

# **Social Studies Teaching and Learning**

**Volume 3, Issue 1**

**An open-source peer-reviewed journal of the**



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# A Government for Distracted People Isn't by Distracted People: Re-Examining Technology Use in Terms of Active Citizenship.

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## **Abstract**

In 2020 I got rid of my smartphone and social media to help me stay more connected to the world in front of me. However, I soon realized that there was more to learn about teaching, learning, and citizenship than I had expected. Therefore, in this paper I discuss my technology journey and put it in the context of teaching and learning social studies. I conclude by discussing the dangers of being distracted in terms of developing active citizenship in the students we teach.

**Keywords:** Digital minimalism; citizenship; civic duty; distractedness

*In my experience, most people who struggle with the online part of their lives are not weak willed or stupid. They're instead successful professionals, striving students, loving parents; they are organized and used to pursuing hard goals. Yet somehow the apps and sites beckoning from behind the phone and tablet screen—unique among many temptations they successfully resist daily—managed to succeed in metastasizing unhealthily far beyond their original roles. (Newport, 2019, p. 8)*

In 2020, as an educator I found myself digitally oversaturated due to the fact that essentially 100% of my job responsibilities had shifted from in person to online due to COVID-19. Due to this oversaturation, I made a well thought out decision to trade my smartphone for a flip phone and I also deleted all social media accounts. I wrote an article that documented these decisions and resulting experiences (see Mullins, 2020). I received many inquiries from people inside and outside of the field of education, about my experiences with minimalizing technology during a time when everyone was expected, if not required, to be online the majority of their waking hours. I have been asked numerous times, “What have you learned from doing this and have you stayed on the same trajectory since making this change almost two years ago?” Therefore, in this article, I am going to reflect on the past two years and connect my experiences with my role as a social studies teacher educator. I will also make connections to the role this journey has played in helping me to re-examine teaching for citizenship in light of technology use.

## Reflecting Back

In the first several months after getting rid of my smartphone, I admittedly thought I had made a bad decision. I did not have maps when I travelled, I did not have an ability to search questions I needed answered throughout the day, I could not lookup phone numbers of businesses, and texting with T9word was a headache. If not for stubbornness, I would have probably gotten my smartphone back and admitted defeat. However, after around five months, I had developed a new way of doing things. For example, I bought a cheap navigation device for long trips, I memorized locations and wrote directions for short trips, I stopped wanting my random questions answered, I memorized phone numbers of places I frequent, something I had not done in years, and I almost altogether quit texting, preferring instead to talk on the phone.

At this point, I realized that there were other areas of my life related to technology that probably needed revisited. For example, my email use was still very frequent. Most days, I would leave the email tab open all day, which similar to my smartphone, would inhibit me from deeply focusing on work that I needed to complete. After reading more literature on the benefits of focusing, such as *Deep Work* (2016) by Cal Newport, I realized that even though I had been able to effectively live without social media or a smartphone, my focus was still suffering. Therefore, I started setting rules for myself about email use. For example, I decided to only check my email three to four times a day, instead of leaving it in the background where it could interrupt my focus at any given moment. Also, I established parameters with my students by developing a policy where I will not respond to emails after 5:00 pm or on the weekend. This is different than being inaccessible and my students still found me accessible but respected those windows as times when they could not get in touch with me.

Additionally, even though I had given up my smartphone, I realized I still needed to set parameters around how I used my phone at home. So I invested in a cheap land line phone and started cutting my phone off in the evenings to fully focus on being present when I came home from work each day. I realize that some will read this and find it to be extreme. However, I would encourage the reader to ask instead, what was the result of all of these drastic measures? In terms of work, my professional work has flourished and resulted in more opportunities to publish and present than I had previous to getting rid of my smartphone and social media. In fact, at my current university I was asked to provide a series of talks on work/life balance in terms of a healthy approach to technology use. In terms of personal relationships, my relationships are more fruitful and rewarding than they ever were before when I had social media and a smartphone because it has forced me to authentically engage with others. For example, I cannot like a post of a new home someone buys, so if I want them to know I am happy for them, I either have to call them or send a letter to them, both of which are more meaningful than a simple click on a social media post. You still may be wondering, however, what does this have to do with teaching or teacher education? That is where I will turn my attention to next.

