

I was surprised to see email coming up stating that institutions were mandating the installation of Instant Messaging (IM) clients on student machines. Around here, the mandates are often in the other direction. So, I'm curious how individuals on this list feel about it... well, really, I'm just sick of dealing with eventlogs and security settings: I need a mental break.

In the debates around here, I'm on the pro side of IM being available to students even though, personally, I have no use for it. As far as I'm concerned, IM is the worst part about phoning coupled with the worst part about emailing. However, lots of people love it.

When we did have MS Messenger installed in the labs, I watched students run up multiple chat windows and talk on a cell phone while holding a conversation with the person sitting next to them... while writing an essay. It completely amazed me. If I'm talking on the phone and someone else starts talking to me, my brain goes tilt and I lose both conversations. Not so with these younger people. I don't know what kind of quality education they're getting with all that interpersonal noise, but they're at least going to make excellent drive through attendants at Wendy's.

More often, students would just sit down, start Messenger, and then do their work. Messenger just lets other people find them. It's more than a game or even a simple communication tool though; it's like a new way of group thinking. Every once in a while they seem to need to ping each other; being out of touch almost seem painful to them.

I find the thought of always being contactable appalling: I would hate it. I don't want my thoughts interrupted by a chime. Then again, I was born slightly before the 15 second attention-span generation. Times change, just because I don't like something doesn't mean it's wrong.

So, we have a new generation where individuals can't focus their thoughts for a measurable length of time and where near continuous group intercommunication is normal. These people don't want quiet... if they don't want to hear the person next to them, they play their music in their headphones while doing IM and whatever else it is that they're supposed to be getting done. These are the majority of people in our labs. Is it our jobs to make an environment that we like, or one that they succeed in?

Schooling still seems focused on getting people to work together... but students these days are way past that; they are at the point where they are starting to think together. Is a student that's using IM to get an answer on an exam cheating or is an exam that tests an individual's ability outdated in a world where people think collectively? Perhaps it's both.

I remember being the first person in grade 7 to have a pocket electronic calculator. My teacher wouldn't let me use it. She kept saying "what happens if you don't have a calculator with you?" I have dozens now. Or, "what happens if the batteries run out?" They're solar powered now. Modern teachers insist their students use calculators. Will it be the same way with IM? Why can't a student ask someone the answer to an exam question?

Why learn long division? Why think alone?

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