“Hang up That Cell Phone and Learn!”:
Students, Teachers, and Technology

Last week, a Winthrop faculty member emailed me and a few other people a link to a New York Times article, “Technology Changing How Students Learn, Teachers Say.” This article sparked a conversation among four or five people, and I thought it would be good for more of us to think about it and respond. Here is the link: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/01/education/technology-is-changing-how-students-learn-teachers-say.html?_r=0

As the article states, the two studies chart K-12 teacher responses rather than give hard data on, say, brain function, but the teacher responses are certainly worthy of attention. Do you share the perception that technology use has shortened student attention spans and their ability to persevere?

My first response it to say that, over the years I have been teaching, I have seen student attention spans grow shorter and students’ perseverance lessened. I am not sure if increased use of technology is totally to blame, but my suspicion is that it plays a large role in what I see as a steady decline.

Even in the relatively small amount of time I see my students, I can tell that they are immersed in entertainment technology. When I walk into class ten minutes early to get things (like technology!) set up, the four or five students who are present are all invariably hunched over a cell phone, texting or reading a text, most of them with earphones in, listening to music, I assume. Nearly all the students who walk in are all invariably hunched over a cell phone, texting or reading a text, most of them with earphones in, listening to music, I assume. Nearly all the students who walk in are looking at a cellphone, and most of them are hooked up with ear buds too. When class starts, I see them reluctantly turn their phones to mute. It seems almost painful to them to part with their device for 75 minutes. The second class is over, if not sooner, the cellphones come out, and they studiously check to see what has happened in their texting world in the last hour and fifteen minutes. They drift out of the classroom, engrossed in that tiny screen. Very rarely do I see students talking to one another, and only rarely does one speak to me. As I walk across campus after class, I watch intently to see if I can spot a student who is not staring at a cellphone. This seldom happens.

And that constitutes only the small part of my students’ lives that I can see. How many hours of the day do they spend watching television, listening to music, playing video games, texting, and using the internet for entertainment? My assumption is that they spend a great deal of their time on those activities—and studies bear out my assumption.

Now to the questions raised in the article: are their attention spans shorter? Yes, without
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question, and getting shorter year by year. Do they have more trouble persevering at difficult tasks? Another yes, from my experience and perspective. And even if entertainment technology is not the sole cause, I think it is a major cause. So what to do about it?

The old school part of me says, "We can't give in to all this technology! We have to fight, to force them to concentrate, to make them work harder!" Make them shut off their phones when they walk into class, and make sure that, during their time with me at least, they are immersed in print technology and working diligently at one thing for long periods of time. Just like when I was in school!

You can make your own choice, old school or new school, but I am sure many of you will choose, as I do, to blend both worlds. I try to stay abreast of technologies as much as I can, and I have integrated them into my teaching. Even better, I let students use technology to enhance their learning. Rather than giving them a PowerPoint lecture, have the students make PowerPoint (or Prezi) presentations. Students find it exhilarating and liberating when you let them whip out their cellphones and answer a question they can look up on the spot, or even to text other students with answers or questions. (Marshall Jones recently did a screencast [new technology to me!] on how to teach students the handout—you can find it on the TLC Resources page as well.)

But I remain adamant that students need to be adept at "old school" skills, especially critical reading of challenging texts. As I have written before, I have seen a steady decline in student reading ability, a decline that predates much of the technology we are worried about.

Even with students' shorter attention spans and lack of perseverance, I find that they can learn and master the valuable skill of critical reading, but only if I emphasize it, only if I spend some time talking about and demonstrating a skill that I used to take for granted. (Many of you have seen and used the handout "How To Read Critically"; I recently did a screencast [new technology to me!] on how to teach students the handout—you can find it on the TLC Resources page as well.)

Perhaps students are changing in ways that we cannot fight, but I am not convinced. I also see positive effects of technology on student learning, as the article suggests. In any case, this is an issue that we must address, and perhaps a good topic for a future TLC session. For those who are interested, here is a link to one of the studies:

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/ Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu

The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

**A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation**

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don’t want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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*Thought for The Week*

“It were not best that we should all think alike; it is difference of opinion that makes horse-races.”

--Mark Twain