order to meet the needs of a younger generation of university students. Certainly, this experience involves opportunities. As with all opportunities, there are, of course, challenges and dilemmas which require responses. These responses in turn require regular review and revision. The experience becomes a process of exploration, experimentation, reflection and review which engages not only the student but the educator too.

An important observation from my own informal research is that a unified new generation of university students with identical skills in the use of technology simply does not exist. Indeed, this is part of what remains most challenging because, not only are there differences between generations, but also there are clear differences within the digital or net generation itself depending on technology user-skills, attitudes, dispositions and emotional responses. Furthermore, the inherent nature of Google is that it is constantly changing as

new resources are added and others are temporarily unavailable or removed. Indeed, different search words may yield entirely different results so that what appears to be unavailable, or removed, may in fact be retrieved. A comparison could be made with a second civilization assignment which the same students were asked to do. This involved searching a civilization textbook in order to find answers to multiple-choice questions within a specific time frame. The students demonstrated a marked decrease in interest and engagement both in terms of correct answers and in terms of the number of questions left unanswered. This is difficult to interpret however. It may be because marks were so high in the first assignment, that there was little incentive to achieve the same in the second, as the overall mark involves an aggregate of the two. It may be the result of a false assumption that students require little or no help when retrieving information from a textbook. It may be neither of these and just a matter of the time constraint imposed exclusively on the textbook assignment. Indeed, it may be useful to consider a second assignment in which students also search for answers online but within a time constraint. What is certainly worthy of note is that there was a marked increase in student engagement where the assignment required them to search the Internet for answers.

What is also worthy of note is that an educator is not necessarily a librarian. Nor is an educator necessarily an IT expert. Yet the situating of information literacy skills in the undergraduate curriculum requires a re-evaluation of all three roles, educator or academic, librarian and IT expert, in order to better address the changing needs of contemporary university students. Needless to say, my own experience of undoing what it means to be an educator has required me to explore becoming something of a librarian and something of an IT facilitator. While "I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself" (Butler, 2004, p. 15), the experience has not necessarily been a bad one. It is possible that the students found less information about French civilization from lectures, textbooks and class discussion. Rather, they explored the possibility of accurately finding such information on the Internet by using Google and citing the websites consulted as relevant sources. However, this hardly signals the end of books, libraries and librarians. Gorman's (2004) response to the possibility

of vast databases of digitized whole books, including scholarly books, seems excessive. He suggests that these are "expensive exercises in futility based on the staggering notion that, for the first time in history, one form of communication (electronic) will supplant and obliterate all previous forms" (Gorman, 2004, para. 8).

5. Conclusion

There is a need to be cautious about "dismissive skepticism", or indeed, "uncritical advocacy" when it comes to deciding whether the phenomenon of digital natives is significant "and in what ways education might need to change to accommodate it" (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 783). Certain scholars, such as Prensky (2001a, 2001b), will continue to draw our attention to the inadequacy of our current educational system claiming that it is no longer equipped to meet the changing needs of the present generation of university students because they are digital natives with ready-to-go information literacy skills; many others, such as Jones and Shao (2011) will continue to de-bunk the notion of digital natives as a unified generation of young students entering the portals of universities and colleges.

While this chapter has not set itself the task of providing solutions to the ongoing digital debate or offering specific conclusions as to the role of the educator, it seems reasonable that Google, or other Internet-based information sources, are here to stay. For now, Google continues to be the first port of call for enquires made by students who have in their possession a state-of-the-art, hand-held, technology device which they want to use. That this is already something of a natural reflex for students, whether they are particularly good at using the Internet or not, causes me to agree with Bennett et al. (2008) when they conclude that education does indeed have a vitally important role to play in fostering "information literacies" that may support learning (p. 781). In terms of how educators might go about fostering information 'literacies', it seems not only reasonable, but also prudent, to first identify where gaps exist between teachers and students, before attempting to make suitable changes in curriculum and

teaching practice. It is in this way, according to Jones and Shao (2011) that educators may respond appropriately to the development of information literacy (para. 1).

As much of the literature quoted in this chapter suggests, and which indeed my own informal feedback from students further supports, there is a range of technology skills and experience among young people (Bennett et al., 2008, pp. 777-778). Some students require help in order to initiate their research, such as deciding which search words to enter in the Google interface. Others need help in order to organize the results of multiple searches. And so it becomes a part of the role of educators to facilitate students' critical thinking so that they may differentiate between what is academically useful, and what is not. After all, it is Downes (2007) who highlights the morass of data available on the Internet while Gorman (2005) reminds us of the extent to which this may, or may not be relevant. This already constitutes a significant change in the role of the educator because it encroaches somewhat on the role of the librarian as knowledge provider and to an even greater extent, perhaps, on the role of the Information Technology specialist. The role of the educator is further changed with the introduction to the curriculum of open, participatory and social media, as Cronin (2011) recommends. While this requires some experimentation with an educator's digital identity, which in turn requires a certain willingness to experiment with the notion of educator in the first place, admittedly, once information literacy skills are incorporated in the curriculum, this seems like the obvious next step.

Unless there is a major breakthrough in terms of a publication that tells us definitively how we may use the World Wide Web for academic purposes, we may never know for sure. What is certain is that educators will continue to need ongoing research, both formal and informal, to inform the debate about the ways in which education may need to respond to new university students in terms of the use of Internet-based information sources. While this chapter cannot accurately predict what the role of the French language and civilization lecturer may look like in the future, it does suggest that a relatively newer role may be initiated. Indeed, a certain degree of vigilance and endurance may well be

enough, as Gallagher (2012) recommends, in order for educators to remain true to the core values of higher education, such as deep thinking, while embracing the potential of Google (p. 225). The best way forward, therefore, would seem to be in a Maxine Greene state of "wide-awakeness" (cited in Teaching Wide-Awake, 2008, para. 1): feeling sometimes curious and other times furious while remaining aware of the digital debate. Similarly, Gallagher (2012) reminds us that "a searching uncertainty" is the hallmark of any student or teacher, indeed of any person (p. 212). In this way, situating information literacy skills in the undergraduate curriculum might involve a process of shifting and observing so that a relatively newer role for the educator that has greater viability may be initiated.

Meanwhile, French civilization continues to extend beyond the boundaries of books and classrooms into cyberspace where wide-awake students may continue to search with a measure of uncertainty for answers to their questions.

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