Emotional Attachments: What Kinds of ‘Friends’ Are Our Computers?

1) Why does “your student” feel so anxious about unplugging his/her computer?

2) Before unplugging, what seems to be the primary use of the computer for your student?

3) How well does your student cope with the immediate boredom that sets in after unplugging?

4) What does your student learn about himself/herself from the experience of being disconnected?

5) Does your student seem to experience a sense of loneliness without their computer?

6) How would you describe the relationship between your student and his/her computer?

7) Is the experience of being disconnected primarily one of the annoyances of being inconvenienced? Or does “your student” lose something valuable about “who they are” by being unplugged?

8) What is the primary benefit “your student” gains by being disconnected?

9) What is the most important insight or recognition “your student” has about the role of computers in his/ her life by the end of the documentary?
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Instructions for Teachers:

“Disconnected” shows the very different experiences of three Carleton College students who unplug themselves from their computers for three weeks. This documentary raises many questions about identity, intimacy, friendship, and loneliness. Are computers in some sense “friends”—allies who do the work of helping us stay in touch both with our face-to-face friends and our online acquaintances? What kind of “friend among friends” are computers? What functions do they serve that our “real friends” do not and perhaps cannot serve?

Divide your students into 3 groups and assign them (or have them assign themselves) to focus their attentions and note taking on only one of the 3 students: Andrew, Caitlin, or Chel. Have each group follow “their” student through the 3 phases of the film: 1) “Anticipating Disconnection” 2) “Being Disconnected” and 3) “Being re-connected.”

This lesson is intended to explore the emotional connections that exist between ourselves and computers.

Prior to Viewing, you can probe this theme of emotional attachments to computers in order to learn students’ initial reactions.

You can ask for example:

Have you ever been mad at a computer? Do you feel “edgy” if you are cut off from computer access for more than a few hours? Ever felt betrayed by it? Would you say you are lonely without it? Does computing play a particular role in your emotional life—escape from boredom? Mastery? Does it fill a void? Create a sense of expectation? Act to create a sense of intimacy? Ward off loneliness? Do you have a different emotional attachment with a computer you “own” than one you have access to, or a “public” computer?

After Viewing, ask your three groups of students to discuss the questions on the “Emotional Attachments” handout within their groups. Ask them to report back to you and the entire class which questions they reached consensus—and why. And which they disagreed about—and why.

Essay: If you want to extend these discussions with a writing assignment, your prompt might be the following: “What kind of “friend among friends” are computers? What functions do they serve that our “real friends” do not and perhaps cannot serve?”