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The Apparition of These Screens in the Crowd

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“I was at a station in the DC metro and everyone in the crowd ahead of me was looking down at their phones,” recalled William “Bro” Adams, chair of the National Endowment of the Humanities. Adams opened his remarks on technology and attention with what, in hindsight, is a striking revision of some of the most famous lines of Modernist poetry. “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black, bough,” reads the entirety of Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro.” Following Adams, we might think of the apparition of so many screens, their incandescence in the chiaroscuro of a subway station overpowering the vellum fragility of Pound’s flowers. This scene of screens set the tone for “Paying Attention & The Way We Live Now,” a panel discussion

during the 2016 Bale Boone Symposium, organized by the University of Kentucky's Gaines Center for the Humanities.¹

The panel raised compelling and, in some cases, provocative questions about how current information technologies change our perception and interaction with the world. Overall, the speakers expressed a keen interest in new ways of thinking and communicating, but they also expressed ambivalence over what happens when technology use becomes compulsive.

Adams celebrated the innovative work in digital humanities that his office has supported, but he also worried about the future of what he called "classic" or "long-form" scholarship such as the printed monograph. Artist Mira Schor related her fascination with the ubiquity of social media in the everyday, but the language of addiction from which she frequently drew also suggested an elegy

A significant theme emerged concerning how technology makes demands of us: demands that we cannot resist.

for self-control in the age of digital interfaces. And Alyson West and Michael David Murphy, the founders and editors of the website *We Are the 15%*, balanced the accomplishments of their project with a concern over our ability to be present and hold civil discourse when digital platforms seem to compel us to publish our thoughts, even if we shouldn't.

A significant theme emerged concerning how technology makes demands of us: demands that we cannot resist. And this is especially evident in conversations about technology in the classroom. *Students just can't pay attention*, we say. *They're always checking their phones or browsing the Internet when they should be focusing on the class*. Some instructors ban all digital technologies in their classes; others permit some technology use in connection with assignments and activities. The brave few don't regulate it at all.

There's a lot that goes without saying in these sorts of conversations, especially when it comes to our understanding of how attention and learning work, and to unpack some of these assumptions I spoke with Dr. Yuha Jung and Dr. Rachel Shane, faculty and chair, respectively, in the Department of Arts Administration at the University of Kentucky. Jung and Shane have worked with faculty in their department to revise lesson plans and course design to incorporate more digital technologies. And they've found that it has *increased* the likelihood that students will be on task. What follows is an informal exploration of what it means to pay attention and to learn in the context of the contested value of digital technologies. It's also an example of how we can observe students without judgment and develop a pedagogy that, even if it challenges our assumptions, empowers students to meet learning outcomes.

About the Project

Trey: Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me about such an urgent question for college teachers. Could we start with the elevator pitch for your project?

Yuha: Rather than telling students not to be distracted by their phones and laptops or banning them altogether in classrooms, we decided to incorporate them into teaching and learning as that is how our students live and learn. In order to develop student-centered, technology-based pedagogy, we first observed six courses, met with the instructor of each course to redesign one of their lessons utilizing student-centered technologies, and observed the redesigned classes. At both observations, we surveyed the students and teachers and did a focus group with the instructors to gather their input at the end of the project.

The result was that students were engaged so much more during the redesigned lessons where students used technologies that were integral to learning objectives and where most of the class time was used by students talking and working on projects in groups. Working on this project has been one of the most eye-opening moments for me. I was able to see that the traditional lecture-based and teacher-centered pedagogy was not working as students were seemingly doing other things (texting, checking emails, listening to music, or just not being engaged at all).

Trey: What led you to this question about attention, distraction, and technology—not only the question, but a project with real impact in your colleagues' classes to use as a call to redesign curricula?

