



# Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn

*Cathy N. Davidson*

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**A digital innovator shows how we can thrive in the new technological age.**

When Cathy Davidson and Duke University gave free iPods to the freshman class in 2003, critics said they were wasting their money. Yet when students in practically every discipline invented academic uses for their music players, suddenly the idea could be seen in a new light-as an innovative way to turn learning on its head.

This radical experiment is at the heart of Davidson's inspiring new book. Using cutting-edge research on the brain, she shows how "attention blindness" has produced one of our society's greatest challenges: while we've all acknowledged the great changes of the digital age, most of us still toil in schools and workplaces designed for the last century. Davidson introduces us to visionaries whose groundbreaking ideas-from schools with curriculums built around video games to companies that train workers using virtual environments-will open the doors to new ways of working and learning. A lively hybrid of Thomas Friedman and Norman Doidge, *Now You See It* is a refreshingly optimistic argument for a bold embrace of our connected, collaborative future.

## Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn Details

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Author : Cathy N. Davidson

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## **From Reader Review Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn for online ebook**

### **Laurie says**

This is a very interesting book, but I feel the title is a little misleading. It's not so much that brain science will transform how we do things; it's more that technology will. In a world where the boundaries between work and personal life have been broken down by constant email, texts, and cell phones; where classrooms have been infiltrated by iPods and homework over the internet; where people all over the world are working to produce the largest, constantly changing, encyclopedia; and where many jobs require skill sets that didn't even exist 25 years ago, the way people are educated has to change. That seemed to me to be the main thrust of the book.

This is not the first time that technology has changed the way people learned and thought. The steam powered press and machine made ink and paper put books and magazines into the hands of the middle class for the first time. Everyday people could learn things that they had no direct physical contact with. This was a revolution in education.

The education system we use today was designed near the start of the machine age, an age of factories that created identical things, and wanted workers who behaved in identical ways. That's not the way the world works today. In a lot of jobs, people need the ability to create, not do the same task over and over again- although these are higher paying jobs for the college educated, not the McJobs that so many of us are stuck in; the author is dealing with 'thinking' jobs in this book, not service jobs. Davidson believes that the schools must change to make education fun and interesting for the students; children usually feel that 'learning' is unpleasant when asked about it, but will happily learn from a video game, and in fact deny that they were learning from it. The author also feels that many of the children diagnosed with ADHD are simply not being taught things that interest them, and are far from hopeless in the classroom- provided the classroom changes to meet their needs. She's not denying the need for learning basic skills- reading, writing, math- but feels these things need to be taught differently. Sadly, in an era where funding for schools is being cut back, I don't see that these changes will take place in the near future.

She also points out that our beliefs changes how we perceive things; the student that we feel has ADHD and should be medicated if we see them in a reading class we might think was a genius if we see them first in an art class; memory lapses are ignored when young people make them but are seen as signs of dementia when someone over 45 has them. We need to become more aware of our preset beliefs to see things as they really are.

I think it's a valuable book for educators and business managers, but a lot of changes- expensive ones in some cases- will have to be made for her ideas to be made real. I think that will be very slow in coming.

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### **Amy Garnica says**

Wow! Changed the way I think about schools and work.

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## Jonathan Cassie says

What a fascinating piece of work. I've long been a big fan of Cathy Davidson's writing and work. Her memoir of her time in Japan - "36 Views of Mount Fuji," is one of my favorite examples of the genre, period.

In this book, she does an exemplary job of unpacking the anxiety felt by many people about the changes being wrought in society by the Internet revolution. She analyzes 20th century practices, modes of organization, thinking, educating and thinking and demonstrates why these modes do not hold up in the information age we now live in.

A couple of quotes to illustrate her thinking:

"Keep in mind that we had over a hundred years to perfect our institutions and work for the industrial age. The chief purpose of those organizations was to make the divisions of labor central to industrialization seems natural to twentieth-century workers. We had to be trained to inhabit the twentieth century comfortably and productively. Everything about school and work in the twentieth century was designed to create and reinforce separate subjects, separate cultures, separate grades, separate functions, separate spaces for personal life, work, private life, and all other functions. And then the Internet came along." (13)

"School has been organized to prepare us for work, dividing one age group from another, one subject from another, with grades demarcating who is and who isn't academically gifted, and with hierarchies of what knowledge is or is not important. Intellectual work, in general, is divided up too, with facts separated from interpretation, logic from imagination, rationality from creativity and knowledge from entertainment. In the end, there are no clear boundaries separating any of these things from the other, but we've arranged our institutions to make it all seem as discrete, fixed and hierarchical as possible." (279)

Davidson is a smart visionary able to synthesize across scientific, literary and social disciplines. My only caveat on the book is that if you are reasonably well read on the literature of 21st century change, the first chapter is going to feel like a review of the literature. But don't worry, things get good in chapter 2!