## Teaching and Learning

### *Issues of Poverty*

Every university I have worked at, has been in an area that has a large number of economically disadvantaged students. While I have made a choice to refrain from using certain technologies, I think it is easy to forget that some students do not have access to some technologies at all and do not have the fiscal ability to make such a decision to either refrain from certain technologies or to purchase certain technologies. COVID-19 magnified issues of poverty that many of our students experience, by expecting them to be online and have devices. As COVID-19 starts to transition into an endemic, perhaps we as educators need to step away from keeping all of our instructional materials online and start realizing that this is inhibiting, if not preventing, many of our students from succeeding. I know that most educators would be willing to make accommodations should a student struggle with issues of accessibility, but requiring students to approach educators and ask for those accommodations due to financial difficulties is what Gorski (2017) refers to as asking students to perform their poverty. In essence, the students have to admit to a superior that they are too poor to be able to purchase what they have been asked to purchase. Therefore, if at all possible, educators need to ensure that any technology access that is needed is provided to the students by the school and if it is not, then that assignment or expectation needs revised and reimagined so that students do not have to struggle with issues of access to complete homework/outside of class assignments.

### *Civic Engagement*

If we want students to develop the dispositions required for civic duty, this cannot be effectively accomplished in a distracted state. However, constant technology use has produced a type of constant distractedness that has become common place. As Newport (2019) notes:

No one, of course, signed up for this loss of control. They downloaded the apps and set up accounts for good reasons, only to discover, with grim irony, that these services were beginning to undermine the very values that made them appealing in the first place; they joined Facebook to stay in touch with friends across the country, and then ended up unable to maintain an uninterrupted conversation with the friend sitting across the table. (p. XIII)

Those uninterrupted conversations can be understood as democratic discourse, and without that occurring on a regular basis, we, as a society, are not engaging in conversations to a degree that we are learning from each other. When writing about the need of people with disabilities engaging in discourse, Mullins (2019) argued:

Consideration of participation in the societal discourse of individuals with disabilities must be recognized as essential to the inclusion of such individuals in the democratic

process and, for one to be included, he or she has to be able to explain to others, to the fullest extent possible, his or her needs, desires, and aspirations. (p. 8)

The same holds true for *all* people. If we as individuals are not able to sit down with others, uninterrupted and explain our desires and needs to each other, how can we really know how to be good citizens to one another?

So then, the question may arise, what are the solutions to such problems? It is not easy, but it is simple. The philosophy of digital minimalism provides insight to what a perceived solution could be. Newport (2019) notes, that digital minimalism is “A philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily miss out on everything else” (p. 28). The key is teaching students that technology is a tool that should be used to support values and learning, not a central focus of the classroom. As Dontre (2021) notes,

Given the general lack of consensus in the literature, it is reasonable to suggest that digital devices are not all bad or all good; they are merely tools that may benefit students or interfere with learning, depending on how they are used. (p. 380)

The idea here is that for learning, technology should be approached as a tool. That being said, sometimes tools prove to not be very effective. It is at that moment, that the tool should be scrapped, and another tool should be put into its place. If the old tool (technology) proves to be more effective, then the teacher should hold strong to the old tool and not replace it because the technology appears as a shiny new Christmas bauble (Hicks et al, 2020). A few digital minimalist guidelines one could implement in the classroom are:

1. For upper grades, have a specific spot for students to place cell phones in the classroom when they walk into the room. A shoe rack that hangs on the door works very well for this purpose.
2. Although many schools are moving everything to Google Classroom or other online formats, push against the norm and have times when students have to use paper and pencil and not be consumed with being online with every activity.
3. Focus on building discussion skills by implementing specific research supported strategies, such as Structured Academic Controversy (SAC, see <https://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21731>). This is especially important in a world where most students do not get these skills because they communicate almost entirely online.
4. Focus on project-based learning, where students create a tangible project at the end of a unit/lesson (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). The current norm is that students consume hours of digital material without ever being a producer of material themselves (Newport, 2016). Expecting the students to create something tangible can help upset this trend.

