

The Public Intellectual as Agent-Egoist: Sherry Turkle’s Ethnography

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Few academics who become public intellectuals have the opportunity to use their research findings to influence and direct public opinion. Sherry Turkle is a public intellectual whose work as a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor of the social studies of science and technology is critically considered in this exploration of a single public presentation based on her 2015 book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*. Drawing deeply on subjective observations, Turkle performs public ethnography, using her knowledge and practice as a psychologist to create what she has called “computer psychotherapy.” This type of ethnographic practice operates within an agent-egoist model of performativity, which Turkle uses to establish her opposition to student use of laptops and social media in classrooms. Arguing in favor of and thereby privileging classroom conversation, Turkle misses the challenge of rendering creative pedagogical options for millennials in the context of their enriched, always-on digital lives. As a public intellectual, she fails to assist the public and educators explore collective and progressive options to technology within emerging forms of pedagogy.

Keywords: Sherry Turkle, public intellectual, public ethnography, agent-egoist, computer psychotherapy, MIT, pedagogy, millennials, social media

Questions Arising From a Public Performance

Sherry Turkle began her presentation to a couple of hundred Boston College faculty and staff at a university-sponsored event in May 2016 with a story about cursive writing. Recent research shows, she said, that cursive writing offers effective ways for the brain to operate, enhancing learning; ergo, handwriting is good for students—better, in fact, than laptop computers. And, she continued, cursive writing is superior for classroom note taking, while laptop or computer-based data entry by students is inferior. It sounded like an open-and-shut case. Speaking at the Excellence in Teaching Day, convened by the Center for Teaching Excellence, Turkle showed a deft rhetorical hand in winning over an audience to

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her critique of laptops and social media in the classroom. (The terms *laptops* and *social media* are used interchangeably in this essay). Her analysis of the limits of mediated communication through laptops in the classroom was prompted by her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* (Turkle, 2015). As such, the storytelling with which she opened her presentation incorporated a rhetorical strategy aimed at personalizing her experience as a teacher while drawing on her reputation for teaching and research about computerization and society.

Given the experiential empiricism used, Sherry Turkle offered a type of public performativity about her personal and professional life. Her lively presentation, together with a question-and-answer session, raised several questions: What can be learned from Sherry Turkle in her role as a public intellectual? How can the meaning of her public speaking style be understood given that it combines ethnographic "truth" with performativity? Does her work as a public intellectual cross into the field of celebrity academics? If so, what does this field say about researchers as public intellectuals? What kind of rhetorical games might she be playing given the challenges to classroom pedagogy brought about by laptops? Is she qualified to critique contemporary communication and media in the contemporary pedagogical landscape?

These questions emerged in a discussion where the focus was on the way students connect with and use online resources in the classroom (Broich, 2015). This article suggests that Turkle's performativity as a public intellectual and advocate for conversation in the classroom constrains the development of pedagogical strategies to assist the creation of much-needed critical and creative approaches. Such approaches would advance the lives of millennial students who are already deeply engaged with virtual communication.

It is important to note the context that prompted this critical assessment. It is grounded in just one appearance in which Turkle's publicness as an academic researcher conveyed the core argument of *Reclaiming Conversation*. In her public speaking engagements, Turkle's reputation and authority is derived from her accomplishments as a published academic with a lengthy history of media appearances and newspaper articles. She has presence in the United States and beyond and, as such, is a public intellectual (Desch, 2016), defined in its instrumental form here as someone who positions his or her research for circulation outside the confines of the university with the goal of prompting change (Goodson, 1999). This article is not, therefore, a review of Turkle's published research. Rather, it is an assessment of her statements and the way she delivered them at one event.

