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"I have been distracted by everything else I'm capable of doing on a 'screen' while writing an essay. . . . I routinely stop writing and check my e-mail, or I am at the disposal of any other wandering thought I get while writing essays. I think I even started to sho[p] online while I was in the middle of this essay…."

This was what one of our students confided to us about her experience writing a paper for our class. Another told us that while "writing the first page of this assignment, I've sent five texts to my girlfriend and received five replies in kind, and I consider myself fairly conservative in my plugged-in-ness."

Both students were enrolled in our team-taught course, titled "Are Machines Making Us Stupid?" The class was designed to address the challenges facing students as they try to concentrate. Funded by an NEH Digital Humanities grant, it was inspired by a listserv conversation with campus CIOs in which a participant observed that many faculty were frustrated that, in class, students were distracted by laptops and mobile devices. The faculty wondered whether there was a "technological kill switch" that might limit or curtail students' Internet access. In general the CIOs didn't think this was a need it was incumbent for them to serve. Their mission was to build greater campus access to the Internet—not to throttle it.

This exchange got us thinking: isn't it ironic that kill switches are hard to find on campuses? After all, 150 years ago, Henry David Thoreau had built a cabin at the edge of Walden Pond that took him off the grid—and allowed him to write Walden. If Thoreau could do it in a less technologically advanced age, why couldn't we?   One difficulty is that we now live

in a culture that highly values connectedness—regardless of how superficial those connections might be, and so to encourage disconnectedness is to challenge cultural norms and expectations. Another problem is that such an experiment seemed economically untenable to many of our students, 31 percent of whom are raising families and 60 percent of whom are working jobs more than 20 hours a week. Allowing our students to take refuge in cabins on the edges of campus might seem idyllic, but it wasn't an affordable or attractive option for most our students.

Perhaps there was another way. In *Hamlet's Blackberry*, William Powers laments the digital distractions we face today, and proposes "Walden zones"—areas of disconnection where we can regain our sense of focus. Thoreau had his cabin. Socrates went on country walks. Seneca found remove through writing. William Powers turns off his modem on weekends. If we couldn't build our students cabins, we came to believe that we could offer them a Walden zone of some kind.

We proposed to repurpose our campus testing centers and turn them into "concentration labs" for writing. In them, instructors could moderate the amount of Internet access students had while writing. For some assignments, access would be unlimited, for others, it would be limited, and in still others, access would be entirely denied.

The "concentration lab" would force students to experience how technology was affecting their writing. These experiences would be complemented by readings that explored historical and philosophical questions associated with technology and society: how are contemporary thinkers responding to the Internet's effect on our society? How did our Victorian

predecessors respond to the advent of earlier communication networks like the telegraph, the phone, and television? To what extent did their experiences anticipate ours? In what ways were they different? Such were the theoretical and practical questions that drove the class.

When the class began, we surveyed our students. Most admitted to being distracted by the Internet. More than sixty percent sympathized with the statement that "Modern technologies interrupt me too often." As one student explained while he tried to write a paper in the midst of these distractions:

> I wrote while texting on my cell phone and occasionally clicking around on the Internet, reading a Wikipedia article or checking an RSS feed. I found myself easily distracted, not very motivated to finish the essay, even though it had a rapidly approaching deadline. Completion only came when I forced myself to intensely focus on the essay, not allowing myself to be distracted by the attractive lure of Internet connectivity.

The students clearly perceived the interruptive potential of technology. But even though they worried about these distractions, they weren't concerned enough to modify their behavior. And some seemed to welcome the idea of even greater connection. Despite their acknowledgement that much technology is distracting,, more than fifty percent agreed with the statement "If money wasn't an issue I'd buy a smartphone." They felt confident that through sheer will power, they could resist modern technology's many temptations,

To shake that faith, we assigned some texts that described how the Internet was rewiring our brains. However, to our surprise, rather than challenging their sense of agency, these texts

seemed only to enhance it. By learning where the dangers lurked, they felt that were in a better position to avoid them. One student described his position this way:

> I do acknowledge that now, more than ever, we must be responsible for our own ability to focus. In a world that is increasingly distracted, I feel that the primary distinction between those who are distracted by the Internet and those who are cognizant and purposeful with their Internet use is simply that; we need to be aware that above anyone else, we as individuals are in control of our Internet usage. We are the rulers and moderators of our connectivity, and we alone can assert our dominance [over] it.

As another put it:

> I recognize more how my life has been shaped by technology. I like recognizing that I am being shaped by it but that I have the power to change it if I want.

The class was unwilling to abdicate its agency to any machine, and this was driven home during one class when we drew a continuum on the board. On one end of the continuum we wrote "instrumentalism" (a view of technology as a tool subject to human control) and on the other "technological determinism" (a view of technology as having power, influence, and control over humans). When we asked the class to locate themselves on the continuum, no one associated themselves with determinism. Then we asked the students whether technology was underpinned by ideology or if it existed independently of it. Nearly every student resisted the idea that their computers and iPhones reflected and embodied ideological imperatives like efficiency, consumerism, capitalism, and connectedness. Technology, they claimed, was simply a benign thing—and completely under their control. It was merely a tool; it was not turning them into

tools. Like many in the U.S., and like many in their late teens and early twenties, they were

convinced that they were masters of their own destiny.

Strangely, and in large part in spite of our intentions, their belief that they could control

technology seemed to grow firmer as the semester progressed. As one student commented at the

end,

> [the class] has changed my opinion. I came in here a technophobe or neutral
>
> about it. But now I'm more open to it. I see its benefits.

