

## Book Review

**Brabazon, T. (2013). Digital Dieting: From Information Obesity to Intellectual Fitness. Ashgate Publishing Ltd Farnham, UK. ISBN 978-1-4724-0937-9.**

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This book is 3<sup>rd</sup> book in a series written by Tara Brabazon, Professor of Education at Charles Sturt University, Australia. It concerns the impact of digital media on university education and is eloquently written, professionally presented and rather strident. The author uses more than 300 pages to both suggest and question the assertion that universities in general, and some academic and managerial staff in particular have been complicit in deskilling students by providing inappropriate and overlapping means for them to obtain information. It proposes a need within higher education to strive to match the means of information conveyance to students with the type of information conveyed. The argument is powerful and is supported by interesting links between educational theory and the popular media leading to the idea that academic information literacy and popular media engagement are now perceived as synonymous in some quarters. The book suggests that students have naturally taken a path of least resistance and so will, for instance, Email tutors for information, and search and skim read internet sites rather than 'slow read' course handbooks and academic literature.

The book purports that the diversion of funding into new technology, rather than into providing and supporting librarians and lecturers, has produced the current situation. In particular, the long term availability of information such as PowerPoint slides in digital repositories enables students to ignore information in the present, i.e. during classes, with consequent loss of real time note-taking skills. It is argued that this deskilling means that a) critical appraisal of received information is not fostered and b) dependency on lecturer provided information is increased. The poor use of PowerPoint by some lecturers accentuates this loss of note-taking skills because, too often, PowerPoint slides substitute for the lecturer's own notes and so they become very text heavy.

Chapter 5 of the book provides an analysis of the contribution of the iPad to education. It reaches the conclusion that the iPad is a better platform for consumption of information rather than its production. The case is well made although the descriptive sections within the chapter of the real and perceived benefits associated specifically with the iPad seemed long-winded and somewhat of a distraction from a main broad thesis of the book; that instant information availability is a distraction from the crumbling teaching and learning experiences of our under resourced libraries and classrooms. Albeit that the iPad contributes to such instant

information availability.

An important point is that different types of information are not equally available. Peer review makes credible academic literature more costly to produce and the consequent commercial constraints imposed on its usage reduce how much it is shared. Since Facebook had more independent visitors than Google in 2010 the question 'how can academic standards be maintained when low level reading and writing flood the environment via social media?' is rightly raised by the book. The ease with which information is shared, it is suggested, leads to confusion in students' minds between moving information and the ability to build knowledge from it. Such sharing also serves to disconnect information from its context. For example, broadcast news becomes less real and magazine articles about celebrities become more real. A further point is that the speed at which information is shared reduces the time for critical thought and hence the quality of its interpretation and recasting by the recipient. Angry first impressions are faster to construct and transmit compared to considered balanced responses and the wide interconnectivity between individuals produced by social media makes the online environment a safe place to express first impressions because those with both mainstream and extreme views are no longer isolated from communities of like-minded people. The redistributed information is hence less challenging to its recipients' understanding and so they accept rather than evaluate it. For Vygotsky (1978) the development of expertise involves passage through a 'zone of proximal development' facilitated by a 'more knowledgeable other' and, without the influence of such a person, we continue searching and sharing information about what we already know. Learning results from the confusion and challenge of others espousing different views and dialogue between students, lecturers and librarians is essential to promote this.

The phrase 'Google effect' is used by the book to encapsulate the notion that easy electronic searching has led to all data being perceived as equivalent with libraries and librarians a no longer needed intermediary between the searcher and information sources. 'Student-centred learning' is often promoted on the basis of such ease of access to information and it may also be attractive from a management perspective as being a less staff intensive option. The idea that abundant information does not equate to abundant meaning may be wasted on some academic managers who are increasingly likely to have business qualifications rather than PhDs and teaching certificates. Since Google ranks search results via metadata and popularity rather than academic merit, do students do the same and do they consequently feel empowered to make judgements about courses on the basis of these parameters? A chapter in the book suggests that websites such as 'Rate My Professor' serve to a) promote academically easy courses and so contribute to grade inflation and b) challenge the notion that academics are best able to judge the quality of academic education. More broadly, this automation of decision making via the use of crowd sourced information may be influencing university learning practices. Does over-automating spell checking and information searching create a deskilled student in much the same way that Henry Ford's assembly line created the deskilled worker? Downloading is not the same as learning and teaching is different to saving data to a hard drive. Access to digital media is not beneficial without the literacies required to use it.

Mobile technology has blurred the boundary between the workplace and home, and between formality and informality. Has there been an assumption that media platforms that are useful, and hence popular, in leisure are automatically also useful

in work or education? Chapter 4 of the book suggests this and proposes that it is a responsibility of lecturers to create a divide between leisure and learning by using appropriate rather than popular media to promote learning. Lecturers need to be acutely aware that the medium by which information is received can alter its perceived value and meaning. This is at its most extreme when technology is used to replace face to face communication. First year students in particular need to be inspired by their lecturers and also supported when they experience difficulties. For this, Skype is a poor substitute for face to face communication and, more generally, technological interventions can provide distractions away from hard academic reading into easy superficial websites.

Educational courses are being bought by students as consumers and, because students are paying high fees, supersize portions of information are expected. For effective learning, however, such information obesity requires treatment including restriction of media platforms and increases in information literacy. Particular platforms create particular types of engagement e.g. it is easier to skim text than audio files. One of the chapters in the book is a case study demonstrating that sound alone media serve to make content seem more personal, slow down decision making and encourage reflection and abstract thought. Furthermore, the role of digital literacy as an antidote to digital consumerism is made in Chapter 2 of the book where the case is made that information literacy is required to use currently available electronic platforms and portals well. It is a forlorn hope that next generation products will by themselves solve the problems experienced by inept users of current products. New technology often merely makes a greater amount of low quality information available and, in the absence of information literacy, it can simply promote plagiarism. We find 'how' by searching, but not 'why' (i.e. we do not develop critical appraisal).

Chapter 6 and the Conclusion of the book consider how the necessary information literacy might be engendered in students. It is, perhaps, understandable for students at the start of their course to be unaware of bias and superficiality in what they read because they are novices to the subject. The book is briefer in its suggestions of solutions to this conundrum than it is in analysing the problems, but it does advocate that the first stage is to free personal time (i.e. digital dieting) by unsubscribing from automatic electronic notifications and so only reading personal messages. Since a life full of smart people is better than a life full of smart devices such personal digital dieting is better than letting particular platforms such as Google, iTunes or Facebook choose what particular information is consumed. Furthermore, the author suggests that students need to be involved in directed tasks that will move them beyond their familiar territory into the unknown. Initial courses should require students to find different types of sources on the same subject and to compare them. Without such interventions students will always read and write based on their prior experiences. Such media education is required to enable students to tailor and manage content on diverse platforms and higher education thinking involves questioning the nature and content of sources. Staff should also realise that they are role models for students so how they conduct their lecture preparation will become how students conduct their assignment preparation. Curricula should be designed from the starting point of the students to be taught. Far too often, the tools to be used are the beginning. If barriers, challenges and unusual tasks are inserted into assessment processes, then students' sleepwalking through reading and writing is reduced. Students must feel slightly uncomfortable most of the time and so be required to

develop new strategies in order to progress.

For me, these proposed solutions are not novel, but what made the book a worthwhile and enjoyable read were the depth of analysis and the diversity of sources used by the author to develop the concept of information obesity; more material being available at a greater speed is not always better.

### **Reference**

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes  
. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.