Much of Turkle's research has maintained a consistency over many years. Her appeal connects with public anxieties about the unknown impact of computers in education, especially their impact on young people. For example, her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (2011) highlighted what she believed was a loss of humanity owing to diminishing face-to-face contact. Turkle argued that the robotic impact of computerization could not enhance social and personal life; it could only deepen, then reinforce, its limitations. Against the increasing use and popularity of the Internet, Turkle channeled concerns about its impact, even though, as one reviewer suggested, "the teenagers she quotes complain about everything," adding, to contrast Turkle's claims, that the Internet's "effects on real-life relationships seem mostly positive, if minor" (Lehrer, 2011, para. 10). The appeal of

Turkle's work drew on what another critic characterized more generally as "alarmist, fear-mongering warnings about a loss of humanity" (Watson, 2016, para. 105).

Given this context, the approach applied here identifies the limitations to effective communication when offered from a single speaker's perspective, in contrast to a critical objective that includes "encouraging the exploration of alternative communication practices that allow greater democracy and more creative and productive cooperation among stakeholders through considering organizational governance and decision-making processes" (Deetz, 2005, p. 85).

The Ethnography of Classroom Technology

Turkle's publicness about her research as an academic has run in tandem with a rising sense of anxiety in higher education (Groff & Mouza, 2008) about how technology connects with, disrupts, and challenges classroom instruction (Leonard, 2014). Meanwhile, much of the hand-wringing about laptops and pedagogy is derived from social science research—most notably, anthropology's offspring, ethnography (Pallant, McIntyre, & Stephens, 2016). Turkle's criticism of current classroom dynamics reflects her experiences, observations, and values, which inform a style of ethnography that she merges with rhetorical skill in public presentations. In so doing, she offers what I call *public ethnography*—using storytelling to convince audiences of the accuracy of her conclusions, because they rely on a subjectivist perspective as well as a preexisting reputation. In her role as a public intellectual, Turkle has an enviable presence compared with academics who are engaged in detailed theoretical and critical work, who rarely connect with *any* public, even while they are deeply engaged teaching students and collaborating with colleagues. Her appearances on radio and television chat shows are further complemented by articles and op-eds in newspapers such as *The New York Times*, where she published an op-ed about her conversational research titled "Stop Googling, Let's Talk" on September 26, 2015. In so doing, she directs her experiences and anxieties into society, likely influencing public opinion about the way classroom teaching is impacted by technology. Given her profile, Turkle's public ethnography has influence; and yet, as the questions posed earlier in this article suggest, her work needs to be critiqued because it appeared at her Boston College presentation to be uncritically accepted by the audience as true, accurate, and definitive.

Few academics can match Turkle's public presence in the U.S. media. There are a couple of researchers who also navigate anxieties about digital media and whose work operates along similar ethnographic lines, making contributions as public intellectuals. They include danah boyd (*It's Complicated*, 2014) and Henry Jenkins (*Convergence Culture*, 2008) and *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (Jenkins, Mizuko, & Boyd, 2015). Meanwhile, Turkle's MIT "Interviews, Profiles, and Commentary" page lists 56 events in which she has publicly commented on her research since 1996, excluding dozens of "Presentations" and "Activities" ("Sherry Turkle," n.d.). Although it is impossible to quantify her impact on public opinion, or her "presumed media influence" (Tsfati, Cohen, & Gunther, 2010, p. 143), the regularity of her appearances connected to the release of her books, suggests a scholar who reflects public concern back to itself in a field in which performances within and around the media are a mirror and channel of subterranean concerns about new technology and social life. Certainly, her place in the contemporary firmament of influencers has been established through her scholarship, which is

successful when measured by the way she appears in and on the media and at public events to discuss the challenges of digital life. Furthermore, her media statements claim legitimacy through their direct connection to her scholarship, creating a profile where the role of public intellectual places her as a valorized commentator, using her academic agency to comment with authority within a broad sweep of social trends. And yet the evidence she presents always supports her perspective, even when a counterpoint exists within ethnographic research to suggest that the field itself is unstable. This *popularization strategy* for "sharing scientific scholarship" based on ethnography has been critiqued for being "rife with potential pitfalls," including rising to the level of "enthusiastic sales pitches" in the TED Talks style, where "a particular form of self-reporting bias" (Tsou, Thelwall, Mongeon, & Sugimoto, 2013, para. 4) is at work. Importantly, Turkle's criticism of millennial digital communication in favor of classroom conversation draws on a style of ethnographic certainty that claims a level of authority that delimits the depth of the challenges facing contemporary pedagogy due to technology.