Another said,

> It's opened my eyes. I'm taking a computer class because I'm so excited about it.

Another declared. "I'm a lot more [in] awe of technology. It's made me realize how much I rely

on it."

This isn't to say that the entire class rejected the determinist perspective. Some students

were willing to consider, like Thoreau, that if we shape our tools, they in turn shape us. But a

generational difference remained. When one is exposed to a technology in youth, one is less

inclined to question it, and so it is the fate of older generations who have become habituated to

an older technology to note and compare the newer one's effects.

We tried to offer some sense of this comparative perspective by reading some history.

Our students, like many people, were unaware of the degree to which our concerns about

"information overload" were anticipated in previous information revolutions. It took a reading

of Tom Standage's The Victorian Internet to disabuse them of the notion that "one's own

generation stands on the very cusp of history," a bias Standage terms "chronocentricism." We

may like to believe that the problems we confront are unprecedented, but many of our concerns are not new. For instance, in Standage's chapter on information overload, he quotes a businessman complaining about his harried lifestyle after the introduction of the telegraph:

> The merchant goes home after a day of hard work. . . to a late diner, trying amid the family circle to forget business, when he is interrupted by a telegram from London, directing, perhaps, the purchase in San Francisco of 20,000 barrels of flour, and the poor man must dispatch his dinner as hurriedly as possible in order to send off his message to California. The businessman of the present day must be continually on the jump ... He must use the telegraph.

Standage showed the class that our current technological anxieties had some uncanny historical precedents.

While the entire class was struck by the similarities between our own information revolution and previous ones, they drew different conclusions as to their significance. On the one hand, many agreed with a student who observed that "the historical stuff makes me less anxious." For this faction, the history we had read offered comfort as well as a rationale for complacence: if people have always harbored anxieties about information overload and interruption, and we're still managing to prevail in the face of these handicaps, then perhaps our own concerns are not quite as urgent as we believe.

Another faction arrived at different conclusions. As one student observed:

> In class, one theme has become very clear: technophobes have always existed. I want to suggest here that while this is true…. I do think this is a particularly challenging age. . . . Certain aspects of history certainly repeat themselves, but

each age is also unique in many ways. . . . We should be willing to examine the current age and admit that it is unlike any other. . . . The kind of technology we are discussing right now is a bit of a historical anomaly.

For this student (and others like him) complacence, and a ready dismissal of technophobia, was an untenable position. In class, these students made clear that continued discussions of technological anxiety were useful because they helped us adopt our technologies mindfully.

This division between the complacent and less complacent was tacitly connected to a larger division that often turned into lively class debate. In keeping with our hopes, some students began to study more often at the library or the "Institute" (on Utah campuses the LDS church offers study facilities directly off campus) or the quiet study lounge at the university's student center. However, other students balked at this increased mindfulness. For example, in a writing exercise where access to the Internet had been completely blocked, one student lamented that

I was and will always continue to be my biggest distraction. . . . As I sat writing I found myself very distracted. The testing center was silent and I was one of the only students testing at the time. . . . The constant clicking of my typing and even the sound of my own breathing seemed to get louder and louder and my thoughts continued to wander farther from the subject at hand as more time elapsed. *I found that the lack of distractions was a distraction in and of itself.*

And as another said "Too much quiet makes my mind wander."

These grumblings were revisited at the end of the semester, when a student observed that the class' obsession with distraction might exacerbate rather than mitigate our problems:

"How much is it made harder because we are thinking about it? How much is it made harder by reading Powers' [on Walden zones]? If there is a pathology how much is the pathology made worse by calling attention to it?"

These class discontents underscored another recurring doubt for us as instructors: in promoting the use of Walden zones and raising the spectre that digital technology might be distracting us from a deeper and more insightful way of experiencing the world, were we engaging in a "moral panic?" Was our concern about the effects of all this technology just the latest iteration of longstanding fears about the new and unknown? Didn't it echo earlier generations' worries about the way that movies, or rock and roll, or television, were affecting America's youth?

Every new information technology has sparked panics in the past. And yet, we prevail despite predictions of imminent cognitive apocalypse. Were our own fears symptomatic of a particular class, a particular generation. and a particular profession whose identity (and possibly livelihood) was being challenged and disrupted by a new technology? As instructors we had come into class at the beginning of the semester uncertain how much we would unsettle students with our questions. But what we didn't expect was how uneasy *we* became: we were not sure at the end of the semester whether our attempts to get students to regard technology with a more critical eye were motivated by a genuine concern about their cognitive welfare and their capacity to write, or whether deep down, we were simply engaging in an inclination to celebrate practices that made our vocations possible.

We couldn't expect to answer the questions our class raised conclusively. However, we think we gave students the means by which to fashion answers that were deeper, more insightful,

and more compelling than were available to them before the class. Moreover, their answers (like our own) began to be informed by a fuller understanding of how others, who view and experience the world differently, approach the questions.

On the last day of class, we asked the students what if anything they thought they had learned in class. One of the few older students in the class noted:

> [Before the Internet arrived I lived many decades] without it and was fully satisfied not having it. For me, technology takes away from time we might [be spending with others]. But [now] I can get along better with my son because I understand where he's coming from in a way I didn't before.

In asking whether machines were making us stupid, we had hoped to understand our relationship to our technology, our tools. But as this last student reminds us, the class also explored and enhanced our understanding of our relationship with others. We had presumed to explore machines, but in exploring machines we had ultimately arrived at a better understanding of our differences and commonalities with one another.