

# THE CONVERSATION

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## Why we should never return to the three Rs



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Ongoing calls for a rejection of “intellectual fads” and a return to “more traditional teaching methods” seem to be ramping up in the education debate.

But if these advocates were talking about rejecting advances over the past sixty years in medicine, no one would take them seriously. So why then is it acceptable to champion simplistic and archaic methods when it comes to education?



Here's why the old teaching methods are not necessarily the best School image from [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com)

We should never, and in fact we cannot, return to the three Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic for a couple of very simple reasons.

### A different time

First, the world is not the same as it was in the 1950s, and the kinds of employment and life opportunities that young people will be facing when they leave our schools are immeasurably different to those of their grandparents and parents.

Second, the enormous impacts of technologies on our lives must be taken into account. The wringing of hands, lamenting the poor grammar and spelling of young people, and calling for a return to the basics simply does not reflect the fact that the world has moved on.

A large body of research into how changing times and new technologies require new literacies has been informing a much broader approach to literacy teaching and learning in our schools.

This does not mean that reading and writing are abandoned. On the contrary, it means that reading and writing are expanded far beyond the limited literacy of printed books and paper to a much more diverse range of texts and information on computers, smart phones, e-books, and the like.

The 3 Rs will not help young people to use computers efficiently, search the internet and access electronic texts for information and then have effective tools to analyse, critique and

synthesise that information. Nor will a “back-to-basics” approach prepare our young people for an increasingly volatile and uncertain world, where adaptability to change, resilience and innovation are going to be more important than whether they can use cursive handwriting or remember their times tables.

## Jumping to conclusions

There is no doubt that Australia has slipped in its comparative performance on some international standardised tests, including the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). These results have been discussed extensively in the education community.

However, making reductionist calls for a return to some fabled “good old days” ignores the dangers of relying on simple standardised performance measurements to assess complex social issues.

Definitions of literacy have undergone radical transformations over the last century. In 1913, literacy would have been defined as the reading (decoding) and writing (encoding) of written/printed text, and judgements of literacy levels would be made according to this simple definition.

In 2013, this definition no longer has relevance for the complex and hybrid forms of expression and meaning making that new technologies make possible.

Interestingly, while literacy has seemed to be in perpetual crisis, over that same time, our capacities for communicating with other people have not diminished. Indeed, more than ever before, literacy is seen as an inherently social practice rather than a discrete set of skills.

Measuring the complexities of literacy through blunt standardised instruments such as those used in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an impossible task, given the pencil and paper nature of the tests being at odds with technologies-infused experiences of young people.

## Policy dangers

Given the likelihood that we will have a coalition government come September, it seems timely to consider a couple of the main arguments presented by Shadow Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne.

Under a coalition government, the focus would be shifted towards bringing back traditional teacher-centred approaches and **values**, with an emphasis on didactic methods, knowledge valued over skills, and traditional curriculum returning to the classroom.

The very notion of values in education is troubling as it conjures up questions of whose values? Furthermore, the rejection of decades of rigorous education research in order to embrace outmoded methods seems ridiculous.

On the question of prizing knowledge over skills, one only has to consider the information processing power of the humble smart phone sitting in our pockets or bags, which contains the capacity to access more information than we could ever hope to store in our memory by rote learning, to see the pointlessness in such a cause.

This debate in fact brings to mind the allegory of the Sabre-tooth Curriculum – a story which is often brought up during teacher training.

Just as it was ridiculous for the wise old men to insist on sabre-tooth tiger-scaring after all the tigers died out, it is absurd for us to consider returning to a mythical golden era of education.

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