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Technology and Learning in the Comic Strip 'Calvin and Hobbes'

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Abstract

Calvin and Hobbes is a serialized comic strip by American author Bill Watterson, initially published in the newspapers from 1985-1995. In context of the recent surge of interest in more unconventional fields of literary and cultural studies, it is a valuable postmodern text with respect to both its form and content. It is of special interest in its depiction of the impact of technology on the mind of the child Calvin, a five year-old who is fascinated by science and natural history, who nevertheless fails to take any interest in the conventional education imparted to him at school. The impact of technology on his mind is shown as largely negative with it proving to be a medium of passively disseminating 'factoids', misinformation and child-inappropriate content that encourages undesirable short-cuts to learning. This analysis serves to partially explain why this cartoon has been able to become a valuable mirror to and sculptor of life and learning in

contemporary society, popular postmodern literary culture and ideology.

Keywords

Technology in literature, Postmodernism, Comic strip, Cultural studies, American popular literature.

Technology and Learning in the Comic Strip 'Calvin and Hobbes'

In the development of the minds of the future, technology is often promoted as the key to success. Yet merely throwing technology at students cannot guarantee learning. Technology can both harm and help minds, and much of the "cool consumer worldview" and academic awkwardness among students (especially in developed nations or/and from privileged family background) today is a result of technology gone awry.

Few observers of American life, including its intellectual and technological life, are as keen as Bill Watterson. Calvin is sophisticated enough to complain about how his "centering, self-actualizing anima has been impacted by toxic, co-dependent dysfunctionality," yet immature enough to be stunned upon learning that teachers do not "sleep in coffins all summer". This kind of attitude makes Calvin the perfect caricature of an average school or even college student. Watterson's work has also helped me

analyze my own experiences as a student. *Calvin and Hobbes* is not merely good humor, but a reasonable basis for a discussion about academe and technology. Other scholars have discussed problems in higher education through apertures that are not directly related to technology, and their views are helpful in understanding technology's role in academia's problems. Mark Edmundson, Professor of English at the University of Virginia and contributing editor to *Harper's*, wrote in a controversial 1997 article about a dangerous "cool consumer worldview" plaguing college students. Edmundson believes that most of the problems on the modern college campus, including academic disengagement, grade inflation, and aggressive marketing tactics by colleges, are more reflective of a business enterprise than an institution of higher learning. He attributes this to a "university culture… ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images". Another compelling explanation for academic disengagement is given by Gerald Graff, professor of English and education at the University of Illinois-Chicago, who postulates that students are disengaged because they are not acclimated to the seemingly "absurd nature of academic practices". Such practices include the predilection of academics to create problems where none existed before and argue about those problems. These contrary perspectives on academic disengagement—Edmundson blames student culture for

academia's woes, while Graff sees university culture as the culprit—are both relevant.

True learning can only be attained with the kind of passion for knowledge that can overcome the problems Graff observes, and technology can easily replace this passion with the cool consumer attitude Edmundson loathes. Technology has taken many activities that once required active engagement and turned them into passive activities. Such changes may be beneficial when used properly, but they too often serve as a crutch to true learning by eliminating much of the tinkering and exploring that drives intellectualism. One field of study where technology can have pronounced effects in this area is music. A century ago, a student who wanted to hear Chopin's "Preludes" would have been forced to find a qualified pianist or learn to play the music. Today, the same music can be downloaded with a few mouse clicks. Of course, recordings can be great tools for developing a passion for music. But recordings also take away an opportunity to develop intellectual passion students had in the past, and today's students, eminent consumers who want the best results with the smallest possible investment of time, are not likely to supplement the void. Too many students are convinced that merely hearing a recording amounts to an intellectual experience, and this is simply untrue.

The confusion of good results, like an expertly played prelude, with learning is the mechanism through which technology makes academia seem absurd and infects students with the cool consumer attitude. One *Calvin and Hobbes* strip depicts Calvin trying to escape an essay by traveling forward in time, when he will have already written the paper. It never occurs to Calvin that he is depriving himself of something—an education—by using a time-travel contraption to obtain the essay without work. Calvin does not use his technological prowess to better engage the absurdities of school, but to avoid them altogether, at the expense of self-improvement. His is the attitude of the consumer who doesn't really care how things come to be, so long as his desires are met. However, it is the devotion to the process that marks an intellectual, and treating technology in this way clearly undermines intellectualism.

The rise of a cool consumer attitude caused by misused technology has been matched by a decline in patience to deal with the absurdities of college. The questions intellectuals answer rarely have a simple, single answer, but technology typically provides users with easy answers, even when the questions appear difficult. The music aficionados from a century ago put substantially more effort into listening to Chopin's "Preludes"—whether that effort entailed learning the music or finding someone to perform it—than their modern counterparts do. It is not intrinsically wrong for information that was previously

obscure to be readily available. However, today's students are now used to *everything* moving rapidly, from instant messages to cell phones, and it is no longer their habit to wait for anything to come to them, even understanding. The ease with which information is now attained has made many students disinclined to put in the hard work needed to deal with the absurdities of college.

