



***The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age
Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future***

By Mark Bauerlein

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Reviewed by Johnpaul Norman, Missouri State University

In his book, *The Dumbest Generation*, Mark Bauerlein (2008) addresses some alarming trends amongst America's youth and young adults. He cites numerous statistics which reveal an increasing number of young Americans are dropping out of high school or college, literacy rates are falling to greater depths each year, and emphasis on traditional knowledge and values is rapidly degrading. He also claims today's youth have changed in how they utilize their time, and their priorities differ greatly from past generations. In conjunction with these changes, Bauerlein offers some possible explanations as to why young Americans have changed. For example, advances in technology and digital media have swept through this nation at an alarming rate. Advocates of technology, many of whom are educators and mentors to America's youth, boast an unending learning potential in the power of the digital age. However, Bauerlein finds some key rifts with the digital mode of thinking, and he is not quite sold that all of it is beneficial to America's youth and education system. The following review attempts to summarize Bauerlein's key arguments, while at the same time, assesses the validity of his conclusions.

Bauerlein (2008) explains numerous ways in which the latest class of mentors has betrayed future generations by not emphasizing the importance of traditional knowledge and values. He condemns mentors today by saying,

Blame, also, the teachers, professors, writers, journalists, intellectuals, editors, librarians, and curators who will not insist on the value of knowledge and tradition, who will not judge cultural novelties by the high standards set by the past, who will not stand up to adolescence and announce, "It is time to put away childish things." They have let down the society that entrusts them to sustain intelligence and wisdom and beauty, and they have failed students who can't climb out of adolescence on their own. (p.161)

In this statement, Bauerlein introduces the reader to multiple aspects of how teachers are failing today's learners. He claims many of today's mentors enable and encourage students to be undisciplined and lazy in their effort. Bauerlein believes the push for digital media in the classroom, the cultural emphasis on having an identity without the presence of a proper knowledge-base, and the lack of support for the traditional values of the past have all hindered mentors from giving students (future generations) a proper education that will sustain them.

"Digital enthusiasts say the screen (digital media) incorporates all the things book reading entails, and supplies so much more. More important, they argue, the screen actually encourages more reading and writing, more inquiry and activism, more decision making" (Bauerlein, 2008, p. 103). While Bauerlein agrees that digital media is a great supplier of knowledge and infor-

mation, he refutes the idea that it is empowering student knowledge. He utilizes statistics such as the NAEP test which compared reading results of twelfth graders from 2005 to those of 1992. Reading proficiency from 2005 paled in comparison to student rates in 1992 which would seem to indicate that digital advancements do not equal increases in intelligence or intellectualism. The influx of knowledge, which our students are to be supplied with in today's digital age, seems to have not have occurred yet. But in the midst of this apparent knowledge deficit, teachers and school districts still push and encourage students to utilize digital tools and rely on them. In fact, many schools have cut other educational programs in order to make room in their budgets for digital media, while other schools are receiving increases in state and federal funds for the same means:

A school district in Union City, California, spent \$37 million to purchase new (digital) tools for 11 schools, and paid for it by cutting science equipment and field trips. The Kittredge Street Elementary School in Los Angeles dropped its music program in order to afford a "technology manager." New Technology High School in Napa, California, received \$300,000 from the U.S. Department of Education, and \$250,000 from the California Department of Education for its pioneering, super-wired facilities. One of the school's slogans is, "It doesn't matter what you know, it matters what you show." (Bauerlein, 2008, p. 117)

Bauerlein further argues that today's mentors encourage and enable students to challenge old traditions and establish their own identity, but the mentors do not require students to study the old traditional knowledge in this process of "finding themselves" Instead, a shift seems to have occurred wherein today's students are encouraged by their mentors to oppose old traditions. A dividing line has been drawn: "Great precursors vs. the self, conventional models vs. individual expression-not *and* but *versus*. Tradition and individuality stand opposed." (Bauerlein, 2008, p. 167) Bauerlein argues that students are not encouraged or required to seek the values in older, traditional, knowledge to help them shape and find meaning in their own identity. Instead, students are encouraged to challenge conventional models without establishing a firm grasp of what the conventional models look like. In response Bauerlein (2008) asks, "Does the young man's growth have to assume such an adversarial pitch? Does tradition have to retire so conspicuously in order for the adolescent self to come into its own?" (p. 174).

