Point/Counterpoint: Cognitive Surplus or The Shallows: Is the Internet Making Us Stupid?

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THE QUESTION

Despite the volumes written about the impact of the Internet on communications, culture, and commerce, we are still far from understanding its effects on us as people – on how we think, how we behave, how we learn, how we participate in society.   What are these effects, and on balance are they good or bad? What has been gained, and what lost?

In a 2008 essay, Nicholas Carr, long a technology enthusiast, asked "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" [1]. The article sparked in a huge response, and Carr followed up with a 2010 book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, exploring the idea in more detail [2]. Carr proposes that the way the Internet is being used has a physiological effect on our brains, training us to crave interruption, eroding our capacity for complex thought, making us more isolated, more shallow. It rewires our neural circuitry so that we skim along the surface of knowledge rather than forming rich mental connections by reading deeply and without distraction.

This view has implications for the use of information technology in higher education. If Carr is correct and the Internet is causing us to lose our ability to sustain our attention and to think deeply, higher education professionals should question assumptions about designing learning activities around the way today's students want to engage with the material. Instead of automatically adapting to the way students think, higher education may have a responsibility to help them learn new literacies for managing their attention and being critical consumers of information [3].

Clay Shirky presents a different view in his 2010 book, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* [4]. He argues that far from making us stupid, the Internet is allowing us to return to forms of creativity and participation that were natural to us before we started wasting our time passively watching television. It enables individuals to connect with one another and to participate directly in defining the world we want to live in, to be producers rather than merely consumers.

Shirky's arguments also have implications for higher education. If individuals have greater freedom and power than ever before to by-pass centralised authorities and influence the world directly, then higher education has a role in helping them to understand their responsibilities in this world of participation. On a broader level, these ideas also present a wake-up call for the future of the university as an institution. If universities don't adapt to students' needs, then students may now be able to go around them and create their own education solutions, making universities irrelevant.

Is Carr a crotchety Luddite? Is Shirky a relic of the free-love 1960s? Who is right and what does it mean for higher edcuation? Join us for this point/counterpoint debate.

THE SPEAKERS

Patricia McMillan builds consensus on policies, standards, and guidelines for information technology across the Australian higher education sector. She currently works with the Australian Access Federation (AAF) on guidelines for the use of identity assurance levels and user attributes. She also brings together communities of practice within the sector. She was the founding Program Director of the annual eResearch Australasia conference in 2007 and continues in that role. She is managing the CCA-EDUCAUSE Australasia conference for 2011. She has held technical, business analysis, and IT management roles at The University of Queensland, The University of Sydney, Macquarie University, and Queensland University of Technology, and in the United States at Carnegie Mellon University and the Software Engineering Institute in Pittsburgh. Patricia holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Management, a Master of Science in Library Science, and a Bachelor of Arts (Mathematics). She is a member of the Australian Computer Society.

Geoffrey Brown is currently the Director of Faculty Services with ICT at the University of Sydney. His team is responsible for providing support to faculties, including the overall relationship with deans, and ICT shared services transitions. Geoffrey has over 25 years of IT experience, and an extensive and varied background in management. Prior to his employment at Sydney University ICT, he has worked in numerous IT management and consulting roles with companies such as MLC, Lend Lease, NRMA and Railcorp. More recently, Geoffrey was an IT Director for Asia Pacific at Deloitte, and also delivered IT Program Management at Qantas.

CONVENER

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REFERENCES

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4. Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (Penguin Press, 2010).