Rachel: In November of last year, an article came out on NPR radio about how to get students to stop using cell phones in class, and it featured two faculty members: one who offered participation credit if students left their phones on the instructor's desk, and one who gave students a one-minute reward every fifteen minutes to check their phone. This article, when I read it, bothered me for the implication that there's something wrong with the technology, something wrong with the way that students behave that we're going to correct to ensure that they'll behave in the way that we would. Or the way that we used to behave, I think, is more accurate.²

I sent the article to my colleagues in the arts administration department without sharing what I thought, and after a long conversation about it with our instructional designer, I realized that what bothered me was the expectation that students meet faculty where they were, which is mostly the opposite of how we think in other professions. We expect the professional to meet the non-professional where they are; it's the professional's job to do this. I thought that faculty wouldn't be

doing their jobs well if they have such a difficult time integrating technologies, and there must be a better way to meet the students.

The arts administration department has an online MA program, so we're already committed to online activity and using technology pedagogically, but we hadn't actively thought about how to use technology for a face-to-face pedagogy that would support students. That was the impetus for the project.

Trey: And what interested you in the project, Yuha?

Yuha: I don't remember exactly, but I agree with Rachel's point that we shouldn't ask students to meet us only where we are. We shouldn't say: "the way you're learning is wrong, so we're going to correct it." We decided to do this research and present it at the 2016 Association of Arts Administration Educators Conference. I love doing research, instructional design, surveys, and focus groups. The proposal was accepted, so we had to do it *[laughter]*.

Trey: That's often the reason that projects move forward *[laughter]*. You worked with your colleagues on this project, and what's interesting to me is that this was entirely in-house within your department. Faculty will sometimes express ambivalence, if not anxiety about allowing more information technologies in the classroom, whether it's phones, laptops, or something else. What did you notice while working with your colleagues to develop more technology-rich pedagogies, assignments, or activities?

Rachel: There was some ambivalence. In all fairness, I'm not sure that people felt that they could say no *[laughter]*. I really didn't *force* anyone to do it.

Yuha: You're the boss.

Rachel: I *am* the chair of the department *[laughter]*. When we had these initial meetings about learning outcomes, we heard from most instructors that they already use technologies in their classes: PowerPoint, YouTube, and so on. For Yuha and me, though, this didn't necessarily meet the criteria for the project. There was technology in the classroom, but it was completely faculty-centered technology. What we were looking for was student-centered technology. Or, teachers might say that their classes didn't lend themselves to technologies. I think anyone's class can use technologies in a way, but that was also one of the ambivalent responses. Lastly, instructors might have wanted to use technologies, but only in a small assignment. They felt that they didn't understand the technologies enough to guide a major project, or if digital technologies were used, they were used outside of class.

Technical Literacy

Trey: What was your experience advocating for digital technologies in the face-to-face classroom, as a part of student-instructor interactions, especially in the context of the worry that instructors can't or shouldn't assign work with a particular technology if they don't have mastery over it?

Yuha: I think you don't have to know it; you can't possibly know everything and be able to use all of the available technologies. One way is to use simple technologies. But it's fine not to know how to do everything. Making videos, for example: I don't know how to do it well. I probably could do it but with editing and everything else I don't know how to do everything. But students are so good at it, and I haven't had to focus so much on teaching the technical aspects of how to make videos. And we always can ask someone who is good at it to come to one or two class meetings to talk to students, or to consult while students work on their projects. I've done movie making in the class as part of a larger project and it went really well.

Rachel: I'm with you. If I were going to make a video and edit it, it would take me a while. But that's not the goal of the assignment. I just assigned a video project in a freshman level class of 55 students. It had to be written, shot, and shown during the class meeting. In fairness, we had to use the next class meeting to view all of them, but they were all written and shot in a single class meeting. They all know how to take a picture on their phones, which means that they all know how to make a video on their phones. If it's a group project and students are in groups of four, it's safe to say that at least one of them knows how to attach the video to an email or upload it to YouTube. Not one person was at a loss for how to film a video on their phone.

Even if the instructor doesn't know how to do something technical, at least some of the students will probably know to do it. But I like Yuha's point that technology in the classroom doesn't have to be complicated. We don't have to create a second, what is it called, life? Space? We don't have to be overly complicated if that's not the point. The point is just to get the students engaged and teach them how to research and deliver content to achieve a learning outcome. It might be as simple as a Google Doc, which everyone can do.