Bauerlein (2008) also states previous generations used to establish a good foundation of prior knowledge before shaping their identity: "Many generations ago, adolescent years meant preparation for something beyond adolescence, not authentic selfhood but serious work, civic duty, and family responsibility, with parents, teachers, ministers, and employers training teens in grown-up conduct" (p. 168). In today's society, people in mentorship roles damage future generations by letting them be undisciplined, ignore old traditions, and define themselves with an inadequate foundation of knowledge. Current mentors not only allow their students to bypass the knowledge and values of the past, but they enable students to think that it is useless, unnecessary, and/or unimportant. This trend of de-emphasizing the past, Bauerlein (2008) argues, ultimately damages today's youth because it does not prepare them for their future endeavors:

Dissociated from tradition, with nobody telling them that sometimes they must mute the voices inside them and heed instead the voices of distant greatness, young people miss

one of the sanative, humbling mechanisms of maturity. This is the benefit of tradition, the result of a reliable weeding out process. (p. 190)

The consequences for failing to heed the works of the past seem to be translating into lower literacy rates, increased high school and college dropouts, and an aimless generation of young adults that Bauerlein (2008) describes as “twixters” (p. 171).

Bauerlein has definitely taken a hard-line stance on the negative effects technology is imposing in the classroom, and many of his arguments challenge the conventional views on digital media that our teacher education classes possess. Most education classes I have enrolled in promote the utilization of computers, projectors, DVD’s, and SMART Boards. Most schools are equipping themselves with these items and investing many dollars on their installation within all classrooms; thus, most college courses are prepping future teachers to know how to use them. Also, some teacher education courses force pre-service teachers to learn how to make blogs, personal websites, and socially network in order to help streamline the communication process to their students. But the problem lies in the digital media whirlwind, and Bauerlein seems to attack it head on. He seems to feel that mentors are relying on a tool that only scratches the surface of penetrating student minds; thus, students are not challenged anymore to research answers in books or to struggle and persevere through challenges to achieve success. Teachers get information to students quick and easy, therefore students want their work and good grades to be quick and easy.

I do not think Bauerlein is asking too much of present or pre-service teachers. The educational trends and statistics he brings to light in the book are both appalling and disturbing. He has definitely challenged my views toward technology in the classroom, and how I might approach future classes I teach. In assessing my own life personally, and greater society as a whole, I do believe we have evolved into a more undisciplined class of people. We do not like struggle, and correcting or criticizing others is usually met with major backlash. Bauerlein (2008) himself thoughtfully summarizes what today’s students need, and at the same time, describes what they are missing:

Students need a long foreground of reading and writing, a home and school environment open to their development, a pipeline ahead and behind them. They need mentors to commend them when they’re right and rebuke them when they’re wrong. They need parents to remind them that social life isn’t everything, and they need peers to respect their intelligence, not scrunch up their eyes at big words. The formula is flexible, but with the Dumbest Generation its breakdown is under way, and with it the vitality of democracy in the United States.” (p. 203)

Bauerlein’s arguments in his book definitely merit value and analysis. His tough-minded approach toward the changes that mentors, and the education system, must implement is definitely appropriate, and long overdue. He emphasizes how teachers have moved from being the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side,” in today’s classroom (Bauerlein, 2008 p. 186). This subtle change has caused students to regress because their teachers do not set the example and lead role in the classroom; thus, Bauerlein (2008) states, “If mentors are so keen to recant their expertise, why should students strain to acquire it themselves” (p. 186). I thoroughly believe Bauerlein’s arguments to be valid and most pre-service teachers should utilize his arguments to assess their own teaching techniques, and what part technology is really playing in the

whole picture. Maybe then they would ask themselves this key question: if technology is the wave of the future, then why are today's students worse off than they were in the past? Or as Bauerlein (2008) concludes,

A foundation hosts symposia on digital learning, a science group affirms the benefits of video games, humanities leaders insist that we respect the resourceful new literacies of the young, reading researchers insist that web reading extends standard literacy skills to hypermedia comprehension, school districts unveil renovated hi-tech classrooms, and popular writers hail the artistry of today's T.V. shows. All of them foretell a more intelligent and empowered generation on the rise. The years have passed, though, and we're still waiting. (p. 111)

Johnpaul Norman earned a Bachelor of Social Work degree from Evangel University in 2005. Shortly after college, he organized and allocated a grant for the Springfield Public School system in Springfield, Missouri. Through the grant work he developed a great working relationship with students, faculty, and administrators in the public school system. These events have led Johnpaul to seek his teaching credentials with the goal in mind of becoming a full-time educator. He is currently enrolled in the Post-Bachelor's Teacher Certification program at Missouri State University and is on track to complete his coursework in the fall semester of 2013.