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Op-Ed “The Flight From Conversation”
By Sherry Turkle
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We live in a technological universe in which we are always communicating. And yet we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection.

At home, families sit together, texting and reading e-mail. At work executives text during board meetings. College students text (and shop and go on Facebook) during classes and when on dates. My students tell me about an important new skill: it involves maintaining eye contact with someone while you text someone else; it’s hard, but it can be done.

Over the past 15 years, I’ve studied technologies of mobile connection and talked to hundreds of people of all ages and circumstances about their plugged-in lives. I’ve learned that the little devices most of us carry around are so powerful that they change not only what we do, but also who we are.

We’ve become accustomed to a new way of being “alone together.” Technology-enabled, we are able to be with one another, and also elsewhere, connected to wherever we want to be. We want to customize our lives. We want to move in and out of where we are because the thing we value most is control over where we focus our attention. We have gotten used to the idea of being in a tribe of one, loyal to our own party.

… A 16-year-old boy who relies on texting for almost everything says almost wistfully, “Someday, someday, but certainly not now, I’d like to learn how to have a conversation.”

In today’s workplace, young people who have grown up fearing conversation show up on the job wearing earphones. Walking through a college library or the campus of a high-tech start-up, one sees the same thing: we are together, but each of us is in our own bubble, furiously connected to keyboards and tiny touch screens. …

In the silence of connection, people are comforted by being in touch with a lot of people — carefully kept at bay. We can’t get enough of one another if we can use technology to keep one another at distances we can control: not too close, not too far, just right. I think of it as a Goldilocks effect.

Texting and e-mail and posting let us present the self we want to be. This means we can edit. And if we wish to, we can delete. Or retouch: the voice, the flesh, the face, the body. Not too much, not too little — just right.

Human relationships are rich; they’re messy and demanding. We have learned the habit of cleaning them up with technology. And the move from conversation to connection is part of this. But it’s a process in which we shortchange ourselves. Worse, it seems that over time we stop caring, we forget that there is a difference.

We are tempted to think that our little “sips” of online connection add up to a big gulp of real conversation. But they don’t. E-mail, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, all of these have their places — in politics, commerce, romance and friendship. But no matter how valuable, they do not substitute for conversation. …
FACE-TO-FACE conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. When we communicate on our
digital devices, we learn different habits. As we ramp up the volume and velocity of online
connections, we start to expect faster answers. To get these, we ask one another simpler questions;
we dumb down our communications, even on the most important matters. …

And we use conversation with others to learn to converse with ourselves. So our flight from
conversation can mean diminished chances to learn skills of self-reflection. These days, social
media continually asks us what’s “on our mind,” but we have little motivation to say something
truly self-reflective. Self-reflection in conversation requires trust. It’s hard to do anything with
3,000 Facebook friends except connect.

During the years I have spent researching people and their relationships with technology, I have
often heard the sentiment “No one is listening to me.” I believe this feeling helps explain why it is
so appealing to have a Facebook page or a Twitter feed — each provides so many automatic
listeners. And it helps explain why — against all reason — so many of us are willing to talk to
machines that seem to care about us. …

We expect more from technology and less from one another and seem increasingly drawn to
technologies that provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of relationship.
Always-on/always-on-you devices provide three powerful fantasies: that we will always be heard;
that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; and that we never have to be alone. Indeed
our new devices have turned being alone into a problem that can be solved.

When people are alone, even for a few moments, they fidget and reach for a device. Here
connection works like a symptom, not a cure, and our constant, reflexive impulse to connect shapes
a new way of being.

Think of it as “I share, therefore I am.” We use technology to define ourselves by sharing our
thoughts and feelings as we’re having them. We used to think, “I have a feeling; I want to make a
call.” Now our impulse is, “I want to have a feeling; I need to send a text.”

So, in order to feel more, and to feel more like ourselves, we connect. But in our rush to connect,
we flee from solitude, our ability to be separate and gather ourselves. Lacking the capacity for
solitude, we turn to other people but don’t experience them as they are. It is as though we use them,
need them as spare parts to support our increasingly fragile selves.

We think constant connection will make us feel less lonely. The opposite is true. If we are unable to
be alone, we are far more likely to be lonely. If we don’t teach our children to be alone, they will
know only how to be lonely.

I am a partisan for conversation. To make room for it, I see some first, deliberate steps. At home,
we can create sacred spaces: the kitchen, the dining room. We can make our cars “device-free
zones.” We can demonstrate the value of conversation to our children. And we can do the same
thing at work. … Most of all, we need to remember — in between texts and e-mails and Facebook
posts — to listen to one another, even to the boring bits, because it is often in unedited moments,
moments in which we hesitate and stutter and go silent, that we reveal ourselves to one another.

I spend the summers at a cottage on Cape Cod, and for decades I walked the same dunes that
Thoreau once walked. Not too long ago, people walked with their heads up, looking at the water,
the sky, the sand and at one another, talking. Now they often walk with their heads down, typing.
Even when they are with friends, partners, children, everyone is on their own devices.

So I say, look up, look at one another, and let’s start the conversation.
As I hope you will have ample opportunities to engage in conversation with family members and friends this holiday break, please find an opportunity to share Professor Turkle’s concerns with them. What do they think about her position? Feel free to use the back of the worksheet, if needed.

**Op-Ed: The Flight from Conversation**

1. Do you think Professor Sherry Turkle is in favor of mobile communication? Use specific examples and quotes from the text to support your answer.

2. List what Prof. Turkle believes are the effects of mobile communication.

3. Why does Prof. Turkle claim that saying something ‘truly self-reflective’ online is a hard thing to do? Explain why you agree/disagree with that statement.

4. List below three examples of figurative language Prof. Turkle used in writing her op-ed. (Note the type of figurative language used and copy the words from the text for each example.)

5. Select and explain one of the italicized quotes from the article.

6. Do you and the family member(s) you shared this with agree or disagree with Prof. Turkle’s point of view? Please provide specific reasons to support your answers.