Digital copy-and-paste culture

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By the time of the summer holidays, every year again my wife gets carried away into the camping adventure. Weeks in advance, we visit camping shops and all available websites are carefully scanned for new ‘necessities’ to make primitive summer life as pleasant as possible. My wife commented that the accessibility of the sites this year is completely different from previous years. For each category - sleeping bags, camping items, tents - a separate ‘specialist’ has come to life, whose help can be called directly for questions about items of his/her speciality.

Meanwhile, my wife has built up a nice bond with Ellen, the tent specialist. The tent we finally ordered arrives at home and we try it out in our living room. When we remove the so-called pop-up tent from the bag, it expands automatically. In only a few seconds the tent’s set up! However, despite both our PhD’s, we find it very hard to fold up the 2-seconds tent again. I suggest calling Ellen, but the site guides us to a YouTube video. After watching and discussing 5 times a 5-second passage of the 5-minute video, we succeed, hurray!

While we are standing there with the tent under tension - when we release it, it will pop up again - my thoughts wander. Frankly, from the music store sites I already knew this approach with “specialists”. Roy from the guitar department, Rolf from the digital studio equipment department, etc. To serve the customer even better and also to bring back a personal touch. If you have purchased an item via the site, the “aftercare” also appears to have been completely renewed.

No instructional manual
You will receive no or an extremely short instruction manual. Instead, the supplier of, for example, a midi interface (or another smart technology device) provides a forum on its website where you can ask questions, and to which Rolf sometimes responds, or a colleague specialist from the same or a competing retail company. But most of the time customers all over the world guide you through the problems you’ll have with (new) devices. And why not, manuals were often hard to read, and writing a good manual is very expensive and requires real specialist work, but then in language and logical thinking.

That is precisely where my concern lies, that is what we are losing, overview and logical thinking. We have ended up in a digital "copy and paste" culture. It’s for good reason that we are talking about "apps" in the app store, about raps, beats and sounds in contemporary pop (house) music culture. Everyone can do something, and the rest we get from a box, or better, app, or plug-in. Maggi (makes everyone a kitchen star) seems to have gotten us under her spell, I make music, with a bit of me and the rest of Logic, Garageband or Cubase.

To see where it can lead, it is good to look at specialists from the first hour. Medical specialists. With a bit of a tricky problem you will have three around your bed. My research group conducted research on children with multiple severe disabilities, and sometimes counted more than 20 disciplines around the patient (admittedly, most not medical, but paramedical, nursing and caring, or psychosocial). And in the end clients, parents, patients or family members are on their own; often they experience a lack of control. Thank goodness there are also generalistic specialisms, for example the general practitioner, or specialist elderly medicine.

What are the consequences of this digital fragmentation for education? It is certain that many Ellens and Royals now have a good job where they can fully merge with their role as specialists who know a lot about a very small number of items. Maybe this offers opportunities for people who were otherwise on the side. I will come back to this in future because my wife roughy disrupts my train of thought. Now that we’ve folded up the tent, we have to find the bag. Where is it? I don’t know. Call Ellen?