

This essay will explore the impact of the digital age in my life as I learn to live and work with new information and communications technologies. Specifically I will focus on the impact of technology on my educational career. As this is an autobiographical essay it is important to identify some of the limits and uses of this approach. An autobiographical essay provides for personal insight and allows for the immediate interpretation of any cause and effect, i.e. I made this change and this was the result. As autobiographical essays relate to personal experience it is easy to become passionate about the details. This has a downside. With this form of inquiry you need to be aware of your own subjectivity and the possible inability to extrapolate your results – just because you felt the effect of something doesn't mean that others will also feel the same way. So while the response is valid, it represents the thoughts of one individual and may not be applicable to others.

Multi-tasking and critical thinking

“There really are important things you cannot think about unless it is still and you are only thinking about one thing at a time.” (Turkle – Professor MIT, Digital Nation)

Many people believe that they can multi-task and think critically. They believe that the digital disruptions do not detract from their ability to think and focus. Lauren, an MIT student interviewed in Digital Nation states “we are completely capable...(of) keeping track of the many things that are going on in our lives.” Herein lays the concern. Too often people confuse organizational activities - such as arranging your calendar online - with critical thinking activities. They are not the same thing. Professor Clifford Nass, is conducting research on multi-tasking at Stanford University and states:

“Virtually all multi-taskers think they are brilliant at multitasking. And one of the big discoveries is, you know what? You're really lousy at it! It turns out multi-taskers are terrible at every aspect of multitasking. They get distracted constantly...We worry that it may be creating people who are unable to think well and clearly.”

While the potential consequences are significant only the surliest Luddites and technological nay-sayers would argue that the internet and various digital technologies don't also provide us

with significant opportunities. In education, digital technologies allow us to create a personal connection with our students on Facebook, permit collaborative opportunities through Google Docs and provide innovative methods for feedback through screencasts. The educational possibilities seem endless. So we need to find a way to utilize these technologies where appropriate while at the same time ensuring that we are provided with ample opportunities to extract ourselves from these technologies to be able to have moments of 'stillness' allowing for deep thought and concentration.

Although this may not have been the intention, I found the Billy Collins poems provided valuable moments of stillness in this class. A hard-back book of poems rather than prose required physical movement away from my laptop and a mental shift to contemplation of big ideas in a foreign format. It forced me to stop, be still and, even if only for a moment, think critically about "the great ideas on horseback and the long-haired virtues in embroidered gowns" (Collins, The Death of Allegory)

I have experimented with numerous digital technologies in class, many of which - including the ones mentioned above - have proven invaluable. I've found others to be a nuisance. I tried to integrate Yahoo Instant Messaging into online office hours believing, based on an article I had read, that this would provide students with an easy way to connect with me during prescribed hours. I have found however that the constant interruptions provided by Yahoo's happy-faced purple messaging icon a near constant source of both irritation and interruption. I have terminated my subscription to this service. My office hours will now be held using a more traditional online chat format (although after watching Digital Nation I am considering trying out chat sessions in the virtual world of Second Life). Ultimately we need to be vigilant in ensuring that the digital tools we choose to integrate into our educational delivery work do not fill up the room with digital clutter and eliminate the possibility of stillness.

Seeing and Simulation

“If you think about the media environment that the average American teenager lives in. To walk into a classroom that doesn’t have any of that media must be like walking into a desert.” (Maher – Teacher Chatham High, Digital Nation)

Throughout Digital Nation we are exposed to numerous advocates of game-play as a valuable contributor to educational experience. We also find many opponents who denounce the educational advantages of gameplay as ‘hogwash’. Although I haven’t been involved in significant online game-play, I was a very avid role-playing gamer when I was growing up. In the 1980’s Dungeons and Dragons was credited with a multitude of evils spanning from devil worshipping to lethargy and suicide. There was a general claim that ‘gamers’ were potentially unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality – these concerns culminated in the tragic story of James Egbert, an avid gamer, who attempted suicide in the tunnels beneath our Michigan State University campus. These arguments have been resuscitated and are being used to describe digital gamers of the 21st Century.

I always felt like I had a clear understanding between the difference between fantasy and reality during my role-playing years and gave short-shrift to individuals who claimed that role-players couldn’t tell the difference. I was surprised therefore when Jeremy Bailenson – Director of the Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford University – stated “We’ve done studies with children, when they see themselves swimming around with whales in virtual reality, a week later, half of them will believe that they swam with whales.” (Digital Nation). Despite my preconceptions to the contrary, the line between fantasy and reality appears to be blurred. The ramifications of this are beyond the purview of this course however the possibility of being able to implant or suggest fantasy as reality is both scary and fascinating.

This may also provide educational opportunities that aren’t quite as problematic. Simulated universes such as Second Life allow for the creation of an environment that may be conducive to education. This is particularly important for online courses that are looking for a ‘personal presence’ an opportunity for the professors to connect with the students and the students to meet each other. The possibility of holding synchronous classes or chat sessions in a virtual world provides real opportunities to engage our students and colleagues. It would seem foolish to

acknowledge these potential benefits but not consider using them for education.

Loss and Gain

“Is it a loss? Sure...But that's the price of gain.” (Gee – Professor ASU, Digital Nation).

Digital technology has provided me with access to innovative digital tools (mentioned above) and has addressed geographical limitations to educational access. Without the internet I would not have been able to obtain a Masters degree from Michigan while working in Vancouver, Canada. But there are costs. Nicholas Carr correlates internet usage with his inability to concentrate “Now my concentration often starts to drift...the deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle” (Carr, Is Google Making Us Stupid). I believe his concerns are valid but can be addressed by developing mechanisms to separate oneself periodically from the digital technologies.

In my personal life I have tried to mitigate these potential losses by setting up a period each weekday wherein our family ‘turns off’. From 6-9pm on Mondays through Fridays, our house is technology free (with the exception of televised playoff hockey games). Although my son might see this arrangement as entirely beneficial, this has allowed time for us to be together as a family, playing music, boardgames, talking or reading. This also provides valuable ‘downtime’ for us to think and focus on a single issue. By regulating a time where I can’t be distracted by digital technologies I have an opportunity to reign in the ‘losses’ and think deeply.

Conclusion

Digital technologies offer tremendous educational opportunities however the constant digital distractions can limit our ability to critically think and reflect. We need mechanisms to allow us to occasionally pull back from technology and extricate ourselves from its digital tentacles. Once these mechanisms are implemented we can then safely pursue the technological questions relevant to us as educators: Will the technology improve or address an educational shortfall? If so, how can the technology best be implemented and utilized? Ultimately I would agree with

Douglas Rushkoff, the narrator of Digital Nation, when he concludes “So I guess that means you can still count me among the believers. I love the possibilities of a digital life...But most of all, I love being able to turn it off.” We need to ensure that we have access to the ‘off’ button and that we provide an opportunity for our students to access this button as well.