

Is technology dumbing us down or smartening us up?

By Brett J. Grooms, Information Technology Department Chief, July 2008

It's the old fear about calculators causing kids to not develop adequate math skills, taken to the next level. Today, terabytes of easily accessed data, always-on Internet, and fast search engines are changing the way people gather information. However, the age-old question remains, is technology making us smarter or dumber?

"Our environment, because of technology, is changing, and therefore the abilities we need in order to navigate these highly information-laden environments and succeed are changing," said Susana Urbina, a professor of psychology at the University of North Florida who has studied the roots of intelligence.

The ability to reason and learn will stay the same and not fundamentally change because of technology. On the other hand, technology, from pocket calculators to the Internet, is radically changing the notion of the intelligence necessary to function in the modern world.

It has become easier to program a cell phone instead of your brain to recall facts or other essential information. In some sense, our digital devices do the thinking for us, helping with everything from calendar scheduling and local directions to in-depth research. One day we might sit around and reminisce about the 'old days' of having to remember phone numbers, but is that a bad thing? These devices free our brain to think about other things. The brain (or at least mine) has a limited capacity. If you give it high-level tools, it will work on high-level problems.

People feared the invention of the printing press because it would cause people to rely on books for their memory. Today, memory is more irrelevant than ever, argue some academics. This seems to be to our advantage as Auxiliarists (from what I'm told). What's important is your ability to use what you know well. Technology is just a natural progression in our society so stop worrying about technology and get to work.