LBAR Lesson IV: Critical Arguments in Favor of Cyberspace's

Assignment: Students should write a short paper (no more than a page) both summarizing and giving a reaction to Zimmer's argument. This will be similar to the assignment of the last lesson, with one exception: they should attempt a critical reaction, that is, they should focus on what they disagree with, and why.

[Note: Zimmer uses a thought experiment devised by Clark and Chalmers. You may well want to do this experiment with your students before you begin the lesson. It should be an effective way of making Zimmer's point before they begin to engage the article itself]

Lesson IV is a continuation of last week's subject, though with an obvious difference: Zimmer agrees that the Internet and technology are having an effect on human cognition, but disagrees with Carr that the effect is mostly negative. There are basically two parts to Zimmer's piece; the first argues that what we know about the effects of technology on cognition suggests a positive net gain – instead of making us "dumber" or "illiterate," such things as texting actually enhance our ability to read and to comprehend. How? By giving us more exposure both to reading and writing. Thus he cites the research of the linguist David Crystal to the effect that people who make more rather than less use of such things actually improve their ability to communicate thereby. Yet it is not a simple matter of exposure and hence experience.

Zimmer's more fundamental argument against Carr is that he makes the right observations, but draws the wrong conclusion. Carr is right, according to Zimmer, that Cyberspace is changing the nature of human thought, but he is wrong in thinking this is a bad thing. Carr's argument assumes that the mind is static and isolated, that it merely sits at the center of all manner of sensations and impressions, receiving and processing information without being affected by that information. Information technology is especially bad, for Carr, because it essentially replaces a role the mind would otherwise be playing, which means that aspect of the mind is left to wither away. But the mind is neither static nor isolated, according to Zimmer; it affects the impressions it receives while also interacting with the world from which those impressions arise. The mind is not being made into an extension of technology; rather, technology is an extension of the mind, which allows it both to acquire and process ever-more information. And it is always doing this; the mind works by focusing only on small bits of data at a time, which means that it makes use of various tools to store information that it cannot currently use. Zimmer refers to the work of Andy Clark and David Chalmers, two philosophers that have argued for thinking of the mind as "extended," which means that it extends itself out into the physical world, thereby remaking it so as to "use" it more efficiently (use here means to process or think about it). Human beings are natural "cyborgs," which means that our minds are continuously re-wiring themselves to create new ways of retrieving and processing information. What Carr sees as a threat to the mind is merely the way the mind has always worked, and will continue to work if left to its own devices.

The threat to the future, according to Zimmer, is then people like Carr who see the mind as fixed, and in doing so, are not really trying to protect the mind from the detrimental effects of technology, but rather prevent it from evolving by further creating technologies, technologies that better help it retrieve and process information. Carr really is then something of a Luddite; his notions are not only fictional, but they have dangerous consequences.

[Note: this is a rather heady subject for high-school age students, but they should be able to glean what is as stake nevertheless. Zimmer's argument is a powerful counter to Carr's, one that they will likely

take to eagerly. Yet, if you probe enough, you will find that they have a certain sense of disquiet about Zimmer's notion of the “extended” mind, or better yet, about humans as “cyborgs.” In each instance, both of agreement and ambivalence, they should be thinking about why they are likewise attracted and repelled. This is perhaps the most important point of the exercise]