

Wired

by Carol Duerksen

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Copies of the Winter 07/08 issue of *With* or the articles at the end of this session.
- 2 A spool of string and scissors
- 3 The following questions written on chalkboard or newsprint:
How many times a day do you check your email?
How many times a day do you text?
Approximately how many hours a day do you listen to your iPod or MP3 player?
- 4 Jewelry that your youth will make and wear. Check with several youth and ask them to help you choose the supplies for this activity.

FOCUS:

Form a circle. Explain the rules of the game:

You'll toss the spool of string to a student, and ask that student one of the questions on the board OR a question of your own on the topic of "technology in your life." The person who catches the spool wraps the string around their wrist and then tosses it to another student and asks a question. The questions may be repeated.

Continue until every person has answered at least one question and the group is all "wired" together.

Sit down, but remain wired together. Discuss the answers. Any surprises? How tied are they to their electronics and cell phones? How do they feel about their commitment to those items? How do their parents feel about it? Does it improve or distract from their ability to communicate with others? Are they more wired to their technology or to other people? Are those mutually exclusive?

Cut the string that connects the youth but ask them to keep the strand around their wrist.

CONNECT TO THE CONTENT:

Hand out the *With* Magazines or the articles "Thoughts on Technology and Teens" and "Text-aholic." Read them together as a class. (Take turns, one paragraph at a time.) Then go back to the articles and discuss the following quotes:

- *I honestly cannot imagine my life without my computer, cell phone, or iPod.*
—Do your youth agree with that?

- *Who needs social skills when you have Web skills?*
—What do your youth think of that statement?
- *Online forums and blogs can be a great way to keep in contact with friends and meet new people.*
—Agree or disagree? Why?
- *This self-contained and truly very antisocial method of communication has robbed this generation of any need to extend beyond oneself.*
—Agree or disagree? Why?
- *Texting takes away conversation skills.*
—Agree or disagree? Why?
- *Without temperance, these things can control your life. If you can't set the boundaries yourself, someone needs to set them for you.*
—Agree or disagree? Why? Do your parents set boundaries?
- *When we start investing too much of ourselves in these electric adventures, we lose track of reality and skew our priorities.*
—Comments?
- *We should make sure that our real-people contact time is at least equal to or greater than that of your _____-alolic time.*
—Comments? Is that truly an issue?

APPLY:

Ask youth if they would be willing to commit to a week without their cell phone, iPod, email, MSN, etc. If so, create commitment sheets for them to sign, along with the “rules of the week.” Plan for some significant interaction time during this week—perhaps a lock-in or weekend retreat. Also plan for a debriefing time afterwards.

RESPOND:

Ask youth to replace the string on their wrist with the jewelry that they make. (They can also do a necklace or anklet if they prefer.) This jewelry is to serve as a reminder for them to be “wired” to people first and their technology second—that when they look at it, they will remember to make their “real-people contact” a priority.

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“THOUGHTS ON TECHNOLOGY AND TEENS”

By Kyra-lin Hom

A typical weekend might find me waking up to my cell phone alarm at about 9 a.m. I'll roll over and turn it off while checking to see if I missed any calls in my sleep—or if I answered any calls late at night that I wasn't actually awake enough to remember.

I'll eat breakfast and then land right back in bed, pulling my laptop after me. First things first, I have to open iTunes and select which mix I want to listen to—currently I'm looping several CDs by Miyavi, a Japanese rocker.

When that's all done, I can settle in to check my e-mail. I sometimes check e-mail up to five, six, seven times a day! I've got three active accounts: one for fun, one for professional use, and another for everything else. I use my “fun” account as a contact e-mail for my various other Web accounts (Cosplay.com, MySpace, eBay, etc.). That means that whenever I have an alert on one of those Web sites (such as a new comment on Cosplay.com or MySpace, or I'm being outbid on eBay) the site automatically sends an e-mail to my “fun” account that lets me know my attention is required.

From there it follows that I go to each of these other Web sites to check for the latest updates and keep an eye on the status of my accounts. The whole process can easily eat up hours at a time if I let it. It's very easy to lose track of time online.

Rumor has it that my generation was born knowing how to use basic technology. Whether or not this is true, one of my earliest memories is of being on a computer. I was home sick, in my pajamas, surfing the AOL Kids Only section. So as unserious as that rumor is, it has its implications.

I honestly cannot imagine my life without my computer, cell phone, or iPod. I'm not the only one. Everyone has some form of MP3 player. Most teens don't even bother putting them away during class. They turn them off but leave the headphones hanging around their neck.

