

ENGLISH 50 FINAL EXAM, FALL 2007

“Teaching with Tech: Does It Work?” by Adam Hunter, special journalist to *MSN Tech & Gadgets*

Are students in the digital age getting dumber? Students today don't just write papers—they create PowerPoint presentations, design Web pages, and take tests using interactive software. The rise of these computer-based technologies over the past decade has been heralded as a boon for education. However, stories abound of students repeating inaccurate facts from sources like Wikipedia, peppering their papers with instant message lingo or wasting study time on [Facebook](#). These concerns have caused some educators to take a more critical view. Are students merely learning how to use computers, but not actually learning?

A 2005 Pew Research survey of more than 1,000 pairs of parents and their teenage children found 80 percent of parents and 86 percent of teens believe the internet helps kids do better in school. If technology is dumbing students down, it's doing it without their knowledge.

Technology a False Promise?

"When you're on the computer instead of in the real world, when you paint with a mouse instead of using a paint brush, do research on the net instead of the library, or go on a virtual field trip instead of a trip to the pond, you develop bad habits," says Tom Oppenheimer, author of *The Flickering Mind: Saving Education From the False Promise of Technology*. "It causes a stunting of imagination. A narrowing of mental capacity." Oppenheimer was a new technology reporter for *Newsweek* in 1997, when he first went on assignment to observe technology use at a Massachusetts high school. A teacher showed him a PowerPoint presentation that a student had made. As Oppenheimer wrote in his book, "Its content was no deeper or more complex than what one commonly sees in civics papers done elsewhere, with pencil and paper, by seventh and eighth graders." The student admitted he'd spent nearly twice the time working on the graphics than he did researching the report.

Dan Leyes, a college teacher for twenty years and Assistant Professor of Speech at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, has noticed many of his students depending too much on technology in their class presentations. "Students think because they can cut and paste a ton of information onto a slide and read it, they're doing well. The truth is, having someone read off slides generally makes for dreadful presentations."

While students can find information quickly and easily on the Web, Leyes worries that they absorb it less. "Years ago, students had to work much harder to find and record information, and by going through that arduous process came to a greater genuine understanding of it."

Elona Hartjes, a secondary school math teacher in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, for twenty five years and a Teacher of Distinction Award winner for her work with at-risk kids, encourages her students to do equations by hand before trying them out on calculators and computers. "I tell the kids that if they don't do math in their head the brain cells that do math will die and they won't be as smart as they used to be," Hartjes says. "The thing I stress is that technology can be used as a tool to help kids be successful in school and in life. They just need to know how to use it for their benefit—and not be used by it."

"You want students to be able to do anything," Oppenheimer says. "If you habituate them to using a computer that may be obsolete in ten or fifteen years, you set them back."

OMG! My Paper RoX!

Another concern of educators is that the language skills of younger students are suffering because of constant use of text messaging and instant messaging. The fear is that abbreviations and syntax used in these short communications can cross over into a student's schoolwork. New Zealand made headlines last year when their educational Qualifications Authority announced it would accept the use of "text-speak" in answers on their national exams. One can imagine that far in the future, when history is written in the abbreviated, text-message language that has swept the globe, New Zealand may very well be regarded as the only country in our primitive 21st century that had the foresight to capitulate to the inevitable victory of technological convenience over proper spelling.

"Students are particularly tempted to use abbreviations when they're rushed for time. So it makes sense that they would be tempted to use abbreviations on a timed exam," says Mignon Fogarty, author of *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips to Clean Up Your Writing*. Fogarty believes that when kids text habitually, they in effect train themselves in writing a form of shorthand. "Kids seem to be sending text messages almost constantly, and it's considered normal to use abbreviations when you're texting. Imagine what it would be like if every student had extensive training in shorthand and they used shorthand every day. They'd be tempted to use it on their homework and exams. They might even slip into using abbreviations unconsciously."