Despite these concerns, the response at Boston College suggested that Turkle's public profile as an MIT academic brought with it the heft of the status of the heavy-hitting technology researcher. In a word, the audience seemed to be unskeptical. The audience enthusiasm for her presentation was constructed within a rhetoric garnished in a performance based on first-person observation-as-evidence ethnography. It was a display that drew on long-standing personal research preferences, which she wrote about in an afterword to her 1995 book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. In "A Note on Method: The Inner History of Technology," Turkle (1995) explained that her work was based on "ethnographic and clinical observation. Where the researcher, her sensibilities and taste, constitute the principal instrument of investigation" (p. 321). She unpacked this methodological description with an explanation of her work as a licensed clinical psychologist and, at the time, a practicing psychotherapist. She described her work as "computer psychotherapy," elaborating that her research is "conservative because of its distinctively real-life bias" (pp. 323-324). Such evidence goes some way to explaining Turkle's skill at public speaking, even perhaps in a less generous sense, the manipulation of audiences through her performance as a student of therapeutic techniques. Her career, it could be said, mixes psychology and therapy with ethnographic and clinical observation in the instantiation of a subjectivist student-as-patient evaluation.

By merging ethnography with the rhetorical power that accompanies a commanding public personality, drawing on her expertise as a psychologist and analyst, Turkle's style moved from that of an esoteric academic methodology deployed privately as scholarship to public discourse. In this transition from the private scholarly to the public performative, the audience is transported to a liminal space where the speaker's claims, presented as stories, seem to carry truth. Such "truth" in public ethnography camouflages critical questions that are glossed over by performativity. Questions about pedagogical performativity itself include "limitations" arising from teacher "fabrications" that make knowledge opaque rather than transparent and truthful (Ball, 2003, p. 215), while concerns have been raised that it does not acknowledge its failures, where the absence of critical inquiry produces an "overly optimistic" (Fleming & Banerjee, 2015, p. 257) belief in its emancipatory value. In addition, there is the debate over psychoanalytic storytelling that "rests on speculation and subjective insights" (Grayling, 2002, para. 4). And as Paul Ricoeur (1977) suggested, the success of psychoanalysis within storytelling is "highly

problematical” because it is based on the “accumulation of truth claims” (p. 869), where the claims themselves are open to conjecture, speculation, and personal, even ideological, bias.

Ultimately however, the appeal Turkle makes to the audience is a moral one. She privileges classroom interaction because her preference is for conversational, interpersonal interactions that rely on the richness of face-to-face dialogue, not interactions by students during class time with their laptops. Of course, some observers of social media may see “the digital and physical as separate,” even while the evidence suggests that they are “increasingly meshed” (Jurgenson, 2011). Such integration of everyday life into the complex intertextuality of real and virtual contexts deserves “close attention” (Gray, 2015, p. 2), because the changed learning environment challenges established notions of social intercourse such as conversation. Nevertheless, Turkle papers over these new communicative formations as well as long-standing criticisms of ethnography as a research method that makes dubious “realist” (Hammersley, 1992, pp. 2, 44) claims about how people experience life in their social worlds. Her tendency to generalize about the traditional classroom accords undue emphasis to the experiential aspects of student learning in formal learning spaces. In so doing, she omits the expressions of contemporary culture, where a “variety of overlapping, interlocking institutions, including both the economic and political systems” (Agger, 1992, pp. 87–88) operate and within which students live and work. Moreover, Turkle’s approach continues the computer psychotherapy method she described in *Life on the Screen* and, as such, risks missing the larger story about the integration of media into users’ “whole way of life,” where the richness of contemporary student experience is about being “always-on” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, pp. 68–69)—a subject to which I will return.

