I observed three people reading, each with reasonable variation. I was able to observe all three individuals in the lounge area located to the side of the Campus Recreation Center breezeway. Considering the location, there was a lot of environmental stimulation. People were walking in and out, exercise equipment and the people on it created a background din, vending machines located in the lounge area create thru traffic, music is playing in the background, and there is an almost total lack of privacy. All three individuals were 20-21 years of age.

The first individual was a female of Asian descent (I can’t confidently determine exact ethnicity) and was situated at the counter facing the climbing wall. She was reading from a laptop. I was not close enough to see what was on the screen, but she had multiple windows open and kept going between them. I wondered if this, as Merkoski mentioned numerous times in his book, was a case of technological distraction, or if it served to expedite whatever she was working on completing. Based on her posture, however, I do not think she was all that intent on her work. She was often slouched and distractedly eating an apple, almost giving an appearance of laziness. Her back was to me, but it looked like she looked up several times to observe the climbing wall.

The second person was also female. She was reading from a laptop, but was facing me so I could not see what was on her screen. Based on the intense, and sometimes befuddled, expression on her face, I would hazard a guess that she was reading for one class or another and not for personal pleasure. Her posture was also intense. She was hunched over, her chin resting on her hand. Despite all of the distractions, her eyes never once left the laptop screen that I was able to observe.

The third person was a male. He was reading a newspaper, but not very intently. He flipped lightly through it, and glanced up frequently. Earbuds were in his ears, and every so often I could hear his own music over the music already playing. His legs and feet were constantly moving, and I imagine that he was tapping out the beat of the music he was listening to. After about half an hour, he folded up the newspaper and left.

I was actually very surprised to see so many people in the lounge area reading. As I stated, it is rife with distractions. It is not a place I, personally, would select for any kind of serious reading or studying. However, the readiness of people to read in such an environment got me thinking. Perhaps our society has become too accustomed to being constantly connected and stimulated. Even the girl that never looked up from her screen had to be at least distantly aware of everything going on around her.

With the rise of social networking sites, I think we have become accustomed to superficial, but constant and varying, stimulation. It is possible to have hundreds or thousands of “friends” that you never even meet. You can, with the advent of cellular and table technology, check your Facebook, Twitter, email, and text messages on one device using only one hand. It is no longer necessary to commit yourself to something for an extended period of time, either for self-entertainment or other goals. We can flip between things at dizzying speed.

On the surface, this connection seems beneficial. In some ways, it is. We now have access to treasure troves of information that we wouldn’t have been able to access as recently as a decade or two ago. We have the power to educate ourselves and reach out to others. However, the easy access to information does not equate knowledge. If we seek only a superficial knowledge or connection to a topic or person, we have no emotional or lasting attachment involved. By seeming to connect more broadly, we tend to segregate ourselves from others. Culturally and socially, this has become acceptable. In his last chapter, Merkoski discusses possible technological futures for humans, hooked up to computers and existing only as avatars. Perhaps this kind of interaction, withdrawing from deep, meaningful contact and understanding, is the first step in that direction.