

Collecting fun facts doesn't amount to learning

by Sabine Eiche

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I confess that I groan whenever I see inserts in a newspaper or on the internet with the heading Fun Fact. What do fun facts do, other than fill spaces on a page? Are they supposed to be the seeds of knowledge? Well, they won't germinate on their own.

Something similar to fun facts was a craze about fifty years ago – the game trivia – which led to the creation of Trivial Pursuit in 1982.

However, the origin of the word trivia goes back a long way. The British-American writer Logan Pearsall Smith (1865-1946) introduced it into our vocabulary in 1902 with the publication of his book, *Trivia* – a collection of short essays about commonplace matters. Smith derived the title from the English word trivial, which in turn comes from the Latin adjective “trivialis,” pertaining to a crossroads (the Latin for a crossroads is “trivium,” literally three roads).

Pause a minute to imagine yourself in ancient Rome, two thousand years ago. You're shuffling down a road and arrive at a fork. An acquaintance comes shuffling towards you. You stop, exchange a greeting, perhaps complain about the weather, and then you shuffle on, going your separate ways. Your brief, inconsequential remarks at the “trivium” were trivial. No one stops at a crossroads to deliver a long speech.

Nonetheless, Smith's trivialities are a far cry from fun facts. We're given a flash of insight in Book II of *Trivia*, in the essay “The Burden,” where Smith writes: “I know too much; I have stuffed too many of the facts of History and Science into my intellectuals.

My eyes have grown dim over books; believing in geological periods, cave dwellers, Chinese Dynasties, and the fixed stars has prematurely aged me.”

Smith wore his learning lightly, but there’s never any doubt that he was a genuinely learned man. Has learning – the dedicated pursuit of knowledge – become a quaint relic of those former times? Nowadays we accumulate bits of information at an alarming rate, only to end up dumping them in the Great Recycle Bin of our mind because we don’t know what to do with them. Another aspect of our throwaway society?

Knowledge is a vast intellectual network. A lot of disparate facts are of little use to us until we discover how they relate to other facts – that is, until we comprehend them, which means a committed effort on our part.

At the root of the English verb comprehend is the Latin “comprehendere.” It means to seize, lay hold of, but also to perceive with the senses, and to seize is also one of the obsolete meanings of the English verb. In modern German, to comprehend or understand is “begreifen” – “greifen” (seize) derives from the same Proto-Germanic source as the English verb gripe. Originally gripe meant to seize, grasp, though unlike “begreifen” it never referred to the intellect.

Yet, in an ironic and roundabout way, gripe can be linked to the intellect, to learning, because in the 1930s, gripe acquired the figurative sense to complain – and don’t students customarily gripe when asked to buckle down and do their homework?