Given these limitations, Turkle’s objection to computers in the classroom provokes important questions about ethnography and its applications. Indeed, questions about technology in the classroom cannot be elided by her rhetoric to be left unasked, thereby skirting discussion about how new learning is taking place within a knowledge explosion colliding with formal and traditional pedagogical preferences. In fact, Turkle’s public presentation offered a case study of how a researcher as public intellectual uses ethnography in combination with psychological strategies and the force of her personality to speak against change rather than in favor of new methods of learning in higher education. Moreover, she did not offer normative options for classroom learning in which interactivity plays a role within contemporary pedagogy (McQuail, 2010). Despite drawing attention to debates about technology through her affecting performances, Turkle’s public ethnography can be viewed as backward-looking, embodying a commitment to a style of teaching that is, on closer examination, disconnected from the everyday lives of contemporary students.

Gender Matters

Before advancing, it is necessary to address a concern raised by this criticism of Sherry Turkle. It concerns her gender—especially in this instance, where the author is a man. Criticism cannot be gender-blind, as research has made clear about identity as a signature contribution of communication, media, and cultural studies (Butler, 1988). Informed by knowledge about context, culture, class, and ethnicity, to name a few of the influences, criticism of women academics by men needs to foreground recognition of the power relations that describe gender, concomitant with a consciousness about the need for sensitivity

by male critics about women's understanding of the world. In this respect, Sherry Turkle's female identity cannot be denied, as if the performance of her self operates in a vacuum, devoid of who she is as a gendered person in relation to power inequities in society and the academy. She writes, teaches, speaks, and performs as a woman, drawing attention to issues in technology and society that are already gendered—generally against women and against “the presumption,” as Rebecca Solnit (2014) wrote in *Men Explain Things to Me*, “that makes it hard for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare” (p. 4). In this respect, this criticism of Sherry Turkle as a public intellectual is intended to enhance an understanding of the way her work constrains public discourse by positioning her expertise around concerns unique to her, thereby limiting the search for shared, gender-sensitive solutions in the face of masculinist technologies.

To reinforce the importance of gender and identity in this discussion, one of the features of Turkle's presentation at Boston College was the number of questions addressed to her by women during the question-and-answer session at the end of her presentation. Most of the questioners were middle-aged women who spoke from a supportive position, foregrounding their questions with statements such as, “Thank you . . . this is what I also have experienced among my students in the classroom. What can I do to stop students using laptops, to stop them disrupting other students?” This line of questioning suggested interactions that became a kind of feminist collaboration within the discourse, the embodiment of shared knowledge for women academics.

While personal observations of audience engagement with a speaker at a single public forum are limited in a formal evidentiary sense, this event suggested that Turkle is a major contributor to the empowerment of women in academia who are confronting the challenges of classroom technology. However, her work fits awkwardly within emerging studies of female empowerment in which an explicit claim to a feminist perspective on equality accompanies the speaker's rhetoric and performance (Lane, 2015). Such a position includes the “critical imagination,” which moves beyond “what traditional scholarship might regard as rigorously demonstrable” (Bizzell, 2012, p. x). The appeal of public ethnography within computer psychotherapy together with the absence of any claim by Sherry Turkle to speak with a feminist voice, constructed her self within an individualistic, even masculinist, technoculture, discounting the preferred critical approach—namely, her capacity to contribute to “practical political struggles” (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, p. 14) and the collective enterprise of knowledge dissemination aimed at pedagogical innovation (Digital-Feminist Rhetoric, n.d.).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the endorsements of Turkle's analysis of classroom laptop computers by audience members were couched in a presentation style tending toward the evangelical, prompting some audience members to audibly express their assent. As Turkle spoke about the limits of classroom computers and the value of conversation, the benefits of cursive handwriting, and the importance of human interaction, Boston College audience members sighed. And as she described her data collection methods—which included her observations of students distracted, unable to engage with her or with one another as they stared into their laptop screens in class—her pronouncements rose to a crescendo. In keeping with her public ethnography, she drew from experiences in her private and teaching life, presenting narratives about her students and recent research in support of her thesis that classroom conversation must be prioritized.