More and more of my friends brought their laptops to high school, and almost no one is brave enough to venture to college without one. Most teachers don't accept handwritten papers or projects anymore. It then follows that online homework recipients such as Turnitin.com are quickly gaining in popularity. To check for plagiarism, these Web sites record the time and date the student work is submitted and then compare the work with material available online. It's a bit of a pain because the teachers can set an exact cutoff time—no more last-minute edits the period before it's due. I'm sure teachers get a smug sense of pleasure when setting that cutoff time.

Cell phones are another fast-growing teen phenomenon. I remember back when I was begging my parents for one because it was the new cool thing to have. Now it's just a thing to have. We don't even ask each other if we have cell phones anymore; it's assumed. We skip straight to asking for each other's cell number—I hardly ever use my home phone.

Cell phones aren't just for calls anymore either. Text messaging is the lifeblood of the teenage communication network. I'm not the only person I know who can two-thumb text under my desk without looking. It creates the illusion that I'm still paying attention to my teachers.

As bad as that sounds, texting is incredibly helpful when you need to get or give information fast. (You can send out mass text messages just like you can e-mails, depending on the cell phone and the provider.) The newer phones have MP3 players, cameras, video and voice recorders, voice recognition, and Web capability along with the traditional games, alarm clock, stopwatch, calculator, calendar, and notepad.

We are a wired generation. Who needs social skills when you have Web skills? Unfortunately the

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accessibility of people through technology leaves everyone exposed and vulnerable to a new breed of online predators. There is almost no way to verify a stranger's facts or identity online. Anyone can pretend to be anyone else, thus culprits are protected from the law by anonymity. It can make for a threatening and paranoid atmosphere.

That said, online forums and blogs can be a great way to keep in contact with friends and meet new people. I had been a staunchly anti-MySpace person for years until I lost a bet and had to sign up for an account. Now I love it. You actually have a lot more control over your person and profile on these types of sites than I expected. As I've never been great on the phone, this no-awkward-pause form of communication is very convenient.

There are ups and downs to this era of communication. Being a part of this social movement by default, I'd say that the ups outweigh the downs. But it's impossible to overlook the fact that this self-contained and truly very antisocial method of communication has robbed much of this generation of any need to extend beyond oneself.

Literally everything is brought to you via the Internet or at your fingertips via your cell phone. It's a seductive world. Without temperance, it has the ability to consume your life. If you can't set the boundaries yourself, someone needs to set them for you. Before my parents gave me a stopwatch to record my Internet time and set an official time limit every week, I would readily blow an entire weekend online and then wonder where all my time went.

It's when we start investing too much of ourselves in these electric adventures that we lose track of reality and skew our priorities. It's our individual responsibility to ourselves, our lives, and our families to know where to draw the line.

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“TEXT-AHOLIC”

By Lora Andrews

I love to talk. I talk like it's going out of style. If I see a friend (I'm one of those people who seems to know EVERYBODY), I stop and say hi. Normally, getting me to shut up is the hard part.

Along with talking, I'm also known for always having my cell phone nearby. Talking and phones go hand in hand, right?

That's why it's rather ironic that I only talk on the phone with two people on a regular basis—a woman from my church and another friend. I have 134 contacts on my cell phone and only call two of them just to talk!

To talk to the rest of my friends, I only use my right thumb. I'm a text-aholic!

Rather than calling up a friend to see if they want to come over, I text, “hey... wut u up 2? u wanna come over or sumthn?” Rather than calling a friend to say happy birthday, I text, “happy bday!”

It's weird, though, because I've only started texting in the last couple of years. Before that, it was cool to talk on the phone all the time, but now in our fast-paced world, it just seems easier to send someone a quick message. Asking someone what they were up to used to be at least a 15-minute conversation but now can be summed up in less than 50 characters. It seems like a quick fix to time constraints.

I have this phobia of that awkward feeling in a phone call when someone answers and wonders why on earth you called. Texting eliminates that gut-wrenching step. I never have to see or hear the reaction to what I just said, or what I just asked. I have the privilege of just seeing the reply. This is a very comfortable way of conversing.

But here's the big question: Is that a good thing?

It's hard to admit, but texting really has taken away some of my conversation skills. Sometimes I think I'd be better off if I did know how the other person reacted to what I just told them.

But, that's still just thinking about the “me” side of the conversation. What about the person I'm talking to? What if they need 20 minutes of my time to tell me how terrible or great their day was?

Yes, I do feel more comfortable texting most of my friends than calling them, but maybe I'm supposed to overcome that and take a leap of faith. Maybe I could even let my guard down and have a 10-second awkward moment while having a phone conversation!

My challenge for myself and any of you who are text-aholics, or Facebook-aholics, or video-game-aholics is to make sure that your real-people contact time is at least equal to or greater than that of your _____-aholic time!