Technology and the Erosion of Traditional Relationships:

Implications for the Classroom Teacher

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Abstract

With the increased inclusion of technology in virtually all facets of our lives, humans, both youth and adult populations alike, are being impacted by the rising rates in technology use. This essay will focus on the influence that technology is having upon school age children and the implications that these influences have for classroom teachers. I will argue that the use of technology by children's role models, as well as by children themselves has resulted in substantial changes in their social skills and the overall value that youth place on 'real life' relationships. These changes that are taking place in youth populations in turn impacts teachers, as educators are now dealing with an entirely new category of technology related issues including everything from cyberbullying and social media gossip, to students having too much screen time and an increasing desensitization to violence. The children of the past differ greatly from the children of today; teachers must now educate students to be digital citizens and informed technology users.

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Two strangers pass on the street. They exchange a nod of the head, perhaps a smile while maintaining eye contact. A family shares a meal out. The children laugh and chat while colouring on sheets provided by the restaurant. Meanwhile, the parents engage in a conversation about their day. Four teenage girls spend the afternoon at the mall shopping and catching up with each other in real life. These scenarios were all once common place occurrences. Are our ever increasingly technologically saturated lifestyles eroding the traditional face-to-face relationship? In this essay, I will propose that this is in fact what is happening in society today. I will argue that face-to-face relationships are being altered by technology use, resulting in major changes in the habits and skills of youth today that lead to new challenges for teachers in the classroom.

All that one has to do to see the way in which technology has permeated all facets of our lives today is to take a moment to observe virtually any social setting. If we look at the above described situations with a modern day lens, a vastly different set of events would likely unfold. The strangers passing by each other on the street would share no interaction with one another, however brief, as chances are, they would both be doing something on a handheld device while walking. It is not unusual today to see a family waiting for their meal in a restaurant and each person at the table is engaged not with each other, but with a piece of handheld technology instead. I recently witnessed a group of four girls at a local mall. They were clearly a group of friends out shopping. All four girls had mobile phones in their hands. They were all texting, shuffling along looking at their screens, not at each other and certainly not at their surroundings. To situations such as this Turkle would respond with the statement that 'in continual contact, we are alone together' (Turkle, 2011). Turkle proposes that computers have become our 'portal to being with each other' (Turkle, 2011). In this particular TEDtalk, Turkle goes on to describe the various ways in which people are using technology in settings where in the past, this would have

not been possible or would have been viewed as being unacceptable; at family dinners, while jogging, at a funeral, and while driving with 'kids in the backseat of the car.' She describes parents pushing their children on the swings with one hand while manipulating a device with the other. During the intimate act of reading a bed time story, parents divide themselves between the two tasks of carrying out a bedtime routine, while staying 'connected' by regularly checking their device at the same time (Turkle, 2011). Children look up to the adults in their lives. When technology is seen by young people as being such an integral part of life, they too place a very high value on the inclusion of it into their own lives.

