The Truth about Student Multi-Tasking

Students often take pride in their ability to “multi-task”. They claim it as the birthright of their generation to be able to read a book, listen to music, text their friends, and check their social networks simultaneously and effectively. Any teacher will disagree. Students are more distracted today than ever before. Students, like all humans, however, are ill suited to multi-tasking (Saunders 455). They are so used to the barrage of information. They have to read that text, that Tweet, or that Facebook post. They are obsessed with minutia and trivial events, a behavior which is far from efficient in any sense. While the information age offers tremendous opportunities for the intellectually curious, it also is a tremendous obstacle to the average student who does not even realize that he has been duped into thinking he is cool. “I may not be able to comprehend what I read or solve a complex math problem, and my grades may be on the brink of failure, but at least I can download the latest app on my iPhone and text my friend to meet me during English class because I have no idea what Shakespeare is saying anyway” (Wood et al. 365). Too much information bombards the unsuspecting teenager who, like his colleagues on this planet, is “predisposed to seek out as much information as possible, especially about other humans” (“Texting”). This human desire to know and understand others is all well and good if one is channeling the desire for information into an amazing essay or into some serious decision making, however, if one is focusing on the Tweets of 350 of his closest followers and not on the
academic task at hand, all that energy is dissipated into the atmosphere and into cyberspace. What a waste.

To be more honest, the self-proclaimed “multi-tasker” should really be called a “distracted learner.” The negative effects of electronic “multi-tasking” have been well documented. Distraction is responsible for both a reduction in rate (time on task) and accuracy (Fife 68); most schools demand both of these qualities in student performance. One California study noted that employees spent just eleven minutes on a task before they were interrupted by either a text, email, or colleague, and took twenty-five minutes to return to the task they had abandoned, if they returned at all. Similarly, no student can switch efficiently or effectively between social media like Facebook, Twitter, or IM-ing and academic pursuits. Another workplace study shows, that “28% of the work day is consumed by interruptions” (Wallace, Steptoe, and Cole 72). While they are probably discreet about texting in class, students are certainly not shy about it in the hallways or in lunch. Do the math. Children between the ages of eight and eighteen spend more than 7.5 hours each day in front of a computer, television, or other electronic display, eleven hours if one includes mult-tasking (Wood et al. 365). Conservatively speaking, a cell phone alone is potentially responsible for the interruption of twenty percent of a student’s day while in school. And then he goes home to his lair, filled with more electronics.

Distracted learners are also more impatient, irritable and experience a disconnection from the real world (Wallace, Steptoe, and Cole 72) and simply cannot switch efficiently or effectively between social media and academic tasks (Saunders 455). Much like those who are deprived of an addiction, students deprived of their social media “fix” have trouble coping, lash out at others and can only focus on the next chance they will have to get linked in and certainly not on the
literary device in line 23 of the poem she should be following. The whole landscape of the world of the distracted learner changes significantly as it affects school, thoughts, and private lives, not necessarily in a good way. Real conversations become Facebook updates. Public identities become anonymity prone to on-line bullying and voyeurism. Meaningful education becomes cheating and plagiarism. Rights to privacy become Internet surveillance of personal habits. Frankly, this phenomenon is frightening to those who can operate outside the technical culture. Too often students withdraw into a private iUniverse, in a private electronic cocoon, rather than truly engaging in their lives or education (Wood et al. 365). The distracted learner become a technological narcissist (Wood et al. 365) who lacks common decency, who causes traffic jams in the hallways, and who has an unhealthy obsession with an inanimate object that seems to represent who they are as a person. Scary stuff.

While technology has had some positive effects in the academic world, technology has become an obstruction to real learning, and “schools are spending billions with little proof that it improves basic learning. Some technology is effective when it motivates without distracting the teacher or the students, when the use of technology has no manual equivalent, like electronic sensors in a chemistry lab.] While some techno-advocates claim that technology inspires engagement and learning, no clear evidence exists to support this claim (Richtel). People in favor of more technology in schools, including phones as interactive tools, must take a bite of the reality sandwich. The buzz-phrase “21st Century Skills” is commonly employed in educational reform to support the implementation of technology in all aspects of the curriculum. Advocates of educational technology claim many advantages to its inclusion. They claim that students will learn to use the Internet to research when, in reality, students need to learn to read, listen to, and follow directions in the first place. They claim that students will learn to organize their work
when, in reality, the organization is either done for them by the computer or by the teacher (and students still do not follow directions). They claim that students will learn to use professional writing tools when, in reality, they cannot write cohesive sentences, paragraphs or essays as it is. They claim that students will learn to collaborate with others (Wood et al. 365) when, in reality, students do their best to find someone else to do the work for them (including parents or the teacher). They claim that teachers should make learning fun (Richtel) when, in reality, after eighth grade, the onus for learning should fall firmly on the students. They claim that students in this century need technology to learn. Really? Really?! Talk to Socrates or Einstein. Technology is but a tool in a good teacher’s toolbox. The best case scenario is that the teacher use technology to promote learning, the worst case scenario is that the teacher and the students are distracted by the bells and whistles and the learning is tossed to the curb. What should the focus be? The best teachers focus on lessons involving human centered principles rather than machine centered principles (Freedman 67); that is, when they can wrench their students away from Tumbler.

Schools must pull the plug on cell phones in school to stop the madness of the distractions and return to the business of real human learning, real human communicating and real human relationships. Ideally, the school, parents and students should impose an electronic lockdown (Fife 68); phones and computers provide plenty of access to the students during the school day. All, students, parents, and faculty members should abide by the rules; modeling the behavior one seeks often ensures the behavior in the target group. Schools should resist the urge to drink the technology Kool Aid; precious time that is wasted on technological distractions of all kinds could be redirected to offer students time to think, reflect, and really learn. Almost everyone is guilty of this obsession. Resisting the culture of technology will be difficult, but it will be worth it. Unfortunately, the only way for such a plan to work is for it to be self-imposed,
but what student in her right mind would dare to be out of the technology loop? Real students must dare to be different, to be better. They do exist and are out there waiting.
Works Cited