Trey: Some have described that second life or space as a second language or literacy.³ We feel that we don't have time to develop the additional literacy of using a certain platform, or learning how to use a particular device. What you're saying is compelling because you're bringing any anxieties over function and technique back to learning outcomes that are more central to the course rather than spending so much time worrying about technical aspects such as, say, the playback quality or production value of a video that students are just shooting on their phones.

Rachel: Right. And I went back and forth on that assignment. Students had to do some research outside of class and during class they had to write a script. I initially thought that they could get up and present their findings to the class, but there's not the same kind of pressure when a group has to present in front of the class. They also tend to go longer. They tend to say too much. When they're told that they have to make a one-minute or thirty-second video they know that they have to be concise and specific about what they're going to say. It allowed students to be more deliberate. Even though the quality of the videos wasn't good—you wouldn't post it on an online portfolio—the other

aspects of the composition more than achieved the learning outcomes. The videos were excellent at demonstrating an understanding of the concepts that I wanted them to understand.

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Trey: When people think of assigning an activity or project that involves the use of these digital devices and modalities, maybe the assumption is something grand in scope. But

you're suggesting that we need to think smaller: something that's more contained and that we can actually complete in one or two class meetings with a limited understanding and familiarity with the technologies involved. That makes it less intimidating for teachers.

Active Learning

Trey: All of that said, though, there is still the question of paying attention that was raised during the Boone Symposium panel "Paying Attention & The Way We Live Now." Even if we commit to bringing information technologies into our teaching in thoughtful and incremental ways, maybe we're still worried that it's all too distracting. As I understand your project, this was also part of the research, and you found that with deliberate integration of the technologies, students were actually more engaged in the learning process. This seems to run contrary to the story that we often hear: the more technology, the more distraction. How do you find your work speaking to this commonplace?

Rachel: For one, I think it's inaccurate to say that just because a student is looking at the teacher, they're "engaged." That, I think, was the problem with the NPR article that spurred the whole project. Just because students aren't looking at their phones doesn't mean that they're engaged in the lesson. It doesn't mean that they'll remember anything that happened by the end of the lesson, or that they've developed any skills or tools for moving forward in the course.⁴

For another, we teachers need to be honest about our own interactions with the world, too. I go to meetings and the rooms are full of people twice the age of my students and I see so many of them checking their phones. It seems disingenuous to say that anyone isn't distracted by some technology at any given time. The bigger point is whether students are meeting the learning objectives or if they're not understanding much of anything that I'm saying. I know for a fact that with the video activity my students took away much more than if I had just stood in front of them and told them about facts and figures. There's something disingenuous about thinking that people can be on task at all times during an hour-long class or meeting. They're simply not going to be.

I like the group work when the class gets loud and I even hear some students off task. This semester I'm teaching a one-hundred level class. One of my goals is that they leave the class with some social colleagues they can network with, whom they wouldn't know without the interactions. I have to give them the chance to develop those relationships. It's okay for me if they have a short conversation about what they did at the game. It's part of being a human being. We don't walk into a meeting, sit down, and immediately go through the agenda without asking somebody else how they are *[laughter]*. That's not how we work in the world and part of having those social interactions is figuring out how to work well in the world. Some might consider that "off task," though.

Yuha: I've found my students more "on" task, though, when they do this sort of work, and I've completely changed my undergraduate class on financial management for arts organizations. You might think that it would be difficult to teach that class without lecturing, and that's what I thought initially. But I haven't lectured a bit this semester. We're doing group work, using really low-tech technologies like Google Drive applications. Sometimes I give them individual work to write things up, but usually it's group work. And they're on task.

I think that because they're allowed to use technologies, they're less likely to check emails and do other things because they're really doing work. I'll ask them to look things up, and they'll tell me what it is. It's a natural way of learning things now, so why wouldn't we use these devices? It changed my way of teaching. What I used to do was "me-centered" and I would stick to PowerPoints, which was a lot of work! *[laughter]* I'm much happier. I look forward to class a lot more now. Not all of the pressure is on me.

Rachel: It's a more democratic style of class activity. As Yuha said about asking students to look things up, teachers aren't expected to have all the answers. I may have the answer, but that's not important. It's important that students know the answer and how to find it. How often are we assigned something in our jobs that we don't know how to do and we have to look up? *[laughter]* It's reflecting what we really do in life. I've been asked to do a million things that I didn't know how to do. Part of this is teaching students to do research for questions that they don't know the answer to.