Technology has given humans an incredible amount of control over when, where and how we connect. Mobile connectivity has provided people with the option to 'bail out of the physical real at any time,' (Turkle, 2011). Technology offers 'the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship,' (Turkle, 2011). Our relationships online are connections made to order based on the users wants or needs. Turkle (2011) calls this the Goldilocks effect, whereby through the use of technology, relationships are not too close, not too far, but are in fact just right. The dominant choice today is to text rather than talk. The ability to be alone for the purposes of something such as self-refection is no longer being cultivated in our youth and 'if we don't teach our children how to be alone, they will only know how to be lonely, (Turkle, 2011). People are in a hurry to connect and be connected with; we want or need that instant connection. Children in particular need to be taught patience, and that fast does not always mean better. Not only are children today being influenced by the adults in their lives, they are becoming technology users themselves to a higher degree than ever before as is illustrated in Figure 1 below.
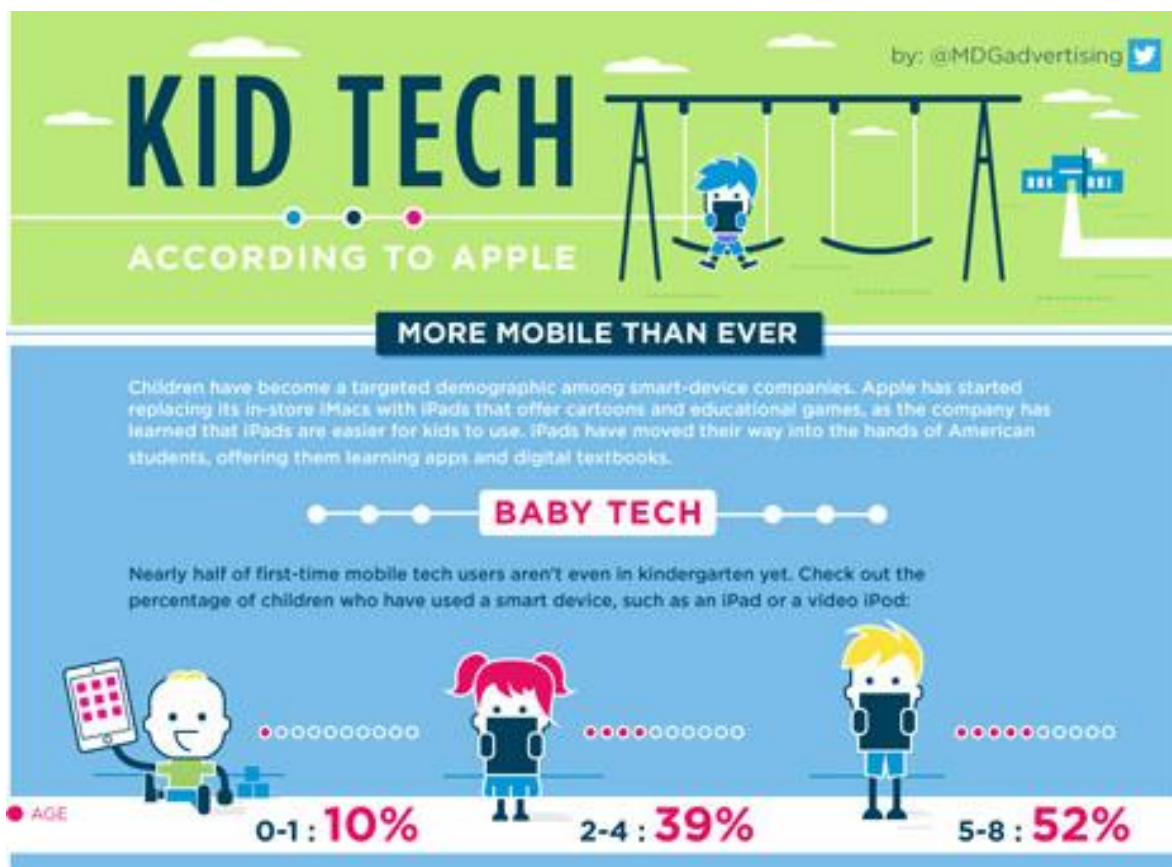
Figure 1 Kid Tech, According to Apple (this is a portion of a larger infographic)

The generation of children entering schools today are mainly coming out of homes in which they have already been exposed to a great deal of technology. To paraphrase some of Pitman's (2008) findings, even background television negatively impacts play behaviour and the attention span of young children. Time spent engaged with technology instead of sleeping due to 'the technological invasion of the bedroom,' (p. 5) has been linked to health concerns due to sleep deprivation. According to Pitman's results, an alarming figure that shows 'by the time children reach the age of 18 they will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence on television alone,' (p. 5). Pitman (2008) draws some conclusions that indicate that children exposed to media violence are developing some concerning tendencies such as becoming emotionally desensitized to violence, avoiding taking action on behalf of a victim in violent situations, as well as believing that violence is an acceptable means to solving a conflict. In my own experience, I have noted that children *are* arriving at school with these attitudes and

perspectives and they *are* behaving more aggressively. They have difficulties respecting school rules and in developing and maintaining healthy face-to-face friendships. Children are spending more time engaging with technology and less time playing outside, participating in physical activity and interacting with their friends and family and this 'time online interrupts real life relationships,' (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, p.660). I propose that all of these factors are resulting in students arriving at school with social skills that limit their ability to conform to school expectations and interact appropriately with others.

