SEARCHING FOR WISDOM IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL DISTRACTION

DR. NANCY SALAY

Dr. Nancy Salay is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy and School of Computing at Queen's University. Nancy received her PhD in the philosophy of mind, language, and logic from Dalhousie University. After a research fellowship at Brandeis University and six years working as a computational linguist and ontologist at Cycorp, an artificial intelligence think-tank in Austin, Texas, her central area of specialization is now embodied cognitive science with a focus on language and representation.

Who do you want to be? Epictetus, a Greek Stoic philosopher of the first century C.E., though born into slavery, went on to establish a school of thought that continues to influence people today. He advised this: "First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do." (Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book III, ch. 23).

He was right to focus on *doing* as the ground for learning — at any given moment in our lives, we are the sum of everything we have ever done, broadly taken. Depending on what we spend our time doing, this can be an advantage or a liability.

If, for the next six weeks, you diligently begin each day with a half-hour meditation, at some point during those six weeks you will notice that your responses have changed: previously what would have absorbed your attention, no longer does; what might have provoked a knee-jerk reaction, you now thoughtfully resist.

If, for the next six weeks, you spend one hour of each day running, you will find that where before you resisted this high-intensity activity, you now *crave* it.

If, for the next six weeks, you spend one hour of each day reading a book that describes a world of experiences and responses that is completely foreign to you, by the time you are finished, you will notice that your own perspective has expanded.

If, for the next six weeks, you spend six hours of each day answering texts, sending e-mails, surfing the Internet for news, gossip, and ways to spend your money, you will begin to notice that your mind is continually racing and that you have become distracted and irritable.

In short, the way we spend the seconds and the minutes and the hours of our days, determines who we are. This is our ongoing, implicit, education. Most of us know this, even when we don't act in our own best interest.

What many do not realize, however, is that we can also learn from the experiences of others, directly, through perception, and indirectly, by reading and hearing their *words*. Our capacity to learn in this way is rooted in our mirror (empathy) neurons and in the plasticity of our nervous systems, but it is extended and deepened by language. This is a remarkable fact, one that is increasingly lost on newer generations who spend more time engaging with technology than with people and their stories.

The more broadly we educate ourselves, the richer our system of conceptual connections will become: new knowledge introduced into a dense conceptual web is deeply integrated as it cascades along the foundation of associations. The result is someone with broad cognitive reach — an independent, creative, and flexible thinker who makes good judgements in novel situations.

Given a narrow education, on the other hand, the more threadbare our web of understanding will be: new knowledge introduced into a patchy foundation will have little opportunity for integration and, consequently, will be isolated into local silos of influence. The result is someone who may have some areas of expertise, but little ability to apply this knowledge widely, especially in uncharted terrain.

Not so long ago the ideal of education was the Renaissance man — a person knowledgeable in a diversity of areas: art, science and the humanities. Leonardo da Vinci is a classic example because he was such a voracious learner, but anyone who aspires to a broad understanding of the people and the world in which she lives is embracing this ideal. Its value lies in the result: by learning from the rich tapestry of human lived experience, we gain wisdom.

Renaissance thinking is no longer an ideal in our modern world. Indeed, today we value precisely the opposite: we encourage our youth to specialize, at increasingly young ages, in STEM subjects because these, we think, will ensure their economic futures and will further our collective technological aims.

This shift in public value has resulted in an increasingly specialized educational system. Whereas in the past, elective requirements or a foundation year or two in the humanities, prepared the ground for a cross-fertilization of ideas, today's degree programs leave no room for anything beyond field specific courses. Students begin their post-secondary education at an increasingly young age, having had precious little lived or learned experiences in which to base their education. And they face increasing pressure, from parents, from peers, from society, to "just get the degree," its perceived worth lying more in the resulting certificate — in what financial opportunities this may bring for the bearer — than in the learning and the lasting effect this will have on who the student becomes.

We have the potential today for more information than ever before and this availability certainly makes us smarter, both as individuals and collectively: videos teach us how to write computer programs, start businesses and build bombs. But as we spend our time mining for data, we are missing the opportunity to *learn*, to make deep conceptual connections of

the sort that come from lived experience as well as from the slow immersion in another world that reading a book involves.

Ironically, then, this increase in smartness is accompanied by a decrease in wisdom. We have a wealth of information silos, but no ground in which to sow them.

Contrary to the current buzz in education, then, more technology in the classroom is not necessary for an enriched learning environment. Instead, students need opportunities for human interaction — something our increasingly virtual world is sorely lacking — and ideas and experiences from a multitude of perspectives, both present and past. Ensuring that they receive a balanced education, in the humanities and the arts as well as in the sciences, is a good place to start.

Who do we want to be? Once again, we can learn from Epictetus: "Only the educated are free," he said. (Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book II, ch. 1) Having experienced life as a slave, he knew firsthand what a lack of freedom means: no choices. If we want an enlightened future, *we* must become enlightened. How we educate our children and ourselves — what we *do* with the seconds and the minutes and the hours of our days — will determine the outcome.