Yuha: And I've noticed that my students now do the readings. When I used to lecture, I felt like I was giving summaries of the readings, so students wouldn't read. But they wouldn't understand the content, of course. There are things in financial management that aren't logical if you don't study them. Previously, I'd get mad at them for not doing the readings. Now, I'm not giving them the opportunity not to do the readings—if they want to be successful during the class meetings.

I test them, too. The tests individually don't bear too much weight for the final grade, but students understand that if they show up not having done the readings they won't be able to do the group work in class. They work on things in class and can ask me questions, which is better than them working at home with no one helping them. I think students appreciate that more, and I feel really needed. When they ask about something they don't understand, or why a certain number is so low in a financial statement, I'll get to explain how all of it would affect an organization. And I can urge them to do some more research with their devices. Again, it's a more democratic way of learning. I'm part of their learning now. Before, I was just delivering content.

Rachel: This is not to say that you don't have the traditional challenges for classroom management. In the same class I've been talking about, I assigned group work that did require work outside of class meetings. I knew, after the first part of the project, that one person in each group was doing most of the work. Students talked about how they had done a lot of work and the rest of their group hadn't. It's a complaint we hear in lots of classes. So, during the next class meeting we spent time with the groups designing their own rubric for assessing each other in Google Docs, which would factor into their grades. The technology integration of Google Docs allowed everyone to see how they were being assessed. I was still troubleshooting, just like we do in any class when there's a problem. Technology doesn't fix every problem; it's just a change in how we approach the problems. We also have writing-intensive days that I call "pen and paper days," so I use different strategies.

Paying Attention

Yuha: Do you consider that—the pen or pencil—as “technology”? What about post-it notes? Are they a technology?

Trey: That's a great question, and it reminds me of Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy*, when he makes the argument that instead of thinking about paying attention as this binary of “deep” attention *without* technology and total distraction *with* technology, we need to be teaching a wide range of engagement, from the deep and sustained to the more fragmented and the more hyperactive. He argues that we ought to incorporate all forms of attention in teaching and learning, and your question about pens and post-its versus video and websites seems to suggest a different

understanding of what attention looks like.⁵ What does attention look like, then, for you in the classroom? What does being “on task” look like?

Yuha: That’s a difficult question to answer.

Rachel: It changes based on whether we’re having a large group discussion or small group discussions, and one of the challenges is understanding both the introvert and the extrovert. When I’m having a large class discussion I’m looking for the largest variety of participation, meaning people throwing out ideas or speculations. And I’ve found that that can change by the class. We have to get a sense of “who” this class is as a whole. I was surprised that in this one-hundred level class, the fifty students really care about large group discussion. That’s actually how they do their best work, when I get the most democratic participation. Not what I imagined. I had imagined that three people in the front row would want to talk with me and the rest would hide. Weird, right?

I had to adjust because I realized that small groups were less comfortable for them. The TA and I did some brainstorming about the problem, and she suggested that especially at the beginning of the class, students might be uncomfortable with the content and feel more exposed in a small group. In a large group, students get the cues when someone speaks and the professor responds. I don’t know if that’s what it was, but they do like to talk more in the large group.

Because you don’t have to have students’ attention all the time, you get it when you want it.

In the small groups, though, engagement looks like being on phones or a website related to the activity, or a couple of people doing that while others talk through a problem. Maybe someone is writing on paper while someone else does research on a laptop. Sometimes everyone is on the same Google Doc recording their findings. Sometimes they’re all quiet, and sometimes they’re all having a conversation. My sense of what being “on topic” looks like changes drastically.

For the “pen and paper” days I’ve started class by giving one or two specific questions about the reading. I’ll walk around the classroom, peer over shoulders, and ask students to tell me more about interesting ideas that I see them writing. If a student writes something like “I don’t know the answer to this question”—this happened last week—I can ask them why until they’re able to rewrite their response. When students see that I move around and talk to them, the responses get better *[laughter]*. If I stood at the front of the classroom, and they thought I’d never look at their writing, it wouldn’t be the same.

