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Brain of a Blogger

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As blogging skyrockets in popularity, we should be asked: Is blogging is good for the brain? Here two physician-learning specialists offer their view.

During the past five years, blogging has exploded from virtual non-existence into an important and influential sociocultural force. Recent survey data indicate that there are now nearly 10 million bloggers, 90% of whom are between the ages of 13 and 29 years old. This incredible upsurge in activity has caused us to wonder: What effect is all this blogging having on the brains of bloggers?

Why ask this question? The primary reason can be found in one of the central tenets of modern neuroscience: "The neurons that fire together, wire together." What this basically means is that our mental activities actually cause changes in the structures of our brains--not only what we think, but how we think as well. Given such activity-directed change, it always makes sense to ask whenever large numbers of people start using their brains in new and different ways, what effects these new activities are likely to have on brain structure and function. Blogging, which only seems to be accelerating in popularity, is a prime candidate for such investigation. After surveying the general range of materials that the blogosphere has to offer, we believe the following basic largely supportive conclusions are warranted:

1. Blogs can promote critical and analytical thinking.

First, there are blogs and there are...well, blogs. The best of blogs are rich in ideas and promote active exchange and critique. Rather than creating closed communities of like-minded troglodytes, these best blogs foster conversation, interactions with other blogs and other information sources, and invite feedback from their readers. Posts can form "threads" or links to other Web materials where readers can examine primary source material or articles that offer competing ideas and views. Blogs that follow this format are far from simple substitutes for television or video games. In fact, they are an ideal format for promoting critical and analytical thinking.

Because blogs are text-based, bloggers must write and visitors must read (rather than passively view) the postings. In research comparing newspaper and television news, public policy experts have previously found that consumers are far more likely to question what they read than what they see in pictures or on TV. There are several likely reasons for this: First, text can be assimilated in a self-paced fashion, allowing time for analysis and reflection. Second, words must--by their very nature--be analyzed, organized, and interpreted before they can be understood, providing more time for critical reflection. In contrast, pictures and music have more direct access to brain areas dealing with emotion and motivation, thereby potentially avoiding or even subverting reason and reflection. Third, pictures and music not only have the potential to alter our interpretations of the words we hear, but can actually alter our perceptions of the words we believe we have heard. Because our perceptions are formed by combining our sensory input with contextual cues from other inputs or stored memories, strongly arousing visual or sound images have a profound ability to alter the words we hear. This is the reason behind Reagan aide Michael Deaver's famous statement to CBS's Lesley Stahl that he didn't mind what CBS said about Reagan on TV, so long as any voiceovers were accompanied by pictures of the President standing in front of a flag. Blogs, with their text-based format, tend to avoid the more manipulative aspects of visually-embedded media.

2. Blogging can be a powerful promoter of creative, intuitive, and associational thinking.

To remain popular with readers, blogs must be updated frequently. This constant demand for output promotes a kind of spontaneity and 'raw thinking'--the fleeting associations and the occasional outlandish ideas--seldom found in more formal media. (Fortunately, the permanence and easily searchable nature of archived posts helps maintain some sense of decorum.) Blogging technology itself fosters this kind of spontaneity, since blogging updates can be posted with just a few clicks whenever a new thought or interesting Internet tidbit is found. Blogging is ideally suited to follow the plan for promoting creativity advocated by pioneering molecular biologist Max Delbruck. Delbruck's "Principle of Limited Sloppiness" states we should be sloppy enough so that unexpected things can happen, but not so sloppy that we can't find out that it did. Raw, spontaneous, associational thinking has also been advocated by many creativity

experts, including the brilliant mathematician Henri Poincare who recommended writing without much thought at times "to awaken some association of ideas."

3. Blogs promote analogical thinking.

Recent international surveys have shown that students in the United States have fallen far behind most of their first world peers in problem solving and critical thinking. This fall has coincided with a shameful decline in school-based instruction in critical analysis, rhetoric, and persuasive writing. However because professionals like attorneys, philosophers, and academicians run many excellent blogs, we all can benefit from their intellectual rigor, and their use of analogical thinking when communicating to the common world of the blogosphere.

Back-and-forth blog-based exchanges between experts also provide a unique opportunity for young thinkers to witness and evaluate arguments from analogy on an ongoing basis, and to develop their own abilities to think analogically.

4. Blogging is a powerful medium for increasing access and exposure to quality information.

Because blogs link many facts and arguments in branching "threads" and webs, and append primary source materials and reference works, they foster deeper understanding and exposure to quality information. In turn these sources can seed other creative projects.

5. Blogging combines the best of solitary reflection and social interaction.

Research using the Lemelson-MIT Invention index found that invention is best fostered in solitude (66%); yet other research has shown the beneficial effects of brainstorming with a community of intellectual peers. So blogging may combine the best of "working by yourself" and "working with other people." Bloggers have solitary time to plan their posts, but they can also receive rapid feedback on their ideas. The responses may open up entirely new avenues of thought as posts circulate and garner comments.

In conclusion, it looks as if blogging will be very good for our brains. It holds enormous potential in education, and it could take societal communication and creative exchange onto a whole new level.

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The Eides' book The Mislabeled Child is published by Hyperion (2006).

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