

High Tech Connections Lead to Face-to-Face Disconnections

by [Owen Edwards](#)

Special Options

The well-known trouble with genies is that once they grant those tantalizing wishes, they refuse to go back into the bottle. The same thing can be said generally about technology and, specifically, about [Web 2.0](#) [2].

Sure, it's been fun to accumulate a virtual circle of friends on [Facebook](#) [3] and to get all the world's information by consulting the oracle of [Google](#) [4]. Without question, for educators, the increasingly deeper Web has provided a resource unlike anything since -- just maybe -- movable type.

So this particular miracle worker isn't one we should want rebottled. But we have to face the fact that the genie we've dreamed -- vast, accessible information and zipless interconnection -- doesn't come without certain significant character flaws and their worrisome consequences.

Consider a few recent observations:

- A mother pushing her child on a swing, talking on her phone—all motion, no emotion.
- A young girl with her parents at a natural history museum, intently text messaging, oblivious to a diorama of lions on the veldt.
- A couple having supper at a romantic restaurant, each on the phone (not, presumably, with each other).
- Middle school kids crossing a busy city intersection, totally absorbed by the screens on their BlackBerrys.

To go on and on would be easy, but everyone can supply their own examples. It would also be easy to simply shake a fist at technology and wallow in the luxury of Luddite anger. But the genie's out, and there's no reason to wish it back in, because its gifts are so abundant.

We have to be grateful for the upside -- the ability of someone to be connected with much of the world's information and a legion of its citizens -- but also be wary of something darker: the user's disconnection from the real world.

Being There

I first encountered what can be called detachment tech during a vacation in Italy. I saw tourists enter extraordinary structures, like the Basilica of San Marco, in Venice, and walk along staring at the screens of their video cameras.

They experience these remarkable places as tiny rectangles of recorded reality, nothing more -- a second-hand walking tour ironically put on video to prove they'd been there. With such means of detachment rapidly on the increase, actually being somewhere is trumped by collecting digital mementos.

More and more, the evolving Internet virtualizes reality, removing people -- perhaps especially young people -- further and further away from where they are and when they are there. Sitting alone in a room with a gaggle of digital friends replaces hanging out with actual companions.

It's clear that the here and now is increasingly at risk of obsolescence when the bishop of Modena urges his young parishioners to give up text messaging for Lent. The request might have been because the bishop could see that this new habit was even more pleasurable than such old standbys as lust and gluttony, but it may also have been to save lives. Texting may not yet be the eighth deadly sin, but given Italian traffic, it really could be deadly.

[Ted Hasselbring](#) [5], who teaches doctoral students at Vanderbilt University's Peabody Learning Lab (and is a [member of Edutopia's National Advisory Council](#) [6]), sees this detachment tech at work every day. "Whenever I walk across the campus," he says, "two out of every three students I pass either have an iPod plugged into their ears or are on cell phones. There seems to be a need for constant input."

The Lost Moment

There was a time, a couple of decades ago, when the ancient discipline of Zen Buddhism was all the rage in this country, led by Alan Watts, Gary Snyder, and other writers, poets, and philosophers. Classic books such as *Zen in the Art of Archery* led to offbeat best sellers like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Central to the tenets of the discipline was the goal of being in the moment: experiencing everything with an immediacy and intensity that powerfully focused the mind and ultimately let the senses dominate the intellect.

With the allure of detachment tech, the concept of being completely in the moment now seems almost as quaint as believing in elves and trolls. But what have we lost with our information and communication gains?

Solitude: There's a fair amount of historical evidence that many great ideas spring into being when the mind is wandering. When we're alone with our thoughts, when the only input is the human mind mulling over what it already has taken in, there's a chance for new thinking to gestate.

Quiet: The companion of solitude, a relief from a noisy world. This is not to say that one can't study with Mozart in the background or be inspired by Coltrane, but there gives us the chance to rest and recharge.

Contact: When emoticons substitute for emotions, then avatars stand in for human connections, and distance and anonymity replace the need to understand body English (or French or Japanese) and to learn the etiquette of accommodation.

The recent rise of the social-networking "mass-memo" site [Twitter](#) [7] indicates that we still haven't seen anything like the crest of this wave.