As a scholar, Sherry Turkle offered ethnography as a personal testament to authenticity, and it was difficult to disagree with the kind of technology-pedagogy challenges she described that drew on her reputation as someone who has been on the front cover of *Wired* magazine—a claim she made twice during her presentation. She had Silicon Valley bona fides, and that gave her comments a techno-industrial credibility few people in academia can match. In assuming that *Wired* gave her credibility, she positioned her speaking self without hesitation, implicitly suggesting that the value of academic work is made more authentic when it is legitimized by recognition in a leading popular technology publication. This move from academic to public ethnography incorporates a shift from scholarship and its role in teaching to celebrity and its function in reputation making and ego stroking. It is an uneasy alliance about which too little criticism has been broached, although Michael Desch's (2016) book *Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena: Professors or Pundits?* marks a recent point in a debate about these aspects of academic life.

Turkle's public ethnography moves in territory defined by an indulgence of the storyteller by her audience rather than a perspective informed by critical theory, more recently added to by cultural studies and autoethnographic studies (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Contrary to the public performative approach, critical research begins by asking whether the researcher and the research are credible. Indeed, presentations that draw on academic celebrity need, at the very least, to be treated with skepticism to separate the performative self from the research. Or is the conflation of the performative self as researcher with the public ethnographer, the real point in Turkle's work?

Complicating matters further is the way academic celebrity connects with the operation of media production to attract audiences. Celebrity itself is sustained by popularity, not critical thinking, and Sherry Turkle is no exception. Her academic celebrity is subjected to market-based forces. In the book publishing industry, for example, media-influenced demand for brand-name commentators has an important role in influencing decisions about publication. Research by sociologist Peter Walsh (2016) suggests that the book publishing industry and its marketing machinery produce a focus on celebrity academics even when the new research is unworthy of notice, because author name recognition guarantees attention and sales. Perhaps now more than ever, academic life requires skepticism about researcher credibility and the commitment to truth in the face of competitive media branding that uses performativity as a means of attracting attention for commercial purposes rather than for critical intervention in an increasingly market-focused academic environment.

Agent-Centered Limitations

Much of Turkle's career has included feminist critique, identified, for example, in her MIT course "Gender, Technology, and Computer Culture," and she carries this prehistory with her (Turkle 1998).²

² That her career has taken place within the engineering environment of MIT's military-industrial-university complex is symptomatic of the relationship between new media and its foundation in the U.S. military's research and development, which has been unproblematically incorporated into research universities in a rush for Pentagon riches in the "war on terror" (Ghoshroy, 2015). Against this backdrop,

However, the question that emerges is about the story she is telling: Who or what is the story about? As noted earlier, it is not about feminism as critical practice; rather, it is several stories—in effect, a struggle between conversation or laptops in the classroom, social media, and Sherry Turkle, celebrity public speaker and researcher. In public ethnography, the researcher's moral vision dominates, mediated by the belief that the researcher's unique subjectivity is supreme, that her or his story is superior to others and deserving of special status. This agent-centered approach derives its power from the belief that an individual should act as the judge in making an ethical claim about a scientific or technological phenomenon. By invoking one's own authority within agent-centered theory, the storyteller pushes society toward a greater good—one uniquely defined by the person telling the story. The effectiveness of the agent-centered method, as argued by James Dreier (1993), relies on the capacity of the "egoist" to prescribe a course of utilitarian action that will "promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (p. 22). It is not, however, a collective enterprise, as feminism has been.