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## Paras Allana says

2.5 stars

Like the gorilla experiment, it feels that the writer too had a blind spot. She was concentrating so much to write this book and make her point that she skipped over how boring and repetitive she is being. Her writing style is chatty and it makes you go on reading. This would be a book that would appeal to a layman and would also be readable but I am not sure the whole book is worth the time and attention it requires. Lucky for me, I divided my attention and listened it to the audiobook.

This book starts out strong and it feels like there will be interesting things ahead but then there is a lot of stuff that she could have trimmed off and wrote an article rather than a whole book. There was something better towards end and snippets of interesting things in between but overall, an okay book. I don't think one may be missing out much if they decide not to read it.

## Trevor says

Although it probably doesn't really seem like it at first glance, this book is really about cognitive dissonance. It is about the many ways that we find to ignore the fact that we are mostly blind and mostly only see what we want to see. I absolutely know this is true of me, for instance – and that it is perhaps getting truer as I get older. I can read these books, but I'm not sure they help me see my own blind spots. Although these books do make me feel like an expert in everyone else's blind spots.

I suppose one of my blind spots is that I increasingly expect most people to be selfish, nasty and utterly lacking in compassion. The Australian Coalition talk of 'families' while cutting nurses from our hospitals, American Republicans are photographed with beaming smiles and money sticking out of every orifice and British Conservatives assure us we can have growth through austerity, despite all evidence to the contrary. But as long as these cuts and thrusts and back-of-the-hand gangster slaps are directed at others, their supporters can talk or 'compassionate conservatism' or 'Big Society' or 'ditch the bitch' without ever a blush.

We see what we want to see. And if there is a lesson to the moon dancing bear it is probably that we are happy to keep on seeing what we want to see. In fact, we become a little annoyed at our having counted the basketball passes all the way up to seventeen and then not receive proper recognition for our efforts...

We are as defined by our blind spots and the half-truths (and worse) we tell of ourselves, by our shadows that always remain infinitely dark, as we are defined by the dazzling, rose-tinted light we shine on our good deeds and our fine sounding opinions. The light is the shadow; the shadow, the light.

To be honest, I thought this book was simply too chatty to be of much use. I found my mind wandering and myself wondering why quite so much fluff was needed. It was almost as if the author thought that we would find her message so terribly challenging (essentially, that we are deluded and need to find ways to trip ourselves up, so as to be able look again, to perhaps be able to see) that she needed to wrap this message in endless balls of cottonwool.

There are good bits – mainly her attack on *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* – her assertion that rather than multitasking being bad for us, it is in fact our standard human response, due to the fact that our brains are not good at doing boring. This leads to her attack on Fordism and Taylorism for exactly the same reason.

The problem I see with all of this – besides the fact that it is really a bit like *The Lonely Crowd*, Revised edition: *A Study of the Changing American Character*, that is, a manifesto for a very small portion of humanity, maybe only the top 5% of the top half billion people on the planet – is that the idea of the future of work being for the symbolic manipulators probably isn't quite as universally true as is often maintained.

Her notion of the future of work as being people working from home in a sequence of short-term, project-centred activities sounds wonderful – although I struggle to see how these people are going to be adequately reimbursed for their labour and thereby be able to afford to buy a house or food or those sorts of crazy things – but then, who needs the necessities of life when there are so many luxuries and all so close to hand. This makes her complaints about 80 hour working weeks and our need to rethink our priorities all ring a little hollow.

Look, her heart is in the right place – it is just that I didn't think she quite saw some of the moon dancing

bears our world is so full of at the moment. A bit like wondering why guys holding guns at Tea Party demonstrations don't get pepper sprayed and bashed by police. Just maybe it is because even if these morons were carrying bazookas they would still never be a threat to the system – whereas young people aggressively sitting on the ground, linking arms, humming Radiohead's No Surprises and sleeping out in parks clearly are. There was a time when those in power thought it necessary to buy off the people of the first world – they clearly don't feel that is necessary any longer. But we all go on dutifully counting the basketball passes.

I'm not sure if I would recommend this book. There are some very interesting and even important ideas here, but they are buried in so much guff and fluff and padding that if you do plan on reading it I can only recommend you bring a shovel.

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### **Mark Changizi says**

...In general, I'm receptive to knock-down-the-pillars theses, but Ms. Davidson's book is ultimately a disappointment, mostly because of the way it treats "the science"—in particular, my own specialty, brain science. Ms. Davidson writes as if the human mind's functions are almost totally elastic. "Learning happens in everything we do," she writes. "Very little comes by 'instinct.' " In fact, instincts are often part of what help us to learn—the classic example being fear of things like snakes and spiders, which has to be triggered by experience but is remembered more easily than other fears.

