



Lucinda Wolters
A Book Review

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

As an educator who advocates for and teaches specific communication skills in schools, an examination of the impact of digital use, such as browsing the internet, using apps and playing video games, is of paramount interest. As we navigate on-going change in the informational era, address our potentially outdated modes of educational delivery, while coping with increased globalization and distressing environmental concerns, our ability to engage in heartfelt dialogue and discussion, is essential for our capacity to co-construct a preferred future. Specific conversational skills necessary for these conversations, which could be described as a communication technology, require ample, informal experiences, as well as intentional teaching and on-going practice, to become mastered. Moreover, I believe that children in particular need regular undistracted time, alone and with others, in order to develop the conscious emotional awareness necessary to handle and care for the significant changes in our world. With these areas of interest in mind, I chose to read and review Sherry Turkle's book.

It is vitally important that we foster relationships through conversation especially since, as Turkle says, "Face-to-face conversation is the most human – and humanizing – thing we do" (p. 3). As a sociologist and licensed clinical psychologist, she is justified as an expert on this topic, having studied the impact of technology for the past thirty years, bringing an informed perspective through her extensive research. Turkle's purpose is a call to action for full, vulnerable and empathic presence with others, the kind of conversation that social media inhibits (p. 17). She highlights that "we miss out on necessary conversations when we divide our attention" and pushes us to "put technology in its place and reclaim conversation" (p. 25). Although Turkle recognizes and embraces the importance of technology in our modern world, she does so with the caveat of continuing to respect the importance of fostering human interaction.

Currently, however, it appears adults tend to accept the normalized technology use habit with ease, lacking awareness of how this trend negatively rocks meaningful, caring relationships, based on authenticity, empathy and shared experience in the here and now. Carr (2011), who is gravely concerned about what technology is doing to us as well, shares his perspective that even those "wary of the Net's ever-expanding influence rarely allow their concerns to get in the way of their use and enjoyment of technology" (p.4). As a result, it is common to see adults and children alike, in most contexts, to be digitally connected – in areas such as the home, playgrounds, waiting room offices and work lunchrooms, for example. Places that may have previously included the buzz of conversation, now are eerily quiet.

Turkle dramatically uses the term ‘silent spring’, originally coined by Rachel Carson (1962), in reference to the assault of pesticides on the environment, as she draws parallels to the effect technology has on the human experience. Turkle harnesses our attention and creates an alarmist message with this association; as she firmly sees that excessive technology use has created a shift towards digital connection with others, and a flight away from face-to-face conversation. In fact, in connection to children, digital use “has jumped from half (52%) to three-quarters (75%) of all children in just two years” (Common Sense Media, 2013, p. 9) and predictably has increased since then as well. Moreover, when experts describe children’s technology use as “a ceaseless flow of seductive trivialities which invoke neither reflection nor choice but instant participation” (Sheahan, 1999, p.44), we need to realize we are not cultivating the thinking and feeling abilities that are necessary for today’s complexity. Therefore, Turkle’s message is an important one because conversational practice has been relegated to the backseat of our muted existence.

Garnering our collective attention on multiple arenas of digital use is necessary for us to truly detect how our emotional lives may be affected. Turkle helps us understand ubiquitous digital use and their contexts by thoughtfully organizing the bulk of her book on an inspirational quote by Henry David Thoreau from *Walden* (1854), that is, “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” More specifically, she begins by illuminating a foundational need for a relationship with self, in first chair conversations. Here she highlights solitude, as “a state of conscious retreat, a gathering of self,” for self-reflection, to assist us later for authenticity with others. Next, she examines second chair conversations, revealing our need for “full... unbroken attention” (p. 36) with family, friends and our romantic partners, without the distraction of technology hanging in the balance. Then, she examines third chair conversations acknowledging our need for talk in the social realm, in classrooms and offices, which she discovers have “striking commonalities,” (p. 48), necessary for collaborative, learning cultures. Each chair provides the opportunity to reflect on what’s at stake and restore the value of conversation in our lives. She effectively highlights how our thinking and feeling competence have been compromised by using the three chairs to emphasize their increasing emptiness.

Turkle provides further support with pertinent examples, such as the need for first chair conversations, at Holbrook Elementary, where troubled teachers share that students are lacking in empathy and reluctant to “sit quietly and concentrate.” The children resist digital disconnection while alone, which is critical “to find their identity” (p. 76), “to hear their thoughts” and open “space for self-reflection” (p. 78). She prudently weaves the importance of quiet time and deep reading, that “demands concentration on a sustained narrative thread with complex characters,” to an improvement in empathic capacity: “First one identifies with the characters in a complex novel and then the effect generalizes” (p. 69). Students need to be taught how to be alone, with sustained practice, that includes, when possible, building reading stamina, to develop into confident, thoughtful, caring individuals.

Children's ability to develop empathy because of excessive digital use requires our attention. Although Turkle does not provide specific research related to empathy to support the book's narrative, one need not look far for corroborating evidence. For instance, Gardner and Davis (2013) relay noteworthy, counterintuitive research regarding social isolation trends with digital overuse (p. 101). Although children are spending more time on social media, they are lonelier. Furthermore, they state that "Isolation is an individual-level problem, but one that can have larger social effects, straining empathy and diluting pro-social attitudes." These authors make an additional reference to a significant decline in empathy since 1980 (p. 110). Carr (2011) provides further confirmation, expressing that "the more distracted we become, the less able we are to experience the subtlest, most distinctively human forms of empathy, compassion and other emotions" (p.221). We must heed Turkle's point regarding a lack of empathy in schools, as "indeed, the absence of empathy is the trademark of the sociopath" (Gardner & Davis, p.111), not denoting the characteristics of caring, healthy individuals.

With consideration of Turkle's book and to counter the negative influences of too much time on digital media, educators need to advocate to families, clear safeguards, guidelines and time limits that are appropriately anti-technology for our children's sake. Surprisingly, Turkle does not describe herself as anti-technology, but as a "student of conversation" (p. 8), who is "pro-conversation" (p. 25). Not being against technology per se seems to dampen her bell-ringing somewhat. Perhaps this tact engenders the support of those who may be initially unwilling to consider the implications she raises. Yet, how can we afford not to recognize what's at stake and firmly advocate for being anti-technology, particularly in children's contexts?

Nevertheless, it is a relief that Turkle concludes her book with hopefulness, saying it is "our nick of time and our line to toe" due to our responsibility to address digital use vulnerabilities while acknowledging that "resilience has always been ours." With attentiveness, we need to resume conversations, of the vocal, "artless, risky and face to face" (p. 362) variety, while seated, and present, in all sorts of chairs – certainly necessary to engage our important lives with our whole hearts.

References

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