Trey: You specifically mention the arrangement of bodies where the instructor is standing at the front of the room and the students are sitting facing the instructor. They’re passively learning. We

might think of paying attention as an active, deliberate effort, but in this case it seems very passive. We might tell people to stay on task and pay attention, but what we really mean is that they shouldn't be doing anything. They should be looking at and listening to the instructor.

Yuha: Whether they get it or not. For me, when students did group projects in Google Docs, I could check it and see them typing. And it's all recorded. That's one way of looking at it. The projects are tied to what we do in class, and sometimes they have time in class to work on them. Later, I can see who was on task on that day. It's very clear. For example, I'll ask that groups have five years of financial data for an organization, and if students don't then I'll know they weren't on task.

Rachel: If they didn't follow the directions.

Yuha: Yes. I can tell if anyone isn't on task and have a conversation with them. As Rachel said, they can't be on task all the time, or be successful at everything. But if I look at the bigger picture—how they do during class, how they do in their assignments and exams sometimes—I can see if a student is on task or not, whether they're "getting it" or not.

Trey: From what you're both saying, it seems like your idea for what it means for a student to pay attention departs from a teacher's ability to control or "have" a student's attention. It seems that your understanding of paying attention, especially in a technology-enhanced class, involves the instructor letting go of the need to "have" the students' attention.

Rachel: What's interesting about that observation is that because you don't have to have attention all the time, you get it when you want it.

Yuha: That's a great point.

Rachel: Since students get to have the conversations and do more of the talking than I do, when I say something it's more important.

Trey: That reminds me of the economy of attention that cognitive psychologists talk about: how long we can sustain our attention on one particular thing. I was talking to someone in that field recently who used the analogy of attention being like a muscle. We can exert it but at some point it becomes tired. We have to do something else with it or it becomes too strained.

Yuha: When we had a focus group, and also at the beginning of the project when we worked with faculty members to redesign some aspect of their classes and lessons, there was some push-back related to the instructor's control over the classroom. And when we observed the teaching with technology—which we think should be student-centered—there still was a lot of control over what



students were doing: over-explaining, not letting students do their thing. I totally get it, because traditionally the teacher has the knowledge that the students need. But that model doesn't work; it never worked. Still, we have a difficult time letting go of it.

Insights

Trey: From some of the best practices that you've found while working with your colleagues, what might be some insights or findings that would be useful for a faculty member who is interested in using more technologies in their teaching, but still feels something of an ambivalence?

Rachel: For me the most powerful move is giving students ownership of the learning. That takes many different forms, of course. After we presented on the project, colleagues have approached me or sent me a message about how they've moved their teaching away from the idea of having and delivering information. Their students have to do more of the "figuring out" of concepts and ideas.

It's a little scary because on the one hand we as teachers don't want to make students uncomfortable, but on the other hand if the class is safe it's alright to feel that way. We're not really going to fail students if they can't figure out what a case statement is in forty minutes *[laughter]*.

The teacher would make some corrective moves for the students to meet the learning outcome. That's our job as teachers. The students will figure out what a case statement is, because the information is out there. It's not like it used to be, when we had to walk over to the library, find the right book in the card catalog, and take things from there. Information technologies give students ownership over their own learning. There is more of a sense of responsibility and a collective energy to keep students on task for a greater percentage of the class meeting.

Yuha: For me it's more about changing the framework or paradigm of the pedagogy. Once you change the mindset, there's no going back. We were observing six traditional classes, sitting with the students in the back of the room. We saw them texting, checking emails, watching sports games, browsing YouTube with the sound turned off, and doing other things. This wasn't working. The teacher was lecturing, and the students weren't paying attention. They were looking at the teacher, but they weren't paying attention. When I saw that, there was no going back.

Rachel: I remember when I was in a college class and there was no PowerPoint. That was an evolution. We used to sit in a classroom where we couldn't see what the faculty member was lecturing about. They had their papers and we wrote down what they said. Then there was this huge revelation when we could see the outline of what the teacher was talking about *[laughter]*. And it changed everything. It was exciting and new. It made students feel more empowered, but why? Because they had more information than they used to have. We're just continuing the democratization of the educational process. We felt good when PowerPoint first came into the classroom for the same reason that students feel better about learning with newer technologies today. We're just moving another step forward.