Yet the trouble really begins with the title, "Now You See It," which refers to the "gorilla" experiments of Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris that demonstrated what they have called "inattention blindness." In the experiments, subjects were asked to watch a video of basketball players and to count the number of times they passed the ball; many failed to notice as a man in a gorilla costume wandered through the frame....

See my full Wall Street Journal review here... <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001...>

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### **Z says**

Perhaps the most engaging book on neuroscience I have read, with the most practical recommendations for our educational system, our workplaces, and our lives. Davidson does a fantastic job of highlighting the contrast between our technological abilities and our ways of doing things, thinking about things, and educating our children. Highly, highly, highly recommended.

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### **Cathy Griffith says**

A must read for teachers, bosses, people who whine about "these kids today and their dang smart phones", and anyone ever diagnosed with ADD.

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### **Grace says**

Have you ever wondered how we are preparing ourselves and our children to survive and thrive in the digital

age? Have you wondered why elementary and high schools haven't changed all that much since you attended them? Have you wondered why the only signs of the digital age in your workplace are the computers in each cubicle? If you answered yes to any or all of these questions, Cathy N. Davidson's *Now You See It: How The Brain Science of Attention Will Transform The Way We Live, Work, and Learn* is the book for you.

Cathy N. Davidson has an impressive resume. Most notably, she was instrumental in the creation of the Program in Information Science and Information Studies and the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at Duke University. She also holds two distinguished chairs in English and Interdisciplinary Studies at the same university. (Information taken from the author biography on the back jacket flap of the book.) Her world travels, keen insights, passion for learning, and inquisitive nature make her an engaging narrator as she details where we are in the digital age and where we could be if we understood and utilized the brain science of attention at home, work, and school.

"By one estimate, 65 percent of children entering grade school this year will end up working in careers that haven't even been invented yet." (p. 18)

Damn. Let's think about this. For every ten kids, at least six of them will have a job that doesn't exist today. The digital age is breaking down the hierarchies and creating a global marketplace of goods and ideas. These developments are creating new careers. What are we doing to prepare children for these new careers? We administer standardized tests. Personally, I understand the practical uses of standardized tests; however, I do not believe that they should be the end all and be all of education. A standardized test should not make or break a student, a teacher, or even a whole school. Teachers teach to the test. Students memorize to pass the test. What about teaching critical thinking skills or oral and written communication skills? Why are we not taking the time to engage students in the topics that interest them or to make a not so interesting lesson interesting through creative, hands-on methods?

Davidson details several instances where children are learning in unconventional classrooms. For example, Quest 2 Learn (Q2L) in Manhattan utilizes video games to educate middle school students. According to Davidson, "The game-based learning makes for a constant challenge, one calibrated to the individual child's learning abilities and progress, each level becoming more challenging after the previous one has been mastered, with constant disruption and shifts, not from topic to topic but with all forms of knowledge integrated into the ultimate test: a boss-level challenge." (p.90) I don't know about you, but I would have preferred a middle school like Q2L than the middle school I attended.

"...the contemporary worker switches tasks an average of once every three minutes. Often that change isn't just a matter of moving from one job to another but requires a shift in context or collaborators, sometimes communicating with workers around the globe with different cultural values and who do not speak English as a first language. Perhaps not surprisingly, once interrupted, the workers she's (Gloria Mark) studying take nearly 25 minutes to return to their original task." (p. 170 - 171)

This makes sense to me. Between emails, phone calls, faxes, coworkers, and bosses, workers are constantly switching gears from one task to another, dropping one task to work on another because it's deemed a higher priority. How can we handle all of the attention grabbing stimuli that are a part of the digital age workplace when most workplaces haven't escaped the early 1990s?

Meet Aza Raskin, the 27 year old creative lead for Firefox, the second most popular web browser. (I use it!) Firefox is an example of a digital age project. It's "an open-source, crowdsourced, collaboratively developed browser." (p. 175/links are to wikipedia) It's also free. Raskin is working to modify Firefox's browser to keep up with the expanding needs of its users. Right now, he is focused on making tabs more efficient. This is wonderful news for me because I have more tabs than my screen can show.

brain's innate attention resources can improve our schools, work places, and lives in general.

