Are you afraid of technology? You shouldn't be

March 18 2015, by Michael Cowling

Many people fear technology, and have great reservations about kids using smartphones and computers. Credit: Anthony Kelly/Flickr, CC BY

Nary a week goes by that doesn't see a new mainstream media story on the dangers of technology use. Just the other day I spotted one talking about how smartphones are making us dumber.

Yet the original study cited in the news story is actually more about how

mobile phones help us to be more intuitive than analytical, and stop us from "overthinking". But it's particularly interesting that this study, like many others, gets framed up as a "fear of technology".

It makes me wonder why many people appear to be so afraid of technology? To answer this question, we need to consider motivations, and perhaps even look at where this argument tends to appear the most, which is in reference to children and education.

Think of the children

The ABC caused some controversy in the mainstream media a couple of years ago when an episode of Play School showed a presenter using a toy computer to send e-mails and a toy smartphone to "tweet" his friends.

The ABC said at the time its intention was to promote items that have now become a part of everyday life. But what is of particular interest is the responses to the episode that express a fear of technology.

For instance, comments on the above-linked article were predominantly negative, with two out of three commenters believing that children shouldn't be exposed to email and social networking.

I saw a similar phenomenon in 2012 with a story by The Courier Mail on research on Twitter in the classroom that I conducted with my colleague Jeremy Novak from Southern Cross University. The Courier Mail also conducted a survey alongside the story that asked readers "should students be able to tweet questions to teachers in class?". More than 3,000 people responded to the survey, with more than 90% voting in the negative.

As educators, we see this position from teachers every day. For example, data from Paul Forster at the University of Queensland notes that more

than 40% of teachers he sampled felt "put out" when seeing a [mobile phone](#) in their classroom. In fact, Paul said that anecdotal evidence suggested that the most common approach for many staff was to ban mobile phone usage in their classroom, rather than encourage it.

As an educational technologist, I find this type of public reaction to the uptake of technology astounding. Technology is now an integral part of our daily lives. As such, society should not vilify technology, but embrace it as an essential part of life in the information age.

Anxiety about the phone in our pocket

In spite of this, Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that there are almost as [many active mobile phones in Australia](#) – 17.4 million, as of December 2012 – than [people to operate them](#) – 18.4 million adults aged 15 and above as at June 2012.

The ABS also reports that in 2009, [76% of 12–14 year olds owned a mobile phone](#). So it would appear that although almost every adult in Australia has a mobile phone, and three-quarters of children also have one, many people (including teachers) are reluctant for kids to learn about this technology, or use it in the classroom.

Why is this? The answer may involve the culture surrounding technology. It's been long-documented that the various generations have differing attitudes to technology. And it's becoming apparent that the typical Generation X'er – a "[digital immigrant](#)" – not only worries about how to use the technology, but doesn't necessarily see the benefit of having the technology in the first place.

Horses for courses means technology for kids

Henry Ford is (often misquoted) as saying: "If I'd asked my customers what they wanted, they'd have said a faster horse." And perhaps this is also true of technology in the classroom. While our "digital native" students embrace the technology, maybe our "digital immigrant" teachers continue to search for "a better horse", all the while ignoring the technology that is already in every student's pocket or backpack.

So, how do we overcome this? Our research is ongoing in this area, but it would appear that what is needed is a cultural change. Rather than standing up and telling teachers to embed technology into their classroom, we should be working harder to get teachers to embed technology into their everyday lives.

If a teacher learns to use a tablet while they sit on the couch at home, or read tweets on their smartphone on the way to work, they will then start to understand how the technology works. It will then become a part of their culture and they'll be more likely to want it in their classroom.

Until we can reverse this fear or technology, we can expect to see many more negative comments about children and technology, and how your smartphone is making you dumber. People tend to fear change, and there is a great fear of technology in our generational culture that needs to be conquered.

This story is published courtesy of The Conversation *(under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*

Source: The Conversation