Key aspects of the agentist method were detailed in *Science and Engineering Ethics* by MIT ethicist Caroline Whitbeck (1995) and later expanded in her textbook *Ethics in Engineering Practice and Research* (Whitbeck, 1998). Whitbeck's (1995) article "Teaching Ethics to Scientists and Engineers: Moral Agents and Moral Problems" offers "an agent perspective," in which a situation is presented "as it would appear to someone who must respond to it" (p. 300). Any decision, argued Whitbeck, involves a moral judgment based on an understanding of the ethics of each case. In adopting this approach, the egoist claims a moral perspective by asserting agency to insist that, first, his or her story is true and, second, it should be considered paradigmatic of the larger context into which he or she is speaking.

Claims for agency are always rendered more valuable in a pragmatic environment. A story illustrates a moral principle in a context that encourages certain action. In other words, there are consequences that arise from telling the story within the moral framework. And it is this kind of agency that is at the forefront of Turkle's ethnography. Her agent-centered work begs the question: Does egoistic ethnography insist on a singular or exclusionary reading? In the example being considered here, the stories Turkle presents are about *her* preferred moral vision rather than the utility of the technology embedded in the laptop, or a collective response. The stories are further energized by celebrity, including her public presence as a media performer, where her agency provokes and directs the discourse about social media, foreclosing other options.

Given this critical reading, agent centrality limits social progress, because the combined force of the individual ethnographic agent and ego is grounded in an ethics defined by a backward vision of established systems of pedagogy. At its extreme, the agent and ego are not "fully engaged" human beings, because, as Stanley Deetz (2005) explained, the egoist is not "filled with care" (p. 101) for the other; in this case, students using laptops in the classroom. "Being filled with care in this sense is to attend to the difference of the other, the parts that seem absurd or don't make sense, things that challenge one's sense of how the world works" (p. 102). Consciousness of one's place in the social world is what ethnographic work should highlight, marking empathy as a pathway to care and thus a central trope

Turkle's research has been a testament to a program imbued with a feminist presence within much of the masculinist culture of MIT's war-making communication technology.

of its research method. In making this contribution, ethnography has added to knowledge of “the other” by recognizing that the gaze of the privileged is exactly that—privileged, as Michael Taussig (1993) has shown in his analysis of “critical self-awareness” (p. ix). Empathy foregrounds humility and care in this preferred model of ethnography and informs the key critical response raised by Turkle’s talk at the Excellence in Teaching Day in which her other—students—were presented in caricature by an egoist whose framework is about insisting on a preferred and limiting reading derived from professorial authority about how classrooms should operate.

Nostalgia, Maternal Feminism, New Ways of Learning

Sherry Turkle knows a lot about classrooms, teaching, and new technology. Her epistemology emerges from an agent-centered view, where her ego embodies a morality that is the standard by which human behavior is assessed. For example, the introduction to her talk about the benefits of cursive writing started as an anecdote tracing the travails Turkle faced as she sought admission for her daughter to a selective, private elementary school in Boston. And while parental anxiety about making the cut is a legitimate aspect of the way ethnography explores the self, being accepted into the privileged class affiliations of elitist institutions is an egotistical orientation. More significantly, Turkle’s use of this and other personal positioning tactics such as references to her mother, her Jewishness, and her childhood in Brooklyn along with her *Wired* celebrity, further embodied an egoistic sensibility that constituted a selective rhetorical strategy used to win approval from the audience at Boston College, a private Jesuit university. In contrast, what would her rhetorical strategy be on the same topic at a public university? Would she still tell the story about working to have her daughter enter a private school? Such contextual questions are informed by linguistic form and personal-political framing and, as such, are worthy objects of study for critical analysis. They also indicate how Turkle’s performance of public ethnography should not be accepted as uncontested within an ideological struggle (Sarroub & Quadro, 2015).

Of course, Sherry Turkle’s privilege as a technology professor at MIT affords her the opportunity to observe millennial students, the most “present” users of social media. She studies American college undergraduates in her classes and in her travels, applying an observational fly-on-the-wall method that offers up data as students speak and act in and out of the classroom. Every interaction becomes a source of data, in a problematic ethical turn that gives Turkle, the egoist, control over her students. This method does a disservice to Whitbeck’s approach, because the very morality of the agent may itself be questionable, as the classroom—ostensibly a site for teaching—becomes a research space. From this perspective, Turkle’s data are not derived from the position that drives Taussig’s critical self-awareness. Instead, Turkle approaches her data from an inductive angle. What she sees confirms a preexisting attitude toward laptops and social media that challenges her authority as an MIT professor.

