

insights

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Human Connection Within A Technological Culture

As we return to life-as-usual after the flurry of the winter holidays, many of us will rely on shiny new smart phones or other screen devices as constant companions to ward off loneliness, boredom, and other unpleasant emotions. But, argues MIT professor and media researcher, Sherry Turkle, there is a human cost that accompanies the benefits of the technological wonders that have changed how we learn, work, think, and socialize.

Dr. Turkle has spent more than 30 years studying children's development within a technological culture. In her new book, *Reclaiming Conversation*, she argues that technology creates the illusion of togetherness while interfering with the benefits derived from live conversation. These benefits include the ability to read other people's feelings, and thereby develop empathy and mutual understanding. Face-to-face conversation, she proposes, is the cornerstone for empathy, and without it we lose practice in the "empathic arts" – eye contact, active listening, attending to others, and validation of their inner experience.

Being constantly "connected" draws us away from conversation, but also from the solitude that allows for both self-reflection and practice in tolerating emotions. "We are forever elsewhere," observes Dr. Turkle, and this disruption in being "present" (mindfulness) affects the ability to regulate both emotions and behavior, and thus the ability to learn.

In her book, Dr. Turkle documents the human cost of our reliance on technology by summarizing the findings of numerous research studies, as well as information gleaned from hundreds of interviews that she conducted over a period of 5 years. For example,

- One study showed that after 5 days at a summer camp that banned all technology, children showed an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their ability to identify the feelings of others.
- The dean of a middle school in upstate New York observed that "Students don't seem to be making friendships as before. They make acquaintances, but their connections seem superficial."

- Teachers routinely reported that even short periods of downtime make students uncomfortable, and that they have difficulty tolerating stillness or boredom.
- Research shows that social media users can experience decreases in inhibition concurrent with spikes in confidence that allow for decreased empathy and increased mean behavior that they might never engage in while face-to-face with another human being.

Dr. Turkle is not anti-technology, but rather, is pro-conversation. Conversations, she argues, are especially relevant in the classroom – more than subject content and answers, it's a discussion of what the answers mean that facilitates learning.

Teachers can promote conversation and counteract some of the downsides of technology by:

- establishing device-free segments of each class during which students actually talk to each other
- pairing students on in-class activities or projects
- creating occasional "downtime" in class to help students learn to tolerate stillness and boredom, and to develop patience
- encouraging parents to ban all devices (including their own!) at a meal time, or other prescribed segment of the day, to encourage face-to-face conversation. ■

Reference:

Turkle, Sherry, (2015). *Reclaiming Conversation, The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. New York, NY, Penguin Press.

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