"We're just scratching the surface with this generation," says [clinical psychologist Michael Osit](#) [8], author of *Generation Text: Raising Well-Adjusted Kids in an Age of Instant Everything* [9]. "When I project ahead, I see inter-machine interaction continuing to push aside human interaction. Technology allows easy access to others, but it also causes a disconnect. Sound bites increasingly replace the essential nuances of conversation."

Do You Know Where Your Students Are?

Schools are learning environments, but they are also microcosms of the larger world. Technological interaction flourishes among secondary school students, and many enterprising teachers have decided to join them rather than fight what may be a losing battle to turn back the clock.

Osit agrees with this approach, but with a proviso: "We have to join in, because we can't beat the kids at technology. But they need more direction. When they socialize on the Internet, they often have no idea what's appropriate."

There is a fine line between savvy and surrender. For instance, [Michael DeMers](#) [10], a geography professor at New Mexico State University, has created an island in [Second Life](#) [11] where he and his students go, as avatars, to hold classes.

Students, he said in an interview on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, "live inside the computer," so he decided that's where they might as well study. "Some people don't know how to interact with each other," he added, "but in Second Life, they do interact."

To a skeptic, this might sound like the revenge of the antisocial nerds: to work online. Wouldn't it be better to encourage students to develop the person-to-person skills they'll need in real life instead of letting them escape to some fantasy island?

No matter how great an advantage technology gives today's students and teachers in breaking the boundaries of the traditional classroom, there are simply times when they have to return to that classroom, focused and in the moment. One of the benefits of project learning is that students can figuratively, and sometimes literally, get their hands dirty by going into the field and doing real work in real time.

Yet at some stage, even this proven, practical teaching method has to compete with detachment. Craig Brandenburg, who teaches media production at [YES Prep North Central](#) [12], a charter school in Houston (and is a [member of Edutopia's National Advisory Council](#) [13]), describes what has happened with students between on-location taping sessions, a time when follow-up discussion could bring deeper insights. "Recently, while making a video with [Teach for America](#) [14], every time we got back into the van to go to the next location, the phones came out and texting began," he says.

Brandenburg has a theory about why text messaging has become the distraction of choice for students: "Kids don't think that texting is disruptive, because they're not talking as they would be on a cell phone call. And there seems to be a constant need to be connected, to make sure they're still involved with friends and their lives."

In other words, I text, therefore I am. And though it's true that silent texting is less obviously disruptive than phone conversations, it's perhaps even more disengaging; when a student is all thumbs and focused on a tiny screen, loss of attention is total.

There's no arguing with any teacher who wants to get every student to be as involved as those few who invariably raise their hands (and can dominate class discussions). Vanderbilt's Ted Hasselbring, author of [Read 180](#) [15], a popular reading software program, sees certain advantages to letting students use technology that transports them from real to virtual.

"The whole issue of social networking is amazing to me," he says. "Some kids can hold much better discussions around subjects online, because they simply may not be comfortable raising their hands in class."

Genie Therapy

Craig Brandenburg also worries about some of the adverse effects, but he doesn't want the genie back in the bottle; he just wants it taught some manners. "At our school, things don't get out of hand, because cell phones aren't permitted during the day," he points out. "And I'm very clear with the kids that when we are on a job, they have to show me that they are there full time."

The trick is to turn detachment tech into attachment tech. "It's no longer hands on," Brandenburg says. "It's 'technology on.' You have to give kids time to play with the technology. They're fast on the uptake, so I don't have to go step by step with something new. I just give them 20 minutes to fool around with new stuff, and that seems to get them past being fidgety."

Michael Osit has called today's students the Access and Excess Generation, a group, he says, "with many privileges -- among them privacy granted by parents who now find their influence minimized because of access to a vastly expanded peer group." Teachers can find their influence similarly minimized by technology.

"But the Internet and social-networking sites have changed the nature of privacy," Osit adds. "Parents and teachers have to reassert leadership and become an essential part of the world kids live in today." As a starting point, Osit, in his book, suggests creating a no-screen day each week, an idea that even a video teacher like Brandenburg might buy into.

"Sometimes, I just tell them to put their monitors to sleep and listen to me," Brandenburg says. "In the end, it comes down to classroom management. Good teaching is good teaching."

Owen Edwards is a contributing editor for *Edutopia*.

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- [4] <http://www.google.com>
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This article originally published on 5/27/2009

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