The desire of students to avoid the struggle of academic absurdities manifests itself in an ardent desire for simplification of academic activities. Calvin wants Miss Wormwood to deliver his lessons in "factoids," and when she refuses him, he consoles himself with the knowledge that his television understands him. Calvin's television has convinced him that the world can be reduced to easy answers, and he rejects his lessons because they do not deal in his familiar factoids, but in academic absurdities. Calvin's resistance to Miss Wormwood's methods also captures the essence of the cool consumer attitude. Factoids are far less work than real learning, and the wonderful selection of academic conveniences Edmundson detests, including pass-fail courses, late course drops, and grade inflation, all enable students to get through school (and college) without a serious challenge to their love for factoids. Calvin's immaturity in the classroom has been brought about by the television, and the fear of "academic absurdities" and "cool

consumer attitude" among students is also a response to technologies that simplify a complex world.

Can technology really turn the art of learning into an absurdity? Bill Watterson seems to think so. The cool consumer attitude Calvin has adopted has been caused, in part, by the way he does things, and the wave of technological advances sweeping over American students cannot help but have a similar effect. Technology's prevalence in American life cannot help but change the way it thinks, and it appears that many of these changes have been for the worse. The greatest symptom of consumer attitudes and perceived academic absurdity in the academy is the declining status of the book. Students still read, of course, but they rarely let a book consume them. Their passion rests in music, video games, television shows, movies, and websites. Calvin defends his anathema for books to Hobbes by claiming, "It's not entertainment unless you can sit in the dark and eat". To respond to the nascent coolness and disdain for academic absurdities present in college students, textbook writers and publishers have made books look more like television. A casual reading of the average textbook reveals attractive printing, colorful pictures, tons of organizational features to point out critical areas of the text, links to concurrent websites, and, occasionally, a CD-ROM. It is interesting to compare these modern textbooks to some of the textbooks I used in school. These books were printed in an archaic, typewriter-like font, with a few grainy black-and-

white photographs, and a sparse collection of questions at the end of the chapter followed by a fairly thorough list of extra books for the student to explore. There is certainly a great deal one can learn from both old textbooks and new textbooks, and new textbooks should not be dismissed *a priori* simply for taking advantage of the tools at their disposal. However, it is too easy to simply scan the modern textbook for the tidbits needed to pass a test and leave the cool consumer worldview unchanged, whereas the older textbook requires the reader to put in a good deal of effort to attain the same information, and might force a change of perspective.

Most of the technology students use on a regular basis, including music recordings, computers, movies, and even television can be employed to further academic exploration. The key lies in using technology actively; whatever is coming out of the speakers or flashing on the screen must be thought about with great care. All of these textbook features can be tremendous aids to the student, but they can also be used to avoid academic 'absurdities', like critical reading and the development of new paths of inquiry, that one must deal with to grow intellectually. Technology has failed if it is used in the same way Calvin uses alien technology. In a particularly eventful series of *Calvin and Hobbes* strips, Calvin procrastinates on a leaf-collecting project assigned by Miss Wormwood until the day before the project is due. Luckily, a pair of space aliens

land in Calvin’s backyard on the same day. Calvin quickly arranges a trade—the aliens get world domination, and Calvin gets fifty alien leaves for his project by nightfall, thanks to the advanced technology of the aliens. Oddly enough, Calvin flunks his project because his alien leaves look like creatively snipped maple leaves. When technology is merely used to escape academics, its promise is squandered.

The really vehement objection to Calvin's making the extremity of his inner fantasy public does not come from the teacher, who – when the strip's perspective shifts from how Calvin sees himself, to how he is seen by others - simply tells him to stop. Rather, it scathing criticism is voiced by one of Calvin's anonymous peers and classmates who not only becomes, in his or her anonymity, an implied representative of the group, but also objectifies Calvin, referring to him in the third person in a way that suggests the icy, distancing language of behavioral psychology in regard to "patients" who are judged to be no longer able to decide for themselves. There is even an element of prescription in this comment: "Miss Wormwood, shouldn't he be in some special school or something?" In making this comment anonymous, Watterson with customary insight makes it a stand-in for the entire institutional and medical culture of aggressive intervention—whether through prescribed pharmaceuticals or "placements"—that was becoming

increasingly prevalent in North American education in the 1990s.

The one thing Calvin does like at school is "show and tell" where students may bring personal items and tell the class about them. When he is once forced to go to the library to learn about snakes, he realizes that learning can be fun. His difficulties in school thus stems from the style of teaching, which may be why he imagines it as a prison or similar facility, and fantasizes about destroying it or fighting his teacher, Miss Wormwood. What remains shocking is that neither his parents nor his school teacher/principal tries to provide Calvin any assistance for his short-attention span and obvious learning difficulties. Calvin himself too never tries to get any real help and almost always turns to his stuffed toy Hobbes. Despite Calvin’s need for help, his alter-ego Hobbes does not really help at all. Thus Watterson has presented Calvin as someone almost entirely maladapted to success in a world that emphasizes as survival tools the deliberate exercise of reason and calculation, toward the maintenance of both social order and the advances of science. He is reminiscent of the Scottish anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing's profound 1960s aphorism that with the birth of every child, the Stone Age baby meets the twentieth century mother. In Calvin's case, however, there is clearly strong resistance to leaving the Stone Age, and becoming "civilized" according to the terms of a math-based world and his grades are

remain far from being representative of his high IQ. It is thus implicitly suggested that conventional learning and attempts to spice it up with technology are both failures in terms of providing the personal psychological attention, sensory involvement and active participation needed by students to actually enjoy and retain their lessons.

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