5. With every activity/instructional decision, educators should always question if the analog way of doing this activity works better or if it is only being conducted online/with technology to keep students' attention. If the answer is that it works better without technology, then push the technology aside for that particular activity.

The previous guidelines, although simple, can produce major changes in a world where students almost never have face to face discussions, create products, or engage with non-digital materials.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

It is interesting that the same people who create these new technologies for teachers and students do not want their own children learning while focused on technologies. For example, the Waldorf School in the Silicon Valley, that educates many tech moguls' students, states the following on their website in regards to how they use technology in the classroom:

Brain research tells us that media exposure can result in changes in the actual nerve network in the brain. This can affect such things as eye tracking (a necessary skill for successful reading), neurotransmitter levels, and how readily students receive the imaginative pictures that are foundational for learning. Media exposure can also negatively affect the health of children's peer interaction and play.

Waldorf educators believe it is far more important for students to interact with one another and their teachers, and work with real materials than to interface with electronic media or technology. By exploring the world of ideas, participating in the arts, music, movement and practical activities, children develop healthy, robust bodies, balanced and well-integrated brains, confidence in their real-world practical skills and strong executive-function capabilities.

In the high school curriculum, Waldorf embraces technology in ways that enhance the learning process, by using it as a tool, rather than replace the role of the teacher. Students quickly master technology, and many Waldorf graduates have gone on to successful careers in the computer industry. (Waldorf, 2022, Media and Technology Philosophy)

One can see that the same people producing the technology that most teachers use in their classroom also believe that students should not be using so much technology. As a matter of fact, down further in their philosophy they state, "Exposing children to computer technology before they are ready (around 7th grade) can hamper their ability to fully develop strong bodies, healthy habits of discipline and self-control, fluency with creative and artistic expression and flexible and agile minds" (Waldorf, 2022, WSP Media and Technology Philosophy). However, as teachers, most of us are forced to give our students those materials MUCH younger than seventh grade.



Elite schools such as the Waldorf School are focused on developing civic skills and discourse, but in the mainstream classroom this is not all that present. Therefore, we as a society are continuing to produce an aristocratic ruling class because those that are being prepared to lead this nation are developing these deep civic values, while other students are being educated by the technology, rather than by real people. As Shlain (2019) notes, “Schools in lower-income areas with poor teacher-student ratios will increasingly rely on tablets while better-off students get more human attention both in and out of the classroom, and inequalities will only grow” (p. 45). We are stuck in a cycle where teacher shortages and a lack of high-quality teaching materials are trying to be resolved by throwing more technology at teachers and students, which is perpetuating the problem, not solving the problem. Students need teachers, not more technology.

What started out as a journey in developing myself led to my eyes being open to the greater need of society in terms of discourse and civic development. We are, unknowingly, continuing to produce a distracted society while the bourgeoisie of society is continuing to produce a class of people to rule the distracted. As teachers, teacher educators, and citizens, we need to take a stand against this constant technology focused world. Some of the elite have already taken such a stand as evidenced in the Waldorf schools, but this is at best producing a top-down approach to citizenship. If our republic is supposed to be for the people and by the people, then the people have to engage with full focus. Parker (1996) argues, “it is not so much ‘we the people’ who govern in these fledgling democracies as it is power elites that govern” (p. 182). As Mullins (2019) similarly states,

Therefore, the argument that everyone has the potential to be a leader is an argument for the disruption of the status quo present in modern politics and in education, too, because it infers that government can and should not only be constructed for the people, but also by the people, which is in line with ideals stated in the founding documents of the United States of America but not yet actualized in the conduct of the American society. (p.11)

It is time to actualize what was written so many years ago. Everyone has the potential to be a leader, but it is time to refocus on being focused.

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