

LESSON: Wired For Distraction

Overview

This lesson is based on the New York Times front page feature article (November 21, 2010) entitled Growing Up Digital: Wired for Distraction. The article includes research findings of those studying adolescents' use of technology including the Center on Media and Child Health, an interdisciplinary research center based at Children's Hospital Boston, Harvard Medical School, and Harvard School of Public Health.

Researchers express concern that developing brains can become more easily habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks and they can become less able to sustain attention. For some, such as one girl cited in the article that sends and receives as many as 27,000 texts in a month, it is necessary to interrupt such tasks as homework to respond. Grades are reported to be falling among students whose attention is continually drawn to their technology of choice (e.g. video games, texting, Facebook, producing video, etc.)

This lesson asks students to examine the research as well as the concerns raised in the NY Times article and then to conduct their own informal survey. Students also have the opportunity to develop a response to the NY Times article and to participate in their own technology summit.

Objectives:

- Examine sample research findings concerning teen use of technology
- Conduct informal survey of teen use of technologies of choice
- Analyze and discuss survey findings.
- Using media, develop a response to parents and other adults reading the NY Times article

Level: Middle / High School

Time: 1 class period (Part 1 only)
2-5 class periods (Parts 1, 2, and 3)

Preparation and Materials:

- New York Times feature article, "Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction"
- New York Times online Readers Comments

Procedures

Introduce the NY Times article "Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction." and use the article as a basis for discussion. Some talking points from the article could include:

- The brain is rewarded for not staying on task but for jumping to the next thing. This can lead to a problem with the developing brain becoming less able to sustain attention.
- Researchers have found that half of the students 8-18 are using a variety of media during the time they are supposed to be doing homework.
- Ms. Blondel, a veteran English teacher in California has to ask her class to read excerpts of an assigned book in class because she states that students now lack the attention to read the assignments on their own.
- One girl the article mentions was sending and receiving 27,000 texts in a month and carrying on as many as 7 different conversations at a time. This was all taking a toll on her grade average, she confessed. (She could be reading a book, for example, and be interrupted for 20 minutes with a text

message.)

- Another student in the article was quoted as saying that he thinks Facebook is amazing because it feels like “you’re doing something and you’re not doing anything. It’s the absence of doing something, but you feel gratified anyway.”
- A principal in California said that the choices students make in their use of technology seem to reflect their personalities: “Social butterflies tend to be heavy texters and Facebook users. Students who are less social might escape into games, while drifters or those prone to procrastination might surf the Web or watch videos.The technology has created on campuses a new set of social types...not the thespian and the jock but the texter and gamer, Facebook addict and YouTube potato.”

Encourage students to express their views about the article and read the article for themselves.

Activities

PART 1: CONDUCT FORMAL SURVEY

Ask the students to conduct some of their own research on this subject.

- Have them gather some data about teen use of technology by developing their own informal survey. The survey should be based on issues raised in the NY Times article such as how many texts the teens in their sample send and receive on average per day, how long they spend on Facebook, YouTube, surfing the Web, etc.
- The survey can be conducted using the technology of their choice (Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, texting a question, etc.) or it could be presented the old fashioned way, pencil/paper or face-to-face brief interview.
- Including their friends in their survey is okay since this needn’t be a scientifically drawn random sample of teens. It’s important to explain that this is simply an informal (not scientific) survey as opposed to the research that was cited in the NY Times article.

Have students summarize and display their results on a chart for presentation in class.

PART 2: DEVELOPING RESPONSE TO THE NY TIMES ARTICLE

The NY Times article drew considerable attention and comment when it was published in November 2010. Since the NY Times is read largely by adults, the comments that were generated were in large part by adults. See New York Times online Readers Comments.

This is the student’s chance to respond to the article with their own comments. Ask students to develop their response by either:

- Writing a comment (in the form of at least 3 paragraphs) that could be posted online
- Recording a podcast
- Making a video response that could potentially be uploaded on YouTube
- Finding another way to express their opinion using technology

Allow time for sharing student responses to the article with the class.

PART 2: HOLD TECHNOLOGY SUMMIT FOCUSED ON SEXUAL HEALTH ISSUES

Hold a Technology Summit in your class. Ask students to bring their best ideas as to how students might make use of technology to explore a topic for in this case, their sexual health class. How would they address such

issues as:

- How will you get around the problem that Ms. Blondel, a teacher, encountered? She is the one who had to resort to requiring the entire class to read passages from an assigned book in class in order to ensure that students had actually read the material.
- What strategies would you suggest for trying to help students, especially those who are not doing as well as they could, to become more engaged in their schoolwork?
- What ideas do you have for incorporating technology in this class?
- Develop a sample lesson plan incorporating technology for this class. Be sure to outline your objectives and describe the procedures and activities that you would suggest. Also be sure to specify how you will assess that learning has actually occurred and that the students have met the objectives you specified.

Assessment

Assessment for this lesson can be based on a few different assignments the students have been given: a) the survey the student develops and the analysis he/she offers for his results b) the response the student offers to the New York Times article whether in video, audio or print form c) the points the student raises at the Technology Summit and the rationale he/she uses to support the points made along with the sample lesson plan that the student develops for presentation at the Summit.