

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transforming Student Views of Boredom: Mediating the Electronic Beast

Is there a more transformative lesson to be learned in college than how to pay attention? Especially in an age where “wandered attention” is equated with “boredom” in students’ minds, the transformative realization that I control my attention and where I put it will pay huge dividends:

Where we put our attention is not only how we decide what we will learn, it is how we show what we value. (Turtle, 2015)

Students sometimes say they check their smart phones frequently and repeatedly because they’re bored. This is a teachable moment. You can’t learn what you’re not paying attention to, and if you find yourself “bored” in your classes — in other words, not paying attention — then you’re not learning.

“But the teacher is dull!” a student might say. “But the content is not, the opportunity for creativity using the content is not, the ability to take that content and do something with it is not dull,” you can reply.

The “boredom” moment is the inner dialogue opportunity: “How do I pay attention to some aspect of this material in a way that will engage me?” is a meta-transformative question we need to help our students ask of themselves.

Ellen Langer’s work on attention indicates that one way to pay attention is to look for “similarities in things thought different and the differences in things taken to be similar” (2005, p. 16). One technique you can teach students, therefore, to pull themselves back to the content when the class is “dull,” is to have them look for either similarities between the content of the class and things that do not immediately come to mind as being like the content, or to look for the ways the covered material is unlike some other seemingly similar material to which they have been exposed.

For more on this idea, see the July and October 2012 Great Teaching articles archived [here](#).

It is Turtle, though, who dives into the psyche of students’ engagement with electronically mediated interactions. In her 2012 book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, she interviews teenagers about how and why they use their smart phones and other means of electronic interaction. One poignant statement made is from a teen-ager who says that if Facebook were deleted, she would be deleted, so vested is she in the persona she maintains on social media (as opposed to that she maintains — or doesn’t — in the real world).

So Turkle's work with the students in her own class can be enormously illustrative for how to bring students around to the transformative understanding about their ability to generate their own attention and place it where they choose, thereby no longer being at the mercy of the environment as an impediment to being present and mindful.

Having learned that lesson, there is no need to be within reach of one's smart phone as the ultimate and only solution to "boredom."

Turkle (2015) describes a class in which some students told her they were texting in class, but they felt guilty about it. They felt this guilt because the class was about science, technology, and memoir, and in class, self-revelatory material often came up, making the shared class time seem more personal, more intimate.

Bringing the topic to the entire class, Turkle learned that students felt constant connection via smart phone was a necessity, some saying that even three minutes' worth of being unconnected was too much.

When the class agreed to try a device-free approach (with a break for students to check their devices), she noticed a shift in the conversation, in the atmosphere of the class:

Conversations became more relaxed and cohesive. Students finished their thoughts, unrushed. They seemed more present and able to be in an uninterrupted conversation. When they were not tempted by their phones, the students told me, they felt more in control of their attention. With phones in hand, they felt control slip away. (Turkle, 2015)

In other words, students felt better able to pay attention during times designated as device-free. Another benefit was learning to become comfortable talking face-to-face with peers and with the instructor. In electronically mediated interactions, there's not the practice with F2F communication.

Turkle discovered that a hesitance to come to faculty's office hours can be the result of this lack of practice in F2F communication:

Zvi, a college junior, says he is not comfortable with conversation and he doesn't see office hours as a time to practice. "I'm much better emailing professors than in person. I find that I don't represent myself well. ... I am not natural with serious conversation [in person] yet. I'd prefer to be able to do that [in email]." He says that in email, his editing and "working on it" will be invisible.

When asked when he might learn to have serious, in-person conversations, Zvi says it's a skill he'll need to develop soon, not just to talk to professors, but also to potential future employers. He thinks that he might try to talk with professors in his final year of college. But then he considers the reality of actually sitting down with a professor and despairs: "It's too late for that. I don't know — when do you grow up? It is a question." (Turkle, 2015)

So we have a double-whammy with the so-called multi-tasking aspect of smart device usage by students: lessened ability to pay attention and lessened ability to communicate well in person.

Don't even get started on the numerous employer surveys indicating a deficit in new hires' F2F communication skills.

A solution?

Try out the idea of a "device-free class" — but remember to have breaks for students to reconnect electronically. And explain the reasons for doing this, the benefits to students, the need to develop the ability to pay attention as well as to communicate face-to-face in one's future job, with one's spouse, with one's community.

Then be sure you're always around in person for your posted office hours.

References

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Turkle, S. (2015, October 2). How to teach in an age of distraction. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved October 5, 2015, from http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Teach-in-an-Age-of/233515?cid=wb&utm_source=wb&utm_medium=en&elq=dc4afd1315ad4965b6ae0dcd8a83d6ab&elqCampaignId=1525&elqaid=6405&elqat=1&elqTrackId=e0d7f2ebeac544b38defbfef901d4b7

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