



Plugging in, tuning out

The digital culture has changed the way kids learn, but at the expense of literacy and cultural awareness.

By Don Campbell
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I ask students on the first day of my journalism

classes to fill out a questionnaire. Most questions inquire about their interest in journalism and any experience they have that is journalism-related. One question is: "What do you read, at least fairly regularly?"

Used to be, they would say *The New York Times* or *Newsweek* or *Sports Illustrated*. A few would list the local newspaper, or *The New Yorker* or *The Economist* to impress me. In recent years, the answers more often have been CNN.com, ESPN.com, blogs and other Internet offerings.

And then, at the beginning of the last semester, a student who claimed to be interested in journalism wrote this about what she reads: "Nothing."

Her answer astonished me but shouldn't have, because it epitomized the lack of intellectual curiosity in students that I have noticed in recent years, along with a decline in such basic skills as grammar, spelling and simple math. A sense of history? History is what happened since they left middle school.

As both a teacher and a father of two multi-tasking teenage daughters, I had long suspected that something was going on. While some students seem just as smart or smarter than they did 15 years ago, I'm also confronted with college sophomores who can't identify Henry Kissinger or perform simple percentage exercises; who argue, as one did, that misspelling someone's name was no big deal because I knew who she meant; students who begin sentences with lower-case letters and embellish news stories by adding their own facts.

I thought I was just a closet curmudgeon. After all, every young generation is associated with some kind of negative stereotype. But then I read two publications over the summer, one that validated my every suspicion, and one that gave me a glimmer of hope.

A narrowing horizon

The first is a book by Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein, called *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future*. As Bauerlein admits, the title is "a little over the top," but don't let that put you off. If you're the parent of someone under 20 and read only one non-fiction book this fall, make it this one.

Bauerlein's simple but jarring thesis is that technology and the digital culture it has created are not broadening the horizon of the younger generation; they are narrowing it to a self-absorbed social universe that blocks out virtually everything else.

"The Internet doesn't impart adult information; it crowds it out," Bauerlein writes. "Video games, cellphones and blogs don't foster rightful citizenship. They hamper it."

Bauerlein, who served as a director of research and analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, makes his case not with anecdotes, but with numerous studies that examined the knowledge, skills and intellectual habits of teenagers. He concludes that the "screen time" occupying so many youngsters on the Internet, cellphones and video games is depriving them of the cultural experiences and learning traditionally associated with liberal arts and civic awareness.

My own interpretation is that, for the younger generation, the Internet has moved knowledge from the brain to the fingertips: Who needs to know about Impressionism or Charles Dickens or George Washington Carver or — hell — even George Washington? Why carry such information around in your head when Google will deliver it in seconds?

Technology's ill effects

The second publication is a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project based on interviews with 700 teens and their parents, as well as a series of focus groups. The youngsters acknowledge that the dumbed-down writing style they use in instant messaging, texting and other social networking sometimes seeps into their schoolwork, with negative effects. But they also say they understand the need to be more formal in composing homework assignments than they are in text-messaging friends. In fact, they are hungry for the kind of mentoring and feedback that inspires and rewards good writing, and a majority of them still believe that good writing is the ticket to success in life.

The alarm bell sounds, however, when you read what some students had to say about how social networking has become such an important part of their lives, devouring hours each day in a way that is much more pervasive than even television.

So what can we — parents and teachers — do? We can't fight technology, nor should we. The Internet is the greatest research tool ever invented. But we must fight the dark side. One way, starting with this school year, is to insist that kids spend less "screen time" communicating with their friends, and more time reading and being exposed to the kinds of cultural and civic activities that will make them well-rounded citizens. This fall's presidential campaign would be a good place to start.

Otherwise, the future is going to be populated by adults who sound like the high school student in a Midwestern city who gave this response in the Pew survey when asked why social networking held such an attraction for her:

"It sounds stupid and everything but like once you like get into it it's really like addicting — just like everything. Like you have your song and like you write like all this stuff about yourself and like all my friends basically have it. So like we always like read each other's pages and like call each other and like kind of, and like you put like 300 pictures up so ... people's pictures and stuff and comments."

Sounds stupid? Why in the world would she think that?

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