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The screen-age: Our brains in our laptops

By Christine Boese
 CNN Headline News
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(CNN) -- When I taught at a university, I worked with the wireless laptop programs that are replacing computer labs on campuses.

Once students began carrying laptops everywhere and using them in class, an interesting dependency developed. There were times in class when I asked a question and students would glance helplessly at the machines, as if to say, "The answer isn't in my carbon-based brain, but I know I got it right here, on silicon."

Or, if the answer wasn't stored in their notes on the hard drive, it became a contest in which students would search the Net madly to compete for extra credit points.

It was always a sad day for the ones who showed up with a dead battery and no power cord, a busted keyboard or loose wireless card. They watched the rest of the class in a flurry of activity, frustrated and feeling like half of their brains -- more than half for some students -- was missing.

Marshall McLuhan -- the prophet

Amazingly, the late media theorist Marshall McLuhan saw this coming in the 1960s. Many things he predicted about television did not appear until the appearance of the Internet and portable computers: so-called "ubiquitous computing."

McLuhan believed our senses become extended outside of our bodies. He suggested that a book was an extension of your eye and a car, an extension of your foot. He would say the Internet is an extension of our central nervous systems.

If we think of ourselves as somehow projected outside our bodies, one's sense of self becomes increasingly fragmented. My math brain lives partly inside a calculator.

My consciousness isn't just split between gray matter and a hard drive or two. Now part of it lives on the Internet and seems to stay there all the time. While I may feel a bit diffuse, mostly I observe changes in what McLuhan called our "sense ratios," like



The Web has become an essential part of checking facts and figures for students while they do their homework.

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a goldfish changing from one kind of aquarium to another. We adapt. We gain some things, lose others.

Internet researcher Sherry Turkle in her book "Life on the Screen " interviews college students about their online lives. She is interested in their ability to multi-task in ways some older people cannot. She describes students as bombarded with media from multiple sources on a typical night of studying in the dorm.

How young people live

A student may have a textbook open. The television is on with sound off (perhaps with the CNN Headline News modular screen). They've got music on headphones. On a laptop hooked in to the Internet there's a homework window, along with e-mail and instant messaging in the background. The Web has become an essential part of checking facts and figures for the homework (not to mention plagiarizing with copy and paste). On top of that, the student may field phone calls or talk with a roommate.

One of the most striking observations in Turkle's findings was a quote from one multi-tasking student who preferred the online world to the face-to-face world. "Real life," he said, "is just one more window."

College students are the leading edge in adapting to this new goldfish bowl, these new multi-tasking sense ratios. Some of us will hold on to the old ways by our fingernails, afraid of losing a coherent self. Others will plunge into the new collective nerve center, our various selves loosely joined in a partial free-fall at all times.

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