Oppenheimer isn't surprised. "If schools don't have the guts to address this, then that says something about the sad state of our schools," he says. "There's no job in the real world that allows writing in IM lingo."

Laptops in Class

More and more professors are allowing laptops into the classroom for note taking purposes. However, a recent study conducted at Winona State University in Minnesota found that laptops in class actually interfered with students learning the material. On average, the students spent 17 minutes out of a 75-minute class doing activities not related to class work. 81 percent of students admitted to checking e-mail, 68 percent reported using instant messaging, 43 percent surfed the internet, and 25 percent played games. The study also found students with laptops earned an average grade five percent lower than those who didn't bring computers.

Leyes allows laptops in his classroom, but keeps a close eye on how they're used. "My rule is they are fine to take notes with, but if I catch you doing non-course related stuff, the penalty is pretty severe," he says. "It's easy to tell when people are taking notes and when they are playing solitaire or instant messaging."

The Digital Classroom

Despite these reservations, a new generation of teachers is embracing high tech educational tools. Erica Braverman, 26, began her teaching career two years ago at a school in a low-income area in Brooklyn, New York, and in her view, the lack of available technology hurt the students' education.

"Kids are drawn to technology and it's not wise to not incorporate that into how they are taught," Braverman says. "Podcasts are a fun way for students to learn about a topic that might have otherwise seemed dull reading out of a textbook. Many schools have adopted the use of blogs, wikis and podcasts into their learning environment, and it really gives the students a voice in their educational process."

In fact, when Braverman recently got a new job as a 6th-grade Language Arts/Social Studies teacher at a school in New Jersey, the superintendent suggested she use the popular online virtual world, *Second Life*, to teach students lessons about community building and communication. "There are virtual field trips that a teacher can lead through *Second Life*. If a student is most comfortable in a virtual environment, why not let him learn that way?"

"I don't think it's a bad thing for students to be dependent on technology," Braverman says. "Teachers are there to prepare students for life, and to teach them how to get by. I would never not allow a student to use any resource because it made their life easier, so long as it wasn't cheating in any way."

The U.S. Congress seems to agree. The government is spending more than \$700 million a year to support technology in the classroom, according to Mathematica Policy Research Inc., which studies educational software for the Department of Education.

Oppenheimer isn't against computers in the classroom, but believes they should be introduced later in a student's development, and then in moderation. "The idea that we need technology in school has been popular for almost a century. But no reputable studies have found it makes any significant difference. What are we spending all this money on?"

English 50 Final Exam

General Instructions

For this exam, use ink, write legibly on every other line of your paper, and use only one side of each page. You may use a dictionary, an electronic speller, and a thesaurus.

Print your instructor's name in the upper right corner of this page. Print your own name on the back of the last page of your essay. Turn in your copy of "Teaching with Tech: Does It Work?" along with your written exam and this sheet. Failure to follow directions will disqualify your exam.

Essay Format

Your assignment is to write a 500-700 word essay addressing the prompt given below. This essay must include an introductory paragraph, several central paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The first paragraph must identify the author of the article and provide a clear and identifiable thesis statement. Each central paragraph must be based on a topic sentence that supports your thesis and that is developed from a variety of methods, such as explanation and elaboration, facts, quotations, examples, and references to authority. The concluding paragraph must bring the essay to a satisfactory close.

Prompt

"Teaching with Tech: Does It Work?"

In the essay, "Teaching with Tech: Does It Work?," Adam Hunter addresses the various ways in which teachers and students increasingly use technology in the classroom. He describes how technological advances like email, the internet, laptops, and instant messaging may not necessarily be beneficial in learning. What do you think are the advantages and/or disadvantages of using technology in education? Make sure that your thesis defines a clear position and is supported by your discussion.

Final Note

Remember that your general goal is to demonstrate to the reader of your essay that you have understood what you have read and that you have reacted sensitively and intelligently to it. Your specific goal is to write a well-constructed essay of the sort you have been studying and practicing all semester.