Increased technology use in youth is potentially setting them up for difficulties at school. There is a possibility that their real life relationships might pale in comparison to the much more controlled relationships they can engage in with cyberspace companions. Based on my work with children, I can conclude that they love to be listened to. Relationships in an online environment provide the 'fantasy of reciprocation' (Turkle, 2006); that being the perception that one is being listened to. This quality of cybercompanionship holds great appeal to adults and children alike. For educators then, the worry is how these children will deal with relationships in which they do not feel constantly listened to. I would argue that these are the children in classrooms that struggle to wait for it to be their turn to be called on and impatiently blurt out the answer anyway when another child is chosen. These are the children that cannot handle playing with others in groups and want ownership and control over their 'best' friend. These are the students that teachers need to educate about the reciprocal give and take of real life relationships. Turkle (2006) notes an eye opening moment for her when a group of youth, her daughter included, expressed their preference for a robotic turtle over the live ones present in a museum exhibit. The fact that the turtles were alive did not seem important to the young people questioned by Turkle. When the real version of something is less exciting and engaging than a controlled or

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programmed electronic version of the same thing, we may begin to prefer the robotic versions over the real ones. This is the appeal that relational artifacts hold for humans. These artifacts can be used to play a human or animal role and can act as a companion for people. Such robots may present as being more perfect than the real object; it might be more attentive, while giving the 'appearance of aliveness and yet not disappoint,' (Turkle, 2004). If robots and technology based friendships are seen as being closer to perfect, cybercompanions may eventually be the preferred choice by many over real life relationships. It is this promise of perfection that may further erode face-to-face relationships as more people nurture their digital companions online at the cost of their real life connections. Turkle (2006) touches on the skills that are lacking in these artificial relationships in the final paragraph of her article *A Nascent Robotics Culture: New Complicities for Companionship* when she states that intimate relationships with technology 'do not teach us what we need to know about empathy, ambivalence, and life in shades of grey.' The ability to feel empathy is a critical social skill. Students that lack empathy cannot place themselves in the shoes of another person in order to gain an understanding of how that person feels in any given situation. When children lack this skill, they often treat others badly as they are unable to predict how their own actions might make someone else feel. This too is a skill that teachers are now having to consciously teach to children.

Many young people today are preoccupied with their reputation, social status, and their importance among their peer group. The development of a virtual personae, a second-self online; a self that can be altered and presented in ways that are more 'perfect' than the real you is an incredibly powerful and seductive thing. Children make concessions all of the time to fit in and be a part of the popular crowd. Technology is now an outlet for many youth that formerly did not have the confidence to take such risks; it is both freeing and empowering. This could on the one

hand be viewed in a positive light. Young people with social anxiety or self-esteem issues are suddenly able to be a part of a social community in which they feel important and included. On the other hand, some youth see this as more than just an extension of their identity; instead they view their online self as their 'true' self. Online, the vulnerable can protect themselves by controlling their own involvement in communications, changing their true identity, role playing, or staying anonymous and lurking in the cyber background carefully choosing when or if to become involved. Such control in the real world however, is not possible. Users of online communication 'can be, quite literally, whoever they wish,' (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, p. 668) and people spend a great deal of time constructing the 'self' that they present to the world via the internet. Some people, particularly people categorized as being 'lonely' express that they feel 'more themselves online than off,' (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, p. 663). Young technology users can actually become more vulnerable as they may take greater risks, thinking all the while that they are 'safe' or anonymous in their virtual communities. According to Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury and Schneider (2012) 'the anonymity afforded by computer-mediated means of communication facilitates intimate self-disclosure among users, with reduced risk of rejection or ridicule' (p. 35). I argue that this would be a negative attitude for youth to adopt. As is evidenced by the existence of cyberbullying and the increased number of underage youth using social media, taking risks in cyberspace is no less risky than taking those same risks in real life. Digital data can be manipulated and sent out across cyberspace in a mind-blowingly short amount of time. Innocent communications can be misinterpreted by others due to the 'reduction in the number of nonverbal and social-context cues that can be transmitted via electronic communication,' (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury and Schneider, 2012, p. 37) resulting in more conflicts between 'friends.' Children who feel more at ease in virtual

environments can quickly become targets. Although these instances of cyberbullying and rapidly

spreading gossip often do not occur at school, the fall-out from such instances is very much felt

in the classroom setting and it is often the school that puts the pieces of the puzzle together,

contacts the families and works toward a resolution between the parties involved.

