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6.13 Unit 6 Writing Assignment

Part 1: Combatting Digital Maximalism

This is my second time reading *Hamlett's Blackberry* this year. Reading about digital maximalization, and having it set against the backdrop of the historical figures as they navigated their own technological conundrums, has been a much-needed fresh look at my own technological interactions over the same time period. So, I'm happy to have the opportunity to relate to this book once again.

In order to coalesce the entirety of the mood set by William Powers and the position of the philosophers – while answering the question at hand – I'll need to focus on one specific strategy: avoiding distraction. It seems to be the one reoccurring theme in the digital age. It's certainly thematic in Mr. Powers' writing. Ross Douthat states, "But we are not using them (devices) within reasonable limits. They are the masters; we are not." Anna Kamenetz writes, "But new technology puts stress on our old, automatic ways of paying attention." Digital distraction can affect our emotions, health, and sleep patterns. "Hence the endless, neurotic checking, and the dread for getting in trouble for ignoring something," worries Clive Thompson. While Kevin Kelly laments, "Technology helped us learn, but it was not the medium of learning. It was summoned when needed." Finally, David Brooks tells us how tech executives must come clean and admit, "Their technologies are extremely useful for tasks and pleasures that require shallower forms of consciousnesses, but they often crowd out or destroy the deeper forms of consciousness people need to thrive."

These references were addressing a myriad of different topics, but the general idea was recurrent: There's just too much on our screens at any given time for real focus, and this is detrimental to education in the digital age. Digital saturation is effectively causing the levees to breach, and we are all being mentally swept out to sea.

So, in essence, Mr. Powers' strategy is to employ some of the methods the various philosophers would use to create a sort of distance between themselves and the crowd to help maintain focus. This is something I can agree on. Now, for a strategy that may be somewhat less desirable for education in the digital age, I suppose I would try to avoid complete isolationism. More precisely, it's the need to find balance. I realize Mr. Powers is not explicitly arguing for a complete disconnect; the sabbath is a temporary shift. The truth for education moving forward in the digital age is that technology will need to be confronted, challenged, and managed. I guess we can't go "full Seneca" and scurry ourselves away to an upstairs room for eternal piece of mind indefinitely. Frustrating as it may be, we all need to engage with these new technologies, figure out what works or doesn't, and adapt.

Part 2: a) How our minds respond to what is offered by the new technologies.

EAD 878: Education in the Digital Age is an amusing course for me because it comes with so many philosophical contradictions. The title suggests that it will be a very tech heavy course, and sort of push the narrative of the "great futuristic world of tomorrow" where all

teachers are flying around the classroom on discs like in *The Jetsons*. The end result is something quite different and reflective. Here are my reflections on what is offered by the new technologies:

As I'm writing this assignment, I'm enjoying my last couple years in the end of my 30s. I love being just at the right age where I've been growing up with these technologies, but still able to remember what it was like to look for a book at the library with a card catalogue. I'll end off with my hesitations, but I'll start with my more pro-tech tendencies.

I'm no Luddite. The future of education is going to involve technology. I can't really see the benefit to staking out a position that is directly anti-tech. The D2L program is enabling me to take this course on the other side of the world from MSU's campus. So, yes, I'm very much in favor with moving students from classrooms to screens. I think hybrid models of education are exciting. Farhad Manjoo's article about Google Assistant operating like a 'Star Trek' computer grabbed my attention. I think the main take-away I have from across this entire course is that we are heading towards a reality where the majority of education is taking place digitally and not on physical campuses, and with a more non-traditional student body making up the majority of those studying. I also think we'll see a future where the traditional degree (what I'm pursuing) might be replaced with a series of narrow skill accreditations. Khan Academy style badges perhaps but distributed from formal institutions of education.

I think the assertion that needs to be made is not that we should embrace technology in education, it's that we must. Cathy Davidson wrote, "In their future work-life, they will be expected to be exceptionally gifted technologically." There's some truth to this. Future generations will be expected to possess digital literacies and frowned upon otherwise. It's the responsibility of the entire field of education to have the elements in place necessary to facilitate for these shifting times.

In the middle of embracing technology and displaying some levels of cautious curiosity for the future, it's sometimes useful to make unorthodox reflections. What a great opportunity to do so in Kevin Kelly's chapter from *What technology Wants; Lessons of Amish Hackers*. I was smitten with the passage, "In a display of pure steam-punk (air-punk?) nerdiness, Amish hackers try to outdo one another in building pneumatic versions of electrified contraptions." I enjoyed how the chapter pointed out that the Amish, while living off-grid, do not completely shun all of technology dating back over the past 100 or so years; tractors with steel wheels for example. I found this to be a fitting comparison with where we find ourselves in the decision to embrace new technologies in education. We certainly don't dive in headfirst the way humanity has embraced the smart phone. We're slow adapters, like the Amish. I mean this genuinely; the Amish model might be the best way forward. I recall reading in a previous module about the idea of 1:1 screen access for students. This was a full saturation approach to a technology in education that hasn't yet been fully adapted or studied. iPads aren't that old yet, nevertheless, there was this need and desire to put a screen in front of every pair of eyes. The classroom would have been changed completely before it was even understood why. I think the Amish would hold out a bit longer to see just how useful (or not) those pads really might be.

Now for the hesitations: David Carr wrote in The NY Times, "In a phone conversation a few weeks afterward, Mr. Powers said that he is far from being a Luddite, but that he doesn't "buy into the idea that digital natives can do both screen and eye contact." I'm very much in the camp of thought shared by the author of Hamlett's Blackberry. I cheered at the article by Alexandra Alter, "E-books' declining popularity may signal that publishing, while not immune to technological upheaval, will weather the tidal wave of digital technology better than other

forms of media, like music and television." I've never been a huge fan of eReaders, I enjoy my paper, and I like hitting my knuckles on hardcovers. I agree with Cathy Davidson when she suggests, "There is something compelling about sitting among strangers and collectively enjoying and responding to (or not to) the same stimuli." Some aspects of completely virtual classrooms seem dull to me; disassociated and unreal. And yes, I find candlelight more aesthetically pleasing than fluorescent light bulbs.

This relates to two specific passages from Mr. Powers' book. First, there's the notion that, "Older technologies often survive the introduction of newer ones, when they perform useful tasks in ways that the new devices can't match." I have some photo albums from when I used to take and have developed real actual pictures. I know I can lose these things, but they are so much more personal to me than my Facebook photo albums. Second, "Paper's tangibility allows the hands and fingers to take over much of the navigational burden, freeing the brain to think." It's things like this we don't really notice are missing when we use new technologies.

Progress will not cease, and education will absorb technologies along the way. This may not move at the pace the 'never-betters' are insisting, but change will arrive. But I believe Mr. Powers has the right of it. We need to find balance, and a lot of us who can remember a time before the internet know we've lost something. My son is two, and some day I'd like for him to be afforded the opportunity to enjoy a lecture at a university supposing they still exist. I'm betting they will. He can fly on a *Jetsons* disk to get there.