READINGS OF INTEREST

*Information Consuming vs. Processing vs. Learning*

We live in an obesogenic information environment. Though the term, “obesogenic,” is generally limited to discussions of the pandemic of corpulence in America today (two-thirds of Americans are overweight, and of that number, half are obese; childhood Type 2 diabetes is rapidly rising; babies born today may actually have shorter life expectancies than baby boomers; etc. — you know the grim statistics; see Kirk, Penney, & McHugh, 2010, for a discussion of the obesogenic environment), the problems wrought by a constant intake of information “junk food and empty calories” are just as serious.

And, according to author Clay Johnson in *The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption* (2012), the metaphor holds for many reasons, not the least of which is the production of cheap, vapid information bereft of intellectual nutrients that is churned out because that’s what sells the most, the fastest, and the easiest.

The final indignity is that the reason for this sorry state of affairs is because we not only tolerate it, we mindlessly demand it.

In an age when students live their lives in a near-constant plugged-in state (computers, smartphones, tablets, MP3 players, video streaming, electronic gaming, and — increasingly — the combination enabled in a single device that is just so-o-o-o very enticing), what is it that they’re being fed, that they accept as normal, and how can faculty prompt more mindful decision-making about students’ information diets?

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For those not familiar with how a great deal of the Web’s popular content is generated — produced by “content farmers” paid on a piecework basis — realizing the state of the enterprise makes clear that such a production process, by its nature, precludes good investigation, fact-checking, corroboration (or not) from alternate sources, etc. Johnson (2012) describes how, at America Online (AOL), for example, managers use BlogSmith to identify currently trending topics based on what Internet users are typing into search engines, then assign those topics to contract labor writers (not journalists) to churn out stories at about the rate of one per hour (or less) and paid based on an algorithm that defines where AOL’s profit margin must be for shareholder value.

The result:

> These articles aren’t written by people with a journalism background. They’re written by freelancers—-independent contractors—who needn’t be provided any healthcare or retirement benefits. For content farmers, they’re simply credited—about $15 for a written piece of content, $20 for a video—directly to their bank account. Copy editors are paid a remarkable $2.50 per piece of content.
Traditional newspapers pay about $300 to a freelance journalist for the same amount of work. (Johnson, 2012, p. 37)

Careful consideration of other examples provided in The Information Diet (2012) leads one to wonder if what is presented on most entry screens commonly used to access internet information isn’t produced solely as click-fodder to take the viewer to intellectual pablum. Further, because more money is made the more often viewers click through to additional pages, we are served even our junk-food information on a tabletop littered with enticements to sample other, different, junk food.

It’s what Cory Doctorow (2009) calls “an ecosystem of interruption technologies.”

This problem is not new for faculty. Cautions to students about trusting the veracity of information easily available on the Web are common in higher education. Access to curated information, as opposed to simply mediated information, though, requires extra work.

It definitely requires mindfulness.

Therein lies the opportunity for faculty. We must model for students our own mindful intake of information along the consuming-to-processing-to-learning continuum. This requires sharing with students how we have done that. Our students need to hear, to be shown how, to mindfully accept information. This requires us to expose our search processes to students, to converse with them about how one finds and uses quality information.

Most important, we must help students understand how to reject information that lacks substance, that is biased, that is poorly researched, that is trumpeted in an echo chamber constructed to appeal quickly and easily to consumers who merely want affirmation of their own views. In other words, we need to help students become mindful consumers of information. It’s our job.

Opportunities in the college classroom to do this abound, and not just concerning issues pulled from today’s headlines. For instance, the scientific community has its own pockets of bias, and a reading of the attacks on one camp by zealots in a different camp can be sobering. Such history can found in most disciplines concerning even things now taken so much for granted that one can wonder how an opposing view existed in the first place. Check the history about sciences’ acceptance of the theory of tectonic plates, for example. Or the central dogma in genetics and the current discussion that, well, maybe Lamarck was right about some things. Or the role of white matter in the brain. Or ______. (You already have examples coming to mind in your own discipline.)

The point is, mindful consideration of information, without a mindLESS acceptance of whatever is pushed at us (“It was on the Web, so it must be true,” right?), is one of the transformations that college is supposed to engender for our students. In order for this to happen — especially given today’s easy access to incredible amounts of information
— we must work to make this happen.

Discuss with your students how you search for quality information, how you determine whether you can trust the information you’ve accessed so easily. Model this with what you accept in your students’ work. Help students adopt mindful consumption strategies by helping them minimize their obesogenic information environments.

A key approach for helping students understand how to be better educated information consumers is the analogy Johnson (2012) uses involving the trophic pyramid. Briefly, that’s a description highlighting the fact that, in the food chain, for instance, the energy available from biomass is exponentially diminished as you work your way up the food chain: the closer to being “produced” (e.g., plankton), the more energy available per processes used to create the source of energy. In information consumption terms:

All too often, we consume information at the top of the trophic pyramid of truth, and as such, we’re getting only the information that has been selected for us by a network of operators interested not in telling us the truth, but in giving us what sells. We have to move towards the base of the pyramid if we want to see what’s really going on. (Johnson, 2012, p. 80)

How will you help your students value a process that seeks to consume truthful information instead of infotainment, click-fodder, and link-bait created by content-farmers?

