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Unit 6

William Powers outlines the conundrum of the constant connectedness that so many are trying to balance in the digital age. *Hamlet's Blackberry* draws on some of the most brilliant thinkers to relate learning and the detrimental effects of “digital maximalism”. While Powers and others are critical with technology, there are obviously some major advantages as it relates to a learning society. The key is to find the most advantageous strategies and resources and create a balance to utilize them effectively.

It is amazing to reflect on how technology has allowed us to perform so many valuable tasks and have accessibility to unlimited information. But as we are connected more and more, we are losing “deep thinking” and what Powers describes as “depth”. He feels we are losing “depth of thought and feeling, depth in our relationship, our work and everything we do”. Depth in all realms is what we've strived to have for generations. It starts with reading “deep” material cover to cover and being able to decipher and communicate abstract ideas to others. It's what makes life meaningful. Power's strategy to create depth is one of the most important arguments he makes. He feels “we train our perceptual and cognitive resources on one conversation, one fascinating idea, one task to the exclusion of all others. This is where depth begins”. Being able to simply reflect on information and balance the use of technology will create more time to devote to depth. In society it has never been more important to possess deep and critical thinking skills. As the world becomes more complicated, businesses need clear, thoughtful, deep thinking leaders to manage the complex issues they face. In my professional experience, it's obvious the younger generation of workers have a much more difficult time completing tasks in a timely manner, and lack the “depth” in relationships and thinking. There is also a major level of disconnectedness with anyone over the age of thirty. While difficult to achieve, depth will prove to be one of the most important strategies to have for future generations.

Powers also presents the strategy and idea of “self help” as a resource for a learning society. Powers urges us to be philosophical in depending on figures from the past and creating a system to learn at one's own speed. Is this a realistic and effective resource for learning? Beth Lisick disagrees with his idea and identifies her skepticism by saying: “In my stable, modest family self-help was meant for the addicted and abused and neurotic, and those navel-gazers with too much time on their hands. It couldn't be meant for regular people who are doing okay”. The idea of “self help” offers some valuable insight to the effects of modern technology, but unfortunately it can't offer realistic solutions for what others coined as “regular people”. Powers feels “it's possible that our brains will eventually adapt to a digital world and learn to manage all these pulls on our attention”. It's simply not a strategy that presents a high level of desirability. In both my personal and professional opinion the “self help” strategy is not realistic for the greater population. More than likely technology and connectedness is not going to lessen anytime soon, and most people do not have the ability to help themselves to the ample amount of being connected. We are headed to what Bill Gates refers to as a society that is “perpetually connected”. Clearly, this is a society that is unable to help themselves.

Powers devotes much of his focus on a philosophy that creates balance between stress and knowledge. He presents numerous strategies, some of which are more philosophical and less realistic, but also outlines attainable resources to promote a learning society. In Part III of *Hamlet's Blackberry*,

Powers outlines the search for depth and the ideas in practice. His principle of inner space as it relates to Seneca presents some very feasible ideas to help balance technology in the digital age. He states “the first and most obvious is to choose a friend or family member in your physical vicinity and just have a conversation. A focused, undistracted chat without screens”. While this might sound bizarre, so few people actually have uninterrupted conversations in person. Even families who live in the same house are often so distracted with social media, texting, and other technology devices. In order to follow through on creating genuine, person relationships, it's important to create rules for yourself. Perhaps, you can have three in person conversations per day with all technology devices turned off. Powers also suggests as another strategy to reduce time online is “to start using other people as your search engines”. Instead of constantly checking out news feeds and updates online, let family or friends inform you on the latest developments. So many people have to focus their attention on attaining as many friends as possible through social media, even if personal dialogue has not ever occurred. Instead, make a rule to have a conversation with someone new each day. Creating meaningful dialogue is a valuable skill on a number of fronts and one that is becoming lost in the new digital age. While these strategies sound easy to implement, intentionality is the key. Two years ago, I created a new policy at school to store all cell phones in a lock box during academic hours and sleep time in their dorms. The result was even more astonishing than I thought. Students not only improved their sleep cycles, academic and athletic performance, but many of the students welcomed the “break” from technology. As to be expected many of the students were upset by the new policy at first, but a student survey reported many students had their friendships and family relationships improved. They also felt less stressed and more productive. If change is going to occur, it needs to start at a younger age where people can see the value of being “unplugged”.

Powers is a strong believer that “digital maximalism” has a direct correlation to behavior. He explains in *Shakespeare's Old Tools Ease Overload* that old tools can be an effective way to bring information overload to a more balanced approach. Tools like reading a paper book, keeping a journal, writing by hand, playing board games, or even playing vinyl records. Powers feels that “old tools can be an effective way to bring the information overload of new ones under control. Today older technologies continue to ground the busy mind”. While this strategy sounds great in theory, it's not realistic to implement for the majority of the population. Technology has taught us that it is difficult to look back and implement old tools. The younger generation is being taught at a young age to use technology and tools like handwriting, and reading text are becoming nonexistent. Students, even at the young age of seven are conducting most of their learning on computers and most middle school students own and use a cell phone for several hours a day. In both my personal and professional life I don't see any feasible way to “undue” this process. Technology has become a legitimate addiction for so many and our society has shifted away from old tools that used to make our lives simpler, but for the majority of the population old tools are simply not a realistic resource.

It's important to distinguish that both Powers and I recognize the value that modern technologies offer, but also realize which resources offer us logical solutions for the quest of balance. The idea of being unplugged is much more difficult than anyone would have imagined. Can we escape what Powers coined as “digital maximalism”? It's important to understand ones own self and how it relates to “maximum connectedness”. Each individual must create a practical philosophy that lends a balanced life of being connected and productive in all realms.