Her narrative and tone are fun and conversational. She doesn't bog readers down with boring examples or scientific data that's undecipherable to the average reader. The pacing is quick, very similar to keeping with the changes in attention every few minutes. Overall, I enjoyed this book. It gave me a lot of think about and a few quips to add into conversation like:

Did you know that over 50 percent of internet porn consumption happens on company time? (p. 14)

The first speeding ticket was issued to Hollywood director Harry Myers for traveling 12 mph through Dayton, Ohio in 1904. (p. 16)

Americans speak about 165 words per minute. New Yorkers speak closer to 200. (p.27)

The average age of a World of Warcraft player is 32 as of 2010. (p.146)

This review originally appeared on Feeding My Book Addiction: <http://feedingmybookaddiction.blogspot...>

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## **Paul Signorelli says**

Cathy Davidson is an engaging, thoughtful, and thought-provoking writer; she also is a justifiably admired educator (former vice provost for interdisciplinary studies at Duke University) who clearly puts her attention on the learners she serves. And she has plenty to teach all trainer-teacher-learners about what we're doing right as well as what we're failing miserably to achieve. Her goal, she tells us right up front in "Now You See It," is to provide "a positive, practical, and even hopeful story about attention in our digital age" by exposing us to "research in brain science, education, and workplace psychology to find the best ways to learn and change in challenging times" (p. 6). And she delivers. Convincingly. Starting with a summary of an experiment that shows how much we miss around us by focusing too closely on certain details because we have learned to block out the overwhelming amount of stimulation that routinely comes our way, Davidson suggests that our learning process needs to include at least three steps: learning, unlearning, and relearning--and the sort of collaboration that allows us to rely on others to help us see what we otherwise would miss. We travel with Davidson through studies of how gaming can effectively be used in learning. How engaging learners in the learning process by making them partners recreates the learning experience to produce tremendously positive results. And there are also wonderful stories illustrating the difference in attitudes between young learners in a failing magnet school and those in a demographically similar school that "exemplifies the best in public education" (p. 97). Those of us who take the time to read--and reread--what she offers in "Now You See It," giving it the attention it deserves, may be able to help others past those feelings of loss and deficit and failure. And help ourselves as well.

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## **Laura says**

At first I was in love with this book... but then the scope expanded to be so broad that it was hard to follow. Still, a lot of interesting case studies and points made.

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## Sally Anne says

Highly recommended. Although I felt it was unfocused in many ways, what did I expect from a book about multi-tasking, the internet, and neuroscience. Very interesting and rather inspirational, for those who are not too old and cynical to be inspired.

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## Marleah says

It was very interesting reading this book shortly after reading *Quiet* by Susan Cain. Davidson thinks about multitasking in a very positive way, even stating that humans are meant to multitask. Cain has a different perspective and is less positive about multitasking. All in all - I think this goes to prove one of Davidson's main points: it takes all kinds of us and all of our own specific skills to address the whole picture. She begins the book by discussing the "modern classic" experiment in which a video of people passing a basketball is shown and participants are asked to count the number of passes. Few people notice the person in a gorilla suit who comes onto the court. Davidson claims that some folks are great at counting the passes, and some people are great at noticing the gorilla - and this is something that we have to recognize in all aspects of life.

Davidson goes on to talk about various facets of attention and how we are affected by our own abilities to attend. Much of the research and experiences that she discusses are fascinating, but I still have some doubts that the majority of people do better with open floor plans in offices and with multitasking.

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## Erhardt Graeff says

Cathy Davidson combines a lot of contemporary research into education, digital media, and neuroscience into a book that reads easily and cohesively like a Malcolm Gladwell volume. She is more careful about her argument though, and discusses its limitations while remaining substantive and optimistic about what can be accomplished through better understanding of how we learn, and need to learn, in order to succeed in this day in age.

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## Amy says

I started this book with high hopes. Most of the books I've read recently have had sections about evolving into the new digital era. This book came highly recommended to me after I posted about project-based education on Google+.

I love the premise of this book: we all have blind spots, and an ability to work together with others and shrug off the industrial model of school and work will help us all become brighter and better at life. The digital revolution requires a shift in how we manage education and our work lives. Yes!

However, there were some problems. First of all, there were some distracting continuity errors. In one section, the author is talking about her mother-in-law, and says she was a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. A few paragraphs (but no apparent changes) later, it's a three-room schoolhouse. At one point, she's teaching third and fourth graders who have a competition with fifth graders. On the next page, when summarizing that story, they're suddenly fourth and fifth graders in competition with sixth graders. Sometimes I wasn't sure

whether the stories were mere anecdote or whether she just really needed an editor to help her see the gorillas in her stories.

This book is also twice as long as it could be. For a book about attention and the types of things that grab it, the author certainly doesn't take her own advice. However, she seems like a passionate person who really loves the transition to the new, modern era, and I honestly wish I could spend a weekend talking with her about it, especially about the things she thinks we can do to change education.

This would be a solid 4-star book for the ideas, but the wordy, confusing writing and the industrial era way of establishing authority using pages and pages to introduce people's names and job titles and experiences distracted from the main points of the text.

And the "brain science" was mostly psychology and behavioral sciences, not actual neuroscience, so that was disappointing, too. 3 stars. I recommend reading the first section to get a gist of the ideas and then skimming the rest.

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