Friendship and all that this word encompasses has been the source of debate for many

years. A cyber friend or a real life friend that is also an online connection makes for a

relationship that is quite different from a face-to-face one. Due to the increase in the use of

technology in society, 'the age of the onset of Internet use is falling, as increasingly younger

children are becoming Internet savvy, (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury and Schneider, 2012, p.

38). Cyber social skills do not transfer over well into real life social settings. When involved in

online communications, users 'choose not only with whom to interact and when to communicate,

but also have time to compose messages,' (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, p. 662). In real life

dialogue people cannot pause to edit and rework what they are going to say. Real life

conversations are spontaneous and fluid in a way that text communication is not. Real

relationships are complicated and require work to maintain. Cyber relationships can be stopped

in seconds without the need to follow through with any sort of terminating conversation;

communication can simply end. Such endings are not realistic in face-to-face relationships. If

children get used to the ease of forming, changing and ending their relationships using

technology, it will be more challenging for those children to build and maintain healthy real life

relationships. Some studies have also indicated that 'people exhibit similar patterns of conflict

resolution within online relationships and face-to-face ones, (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury

and Schneider, 2012, p. 37). The worry for educators then is that students who choose to

terminate relationships online as soon as trouble surfaces will implement these same strategies,

or lack thereof, when faced with social situations in real life that require them to draw on their own conflict resolution skills. At some point youth may not want to be bothered with the work required for face-to-face companionship, pushing them further into the cyberworld and their second-self.

Educators are dealing with a unique generation of children. The children entering schools today have been brought up in a society in which technology plays a major role in the daily lives of much of the population. Young people are engaging less in physical activity, less in face-to-face conversations and more in activities that are categorized as 'screen' time that extends well beyond the television set. Much of what educators do is about helping students discover who they are or who they want to be as individuals. A new hurdle has presented itself to educators as they are now dealing with students who are actively engaging in duplicity in regard to their own identities. While educators are helping students become comfortable with who they are, some of these students are simultaneously heading out online and carefully representing themselves in ways that they are hoping comes across as being perfect. Many students are spending time working on their online relationships at the expense of their real life friendships. Conflicts that arise online permeate into the classroom causing teachers to become involved in events that took place outside of school. More and more, students are lacking the conflict resolution skills and empathy necessary to resolve friendship issues independently or effectively. Due to the screen exposure youth have to things such as violence, students are becoming desensitized to violence in the world around them, even going so far as to stand by and allow it to happen to others, or use it themselves to 'solve' a problem. Each and every one of these factors comes into play in classrooms today.

Conclusion: What must teachers do to meet the needs of these new learners?

   As Turkle (2011) states in her TEDtalk, the internet and the increased connectivity in our daily lives are not going away. If anything, as technology continues to advance it will likely play an even greater role in our lives in the future. Teachers therefore must prepare themselves for changes in their students. One can assume that students will be technology users. Educators can do a number of things to help youth cope with the advancement of technology in their lives. First of all, even from the earliest years in elementary school, educators need to be teaching children how to be literate digital citizens. Many curriculum documents now include outcomes that relate to digital citizenship and promote the appropriate use of technology both for educational purposes and for personal use. Educators cannot assume that students know how to incorporate technology into their lives in a healthy and balanced fashion. The second thing that we can do for the betterment of students is to educate parents about the pitfalls of connectivity and provide strategies for them to use to support their children in finding balance in their technology use. Since technology is here to stay, educators need to arm students with the tools that will make them cognizant of the opportunities and benefits, as well as the dangers and risks in using technology in their lives as a means of staying connected.

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