

# The Importance of Researching Sources: A Traditional Approach for our Future in Education, From Origins to Innovations

Subjects: **Literature**

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This article argues that true education first investigates the sources of our knowledge and then turns to the actual learning process.

AI in education

the value of sources

medieval examples

Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

Gottfried von Strassburg

the Bible

Friedrich Nietzsche

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of robotization, automation, and the intervention of AI in more and more areas of human life constitutes a serious challenge to education, though not necessarily a threat. We are therefore constantly required to reflect critically on the fundamental question of what knowledge and skills we want to share with and convey to the current and future generations of students. Additionally, we must carefully examine what education itself might mean and how we are going to help students not only accumulate data but also grow and transform in the process of learning. In fact, the more the Internet and AI become essential components of human life, the more we need to reflect on what we are supposed to or want to achieve in our classrooms. Without going into too much detail, we are obviously faced with critical questions relating to the philosophy of education, and not so much with concerns regarding the modalities, methods, and materials of teaching.

## 2. The True Intellect

One would have to write an entire book about this topic, which is not at all novel, if we consider Friedrich Schiller's famous comments about the "Brotgelehrte" versus the "philosophische Kopf" (1789; for a good recent summary, see <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0170840621989002>). The former is a person who studies in order to gain the factual knowledge necessary for a job (bread earning); the latter is a person who wants to grow emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually through learning (philosophical mind). As the authors of this article indicate, this is "[a] Scholar [who] actively thinks about the nature of the phenomenon of interest, strives to see the world from a novel angle, reconsiders frameworks, carefully scrutinizes data and challenges received ideas."

## 3. Two Medieval Sources

In a recent edition of the plays by the tenth-century canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, who was the first in many respects (i.e., the first German playwright, also as a woman), Benno Löning convincingly argues that this female author had already outlined in clear terms what we today should understand as education, that is, a form of *Bildung*, determined by inner dignity, honor, morality, ethics, and spiritual strength, all brought into existence through the study of ancient sources of the three fields of the *trivium* (logic, rhetoric, and grammar) and the four fields of the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), and this, of course, at least for an ecclesiastic, exists within the framework of religion.

Hrotsvit's female martyrs resist external violence (torture) not by means of violent counter-measures but by rallying their inner strength, faith, and worth. This *metanoia*, the growth of the heart, the transformation of the self within the material existence, the discovery and development of the soul, and the turning away from the physical dimension to the spiritual one constitutes, in Löning's words, true *Bildung*, or education. This, in turn, involves the individual's ability to think for themselves, and the capacity to engage with materials, texts, or objects studied in a critical fashion, that is, based on understanding, independent reflections, and the ideal of the individual's growth from childhood to adulthood (Löning, ed., Hrotsvitha von Gandersheim, *Sechs Dramen & ein Epos*, 2025). Löning refers in that context to the observation by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), according to whom true education needs to transform the simplistic calculating thinker into the profound and reflective thinker, who investigates the true nature of things, their purpose, and meaning, and thus reaches a new plateau in their intellectual but also spiritual development (<https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/core/books/cambridge-heidegger-lexicon/thinking-denken/7A237ECB1465F7AECAAA933FD1EFE7D1>). Thus, studying really means, according to Löning, or rather Heidegger, not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the growth of the individual as an independent thinker (Löning, 30).

## 4. Challenges and Opportunities

AI and many other new technologies make it increasingly unnecessary for our students to search for data, which is freely and quickly made available through a simple online search. This actually constitutes a great advantage, despite the many dangers involved. Undoubtedly, most of our students today know much fewer facts than those in previous generations. But this also provides them with a chance to use their time in school for the much deeper and comprehensive development of unique and critical thinking, building connections, and finding innovative ways of sorting through the expanding clusters of data that threaten to overwhelm if not choke us. Data crunching is not learning; computers can perform this job much better than we will ever be able to.

## 5. The Study of Sources

This finally takes us to the central point of these reflections: the engagement with sources. Nothing we believe to know is absolutely certain, as the entire history of learning and research has amply demonstrated. Hence, we need much more critical engagement with the sources of what we think we know. From where is our knowledge really derived? Who has determined the pathway of our thinking and assumptions about facts? And who are we in this

constant process of knowledge production? Questioning the presumptions presented to us proves already to be the decisive approach to the labyrinth of data, almost being the way through and then also out of it, because, by means of returning to the roots of our knowledge, we can also comprehend the proverbial tree trunk, the branches, and the panoply of the tree we thought we had a good comprehension of.

Two very recent examples can powerfully illustrate this phenomenon and the promises of turning back to the sources. Religious people all over the world rely on their Scriptures as the bedrock of their faiths. Historically, every time an intellectual began to question those sources, major disruptions occurred, such as the Protestant Reformation started by Martin Luther in 1571. At stake here proves to be the source itself, the Bible, which has gone through countless revisions, adaptations, translations, criticism, and modifications (*The Oxford Handbook of the Latin Bible*, ed. H. A. G. Houghton, 2023). Anyone can proclaim to be the true interpreter of the Bible, but only if we know what version of the Bible might be at stake can we really form a convincing argument. The other example is Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde* (ca. 1210), which has finally been fully and critically edited, satisfying the highest standards of modern scholarship, and this after ca. 200 years of philological efforts (ed. Tomas Tomasek, 2024). All scholarship dedicated to this famous medieval romance is now required to reassess its findings because we can only reach solid conclusions if we have a reliable source. Finally, there are many philosophers today who engage with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), but they often do not know any German, rely entirely on translations, and never question the validity of those. When every word counts in a close reading of a text, the reference to the original is a *conditio sine qua non*.

## **| 6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, if we want to move current educational principles forward and establish new models of best teaching and learning practices, one of the essential procedures has to be the return to the sources and to draw our insights from the actual source; otherwise, we will remain dilettantes subject to AI and other robotic mechanics. As paradoxical as it might sound, stepping backwards to the past during our efforts regarding teaching, education, and learning proves to be essential in the effort to move forward toward the future. Only the independent and critical thinker, fully aware of their sources, can expect to develop new ideas and pathways and comprehend the labyrinth of our existence. Of course, we should not confuse this with the reinvention of the wheel, but only if we know enough about the origin of our investigations can we also expect to reach innovative shores where the mature, independent, and truly knowledgeable person awaits us.

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