Computers and Social Relationships

After reading the Clive Thompson article, “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy” please answer the following questions:

1) How do you use social networking sites such as Facebook? Is this similar to how people in the article use them?

2) How much time do you spend each day using such sites? If you were not able to get online one day, what would they do?

3) What are the author’s main arguments about social networking sites? Do you agree or disagree with those arguments? Provide supporting or contradictory evidence from your own use of social networking sites.

After watching “Disconnected”, please answer the following questions:

1) How did the three students use their computers to connect socially with people in their lives before they “Disconnected”?

2) What impact, if any, did being disconnected have on the social relationships of the students? How did being disconnected affect how they were able to communicate with their friends, families, and professors?

3) After being reconnected, what, if anything, did the students notice about their online modes of communication? Did they foresee any changes in how they used their computers to communicate with friends and family?

After the class discussion regarding the article and the film, please answer the following questions:

1) What kind of social relationships are online relationships? Is there a difference between having online friends whom you see on a daily basis (for example, most of your Facebook friends are your classmates) and having online friends you rarely see or never even met in person? Does being “Facebook friends” with someone mean that you “know” them?

2) Reflecting on the Carleton students, do you think their experiences of being “Disconnected” supports or challenges the article’s arguments? Did being disconnected lead them to be less or more self-aware and self-reflective, for example? Did being disconnected prevent them from learning about what was going on in their friends’ lives?

3) In the documentary, one of the students talks about how strange it feels to actually talk to a friend on the phone, rather than emailing or texting them. In the article, one person talks about how social networking sites might actually discourage you from talking to a person on the phone or visiting them in person. Do you think using emailing or texting as a main form of communication diminishes or enhances the quality of your friendships? Is emailing or texting someone the same as calling them or seeing them in person?
In his “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy” about social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, New York Times writer Clive Thompson makes two interesting and provocative arguments: 1) social networking sites help to create the dynamics of small town life where everybody knows everybody; and (2) these networks lead to increased self-awareness and self-reflection.

Instructions for Teachers

This is a high level lesson that requires students to do analytic thinking about both “Disconnected” and Clive Thompson’s article, “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy.” It would probably work best in a college-level Introduction to Media Studies course in which a discussion pedagogy is used frequently. Many readers of the Thompson article responded to the New York Times Magazine through an online blog.

Several of the blog responses were critical of Thompson’s logic. By requiring the additional reading of the blog responses, teachers can move into a discussion of careful and slipshod reasoning as it applies to New Media. Teachers could require, for example, students to bring their own examples of the “best reasoned” and “worst reasoned” blog responses to class. Discussion could be launched by having students read aloud their examples, or by posting their examples on an online course management system prior to the class.