Response to The Shallows

Jerry Holsopple

Early in my career I was an advocate for adopting communication technology, started a website for the Mennonite Church more than 15 years ago (thirdway.com), considered McLuhan’s warnings, used media literacy techniques and was an early adopter of much of the digital media production software and equipment that is a normal part of our digital experience. I continue to pay attention to developments, experiment with much of it, and just like many of my colleagues I get drawn into the time consuming, brain changing usages of the internet.

In recent years I have been fascinated by what research into the brain reveals and have sought to understand while standing (literally) in the Orthodox services their relationship with icons, in fact immersing myself in the deep practice of writing (painting) icons.

These two foci seem to be very different practices, divergent languages and separate physical/mental activities. It is this experience that I bring to my second reading of *The Shallows*, after reading it shortly after the initial release. I resonate with much of the experience that Carr describes in his relationship to the Internet. My observations are a series of comments and questions, which I continue to mull in my thoughts, within my planning for courses and in the execution of these classes.

1. The priority of the linear mind is challenged by both of these experiences by the fragmentation, scanning, speed and multi-tasking of the Internet and by the mystery of the icon and practice in the Orthodox experience. However, the effect on concentration and contemplation is markedly different.
2. Habits, good or bad, can be programed into our brain. As the activity is transformed into habit so are the circuits in our brains transformed. These synapses program us to keep repeating the behavior that created them. How do we think about embodying/living what we want to be “habitual?” It is not just random or chance. There can be deliberateness to the forming of our brain, that I had rarely considered when looking at other media evaluations. Many other forms of evaluation give preference to content over the medium. That remains an important factor in our understanding of socialization, but the brain research referenced in the book gives a valuable counterpoint to that. When we give priority to one form of brain function, we may lose another valuable form.
3. We can influence the shape of our brain, what synapses are created by the very way we read, use the Internet, hold discussions, write, produce art, contemplate, play, make music, choose to remember. Can you imagine if we took brain health as seriously as we might take physical conditioning or our health care benefit extra charges. If you don’t read a book in depth every week you have to pay a mental surcharge on your health benefit. In the last 3 years I have reshaped my body to think running 7-10 miles at a time is normal. I get restless if I don’t run every other day. I have retrained what my brain expects from my body and of course the chemicals this releases. How do we see what the brain research reveals as offering exciting possibilities for reshaping/training our own brain in the directions we want to be able to function? During the blessing service for the first icons I painted in Lithuania, the priest prayed for my “perfection” (in Russian of course), which in their understanding means that I would become an icon myself, that I would embody faith, not just understand it. I recognize that few of us sit around making a plan for how we want the synapses in our brain to develop, nor do we consider that we shape them on a daily basis. I wonder how I might teach differently if my expectation was to enable to students to reshape their brain rather than a concern with only critical thinking, content understanding and technical skill development.
4. Can we use our commitment to cross-cultural experiential learning and our commitment to exposing students to other languages as a way to think about educational methods? My initial thinking suggests that we want our student’s brains to be able to both do linear/logical thinking combined with deep reading along with accessing the mass of information using rapid surface reading. We want them connecting via social media and other electronic mediated forms yet to come, but we also desire that they are a socially adept in face-to-face situations. I suggest this means encouraging both sustained concentration and the ability to shift into a mode of multi-tasking. Without fail one of the things students on my cross-cultural miss early in our trip are the connections to friends/family but what they miss at the end of the trip are extended conversations over coffee or a meal.
5. What is the spiritual significance of the shaping of our brains? I am fascinated that several Orthodox websites use brain research to validate the practices of prayer and spiritual practice. These practices are a way to habituate a less stressed, more hopeful, compassionate spiritual life. This is an area I hope to explore more in the next months in my personal research.
6. Do our class schedules, moving rapidly from one class to another, and our assignments/testing, that requires short bursts of focus on what is most pressing, also serve to create what Carr describes as the “juggler’s brain?” It might also be worth paying attention to how Moodle and TurnItIn will change our own grading/evaluation/teaching styles in addition to how it helps students to develop. (I do find the attendance module to rapidly help me learn the names of all my students—since I can match the name and image quickly every time I open it. I usually know all the students within a week or two because of this.)
7. We should pay attention to how the information is controlled and driven by economic forces. Google tailors the searches to sites that match our predispositions, because that is also how they match ads to us. While this seems convenient it is also very limiting. If you don’t think this changes the information we get, take a quick look at the TV news media, where you choose your channel based on your political preference and then you get affirmed rather than challenged. This is driven primarily by the economic model on which public/mass media is based. If you follow recent events dealing with the FCC control of the Internet you are aware that, equal access may soon be tiered to those information/entertainment sites that are willing to pay will get preference from the Internet access providers.