The Role of Interpersonal Communication in Technology Use

Critical Thinking by Alexandro Pacheco

Technology is everywhere. The way people communicate in the world has changed drastically over the last twenty years. Past trends are unrecognizable to the youngest generations currently being introduced to modern devices. Because connected technologies have practically taken over our lives, the term *off-grid* has become synonymous with turning off all of one's personal devices and, if not permanently, living without communication via those devices for any given time. While disconnecting from personal technologies may seem quite difficult to some, it should be taught as part of the responsibility we have towards our gadgets and society at large.

The way humans are interacting with others, and thinking amongst themselves, also continues to evolve. I believe there needs to be more responsibility in the use of our connected technologies to take better advantage of the devices currently at our disposal. It is imperative we learn to control constant connectivity and instead use devices sporadically; to enhance our own cognitive functions, interpersonal communications and deep thinking. In this paper, I will discuss how technology is used by students and teachers in education and by the media and individuals during recent election campaign cycles. I will show how changes in norms have overshadowed the importance of cognitive learning and deep thinking. I will conclude that the responsible use of connected technologies must include the renewal of interpersonal communication combined with deeply absorbed thought to promote a better-balanced use of our devices.

Web-Mediated Problem-Based Learning

Computer technologies in schools are challenging instructors to learn ways to best use new systems. Chia-Wen Tsa's 2015 book, *Emerging Issues in Smart Learning*, discusses how many educators have essentially played "catch up" with technologies as school systems have

attempted to evolve along with the growth of technology. Teaching with computers, online books and the reliance of the internet, can make the learning process easier. While this embraces technology and creates a modern approach to teaching methods, "one major disadvantage of online learning cited by students is their sense of isolation and loss of personal interaction with instructors and peers" (Tsa, 2011, p. 3).

Students are also being challenged to make sense of technologies in addition to the actual curriculum. "Online learning differs from didactic presentation, where the student has few opportunities to deviate from the teacher's presentation of the material" (Tsa, 2011, p. 5). Much of the onus on attention to details and immediate understanding of materials is placed on the student while away from the instructor. According to Bruce W. Hardy and Dietary A. Scheufele in their research paper, *Examining Differential Gains from Internet Use: Comparing the Moderated Role of Talk and Online Interactions* (2005), "personal contact can help individuals extract and utilize mobilizing information gained from mass media" (p. 4). This stresses the importance of interpersonal communication as the stepping stone to deep thought on any given topic. "In online learning environments, the physical absence of the instructor and the increased responsibility demanded of learners to effectively engage in learning tasks may present difficulties for learners, particularly those with low self-regulatory skills" (Tsa, 2011, p. 4). It is important to note here that not all students think and learn alike but online learning environments ask equally of all students. I matter their advanced, or remedial, capabilities.

Connectivity issues and lack of general training on the use of technologies can make it easy for a student to get discouraged or even give up during a dire moment by themselves. This is where one-on-one communication can truly make a difference. The most important focus to curtail these effects should come before the use of technology even begins, in the form of

application software education. Author Guang Chen, in *Emerging Issues in Smart Learning* (2015), speaks in detail of both the advantages and disadvantages of a blended learning environment for enhancing meaningful learning using 21st century skills. In his correlation study on the relationship between awareness in collaborative learning and academic performance, he concluded the need for "adapted e-assessment systems" (Chen, 2015, p.6) which essentially are created to ensure that students (and instructors) are well versed on how to use technology and the warnings of what to look for or avoid. Coupling this with the foundation that technologies are here to add to interpersonal communication, not replace it, can make the difference between success and falling astray.

Election Season Rhetoric

While the internet and the use of technologies can aid in research, the fact remains that one-on-one interpersonal communication remains the most effective way to discuss an issue. If we focus on research devoted to how citizens take in all the news surrounding an election cycle, some very significant perspectives begin to reveal themselves.

Shaufele's Differential Gains Model (2005) assumes that:

interpersonal communication among citizens contributes significantly to their ability or willingness to extract meaningful information from traditional news sources. Talking about politics helps individuals gain mobilizing information and increases their willingness to participate. (p. 11)

Because of the amount of rhetoric being tossed around by all sides during any given election cycle, it becomes imperative that citizens find forums to discuss ideas and sides, to dissect truth from fiction, and determine among themselves, which arguments, if any, are valid.

we talk about and what we see can sometimes be solely based on which television network we are watching. Things get a little tricky when interactions are further moderated by corporations with their own agendas. Further to this, the news being broadcast on those corporate channels is absolutely skewed towards the political side to which that corporation subscribes.

> Information available on the WWW has even more shortcomings than traditional media. It is reasonable to assume that these shortcomings are actually exacerbated because of the nonlinear nature of the medium. Individuals must actively search for mobilizing information and will attend only to information that they are searching for or information that is personally relevant. (Shaufele, 2005, p. 12)

While face-to-face interactions can help decipher between the misleading comparisons, rhetorical analogies and overused jargon by helping to push news cycles along, these days even news cycles scroll quicker than a Twitter feed. When partisan bickering gets ugly, citizens tend to retreat and instead find themselves losing the opportunities technology is supposed to provide. "Recent advances in technology coupled with increasingly rich environments of information should be expected to produce increased levels of participation" (Scheufele, 2005, p. 4). However, interpersonal communication is key to spreading a word and debating an idea. The more we get into our personal devices, the less we talk. Scheufele states, "debates in chat rooms consist mostly of normative statements that require little evidential backing, and thus political discussion in chat rooms provided or used little information" (p. 12).

The potential solutions remain the same as discussed above. Keeping citizens engaged in face-to-face encounters should remain top priority as political parties continue to test new ways to bring masses into their individual corners. Of course political parties have their agendas and the use of rhetoric has become the norm on both sides. Cutting through the fallacies is what

makes the need to imbue interpersonal discussion so critical. We are on a dangerous path, unless we make significant efforts to curtail constant use of technologies without stopping to discuss things amongst ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Technological connectivity in today's world is forcing individuals and professionals to take drastic measures to keep up, including the need to stay constantly connected. It has become increasingly evident that the negative effects include a significant decrease in interpersonal discussion. Computer-mediated interactions are causing us to think less for and amongst ourselves. Realizing the responsibility for using technology sporadically, as a tool and not as the sole way to communicate, can seem impossible these days. It is time to form a responsible culture regarding technological connectivity and interpersonal communication to grow as communities, as learners and as a forward-thinking society.

RESOURCES

Chen, G., Kumar, Vive, Kinshuk, Huang, Ronghuai, & Kong, Siu-Cheung. (2015). *Emerging issues in smart learning (Lecture notes in educational technology).* Heidelberg [Germany]; New York: Springer.

Hardy, B., & Scheufele, D. (2005). *Examining differential gains from internet use: Comparing the moderating role of talk and online interactions.* Journal of Communication, 55(1), 71-84.

Tsa, Chia-Wen. (2011). *How much can computers and internet help? A long-term study of web-mediated problem-based learning and self-regulated learning. (*Report). International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction, 7(1), 67-81.