Trey: I think what's really thoughtful about your project is that you observed the students instead of the typical focus on the teacher and instructional materials. Beyond the interventions you've already mentioned, another is turning the focus onto the students and shifting the question from how the teacher teaches to how the students learn. It disrupts the story that we often tell about how using technology means that there's going to be more distraction and less productivity. We can try to forbid it, but it doesn't seem to promote much trust for a healthy learning environment.

You're thinking very deliberately about how to harness what's there and use it to raise the total amount of time that students spend paying attention and being on task. It just doesn't look like what we've come to expect, and that's what might make us uncomfortable at first. There's a trust

that we have to place in the process and we have to get out of our comfort zones, just like we ask our students to do.

Students were looking at the teacher, but they weren't paying attention. When I saw that, there was no going back.

Rachel: If we think about our own workflows, are we more on task when we're sitting in a meeting or when we're sitting at a desk doing research on a project? It makes sense. There's a logic to it.

Trey: These are some really compelling ideas, and I'm excited that people will be hearing about your work. And that they'll be inspired by it, as you were inspired to do the work in the first place.

Rachel: Even the faculty who were more hesitant still use some of the strategies that we developed. No one went entirely back to the way that things were. Yuha and I really went all in and changed everything in our teaching. But all of the faculty have incorporated the lesson redesigns in some way.

Trey: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk about your work during a very busy part of the semester. And perhaps it's more appropriate for it to be a busy time of the semester to have a conversation about attention and distraction, especially concerning technology, which often leads to a lot of assumptions about what it does *to* us. But you're thinking about what we can do *with* it to enhance learning environments.

Dr. Yuha Jung is an Assistant Professor of Arts Administration at the University of Kentucky. She is a devoted arts educator, museum scholar, and qualitative researcher. She holds a BFA in painting from Yeungnam University in South Korea, MA in Museum Studies from Syracuse University, MPA from University of Georgia, and PhD in Art Education from the Pennsylvania State University with an emphasis on museum education and management. Dr. Jung's research interests center around cultural diversity, engaging diverse audiences, systems theory, organizational structure, fundraising, and qualitative research methodologies in arts and cultural studies.

Dr. Rachel Shane is the Department Chair and an Associate Professor of Arts Administration at the University of Kentucky. She teaches courses on marketing, financial management, fundraising, nonprofit management and legal issues in the arts in both the BA and MA programs. Prior to joining the UK faculty, Dr. Shane served as Department Head and Professor of Arts Administration at the Savannah College of Art and Design, and she has served in a variety of capacities as an arts administrator in the field. Dr. Shane earned a Ph.D. in Cultural Policy and Arts Administration at The Ohio State University.

NOTES

1. The Boone Symposium Panel “Paying Attention & The Way We Live Now” was organized and moderated by Dr. Phil Harling (Director of the Gaines Center for the Humanities, Interim Dean of the Lewis Honors College, and John R. Gaines Professor of the Humanities) and Stuart Horodner (Director of The Art Museum at the University of Kentucky).
2. Kamenetz, “How To Get Students To Stop Using Their Cellphones In Class,” *NPR*, 10 November 2015, www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/11/10/453986816/how-to-get-students-to-stop-using-their-cellphones-in-class.
3. See, for example, Tyre, “Is Coding the New Second Language?” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 23 May 2013, www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/is-coding-the-new-second-language-81708064/.
4. From a later email exchange:

Yuha: After some mid-semester feedback, I've noticed that some students feel that they'd learn more from lectures and slides, even though assessments of their work say otherwise.

Trey: Maybe what *feels* like good teaching and learning—at least from a student perspective in the process of taking a class—might draw mostly from what teaching and learning has looked like in previous classes, or align with previous goals (e.g., recalling information for an exam). You've brought up an important point for us to keep in mind: students may not respond to active learning with unqualified enthusiasm, but it doesn't necessarily mean that those strategies are a failed experiment.
5. See Keller, *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration*, University Press of Colorado, 2014.

MEDIA

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