Furthermore, Turkle’s approach can be summarized by a phrase in *Reclaiming Conversation*: “Technology . . . makes us forget what we know about life” (Turkle, 2015, p. 13). In other words, her ethnography is derived from a backward-looking angle, a point made in the very title of the book, which pitches “reclamation” of classroom conversation as the central trope of her argument. With moral certainty, her model of the social world is based on past preferences. In her role as technology critic, she demands that students engage in the *unitasking* of classroom conversation rather than *multitasking*

through social media, which, given the centrality of media in the everyday lives of always-on millennials, establishes an antipathy to media when it is the “the primary space” (Wark, 2016, para. 24) of social life. Turkle’s demand that students close their laptops to avoid distraction is entirely understandable, as any contemporary instructor at almost any level of school or college knows. But it is the positioning of the demand for conversation that is of interest: the assertion of her authority as a professor, a demand for students to acquiesce to a traditional interactional exchange in which the model of classroom intercourse becomes a transaction controlled by the professor. As such, it is the egotistical assertion of the demand of the powerful over the less powerful: the professor over the millennial student. It mirrors the world she successfully negotiated as a mother to achieve success for her daughter, a kind of maternal demand scenario in which she asserts her authority.

The assertion of Turkle’s ego over the other of her students sets up a system in which she demands their attention, insisting she be recognized and accommodated as the designer of the learning environment, foreclosing other investigations of knowledge. In a sleight of hand in keeping with her computer psychotherapy method, Turkle convinces her audience of the veracity of her moral code by citing her own experience in tandem with research that suggests that students learn more, remember more, and so on when they are engaged in conversation—when their social media is off.³ What she presents less is the complexity of social interactions in the new learning environment. By privileging conversation, she appeals for a simpler, more authoritative bygone pedagogical era. And in this respect, the nuclear family metaphors she drew on were instructive, derived from the bourgeois family model in which children sit in compliant passivity at the dinner table as the parents offer them moral instruction. Her preferred method of address in the classroom asserts pedagogical nostalgia for a pre-networked era, when authority was uncontested and professors were considered fountains of wisdom.

This “maternal feminism” is one in which Turkle controls the classroom by managing the conversation, much like a mother controls young children to socialize them. Clearly, maternal feminism is a conservative response to the disruptions of digital technology, in the way it is conceived as a kind of preferred motherhood where traditional and maternal roles of caring and discipline for children in a domestic space are an expression of the natural order of women (“Motherhood and Maternity,” n.d.). This is my most serious concern with the claims Turkle made: She treats laptops as something that intervenes and disrupts the relationship with students instead of an extension of the new dynamic of learning relationships. Contrast this with an alternative perspective, described by T. D. Marx (2016) in a *New Yorker* article about children learning through classroom computers: “Adults like to make distinctions; childhood is lived as a continuum” (p. 46). It is important to accept that millennial college students are the

³ There is a broad rearguard thrust for the continuation of traditional pedagogical models, illustrated in this claim from Sana, Weson, and Cepeda (2013): “The presumed primary tasks (for students) in many university classes are to listen to a lecture, consolidate information spoken by the instructor and presented on information slides, take notes, and ask or respond to questions. On their own, these activities require effort” (p. 24). The title of the article is instructive, adopting like many others, a reactive position to classroom learning in the face of laptops: “Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers” (p. 24).

early adopters on the continuum, and most 20-year-old Americans by 2016 had always known the Internet, with significant numbers of them growing up with some type of social media (Lenhart, 2015).

A critical pedagogical approach to classroom learning sees the space becoming an active site for classroom research about digital knowledge (Paechter, 2013). Meanwhile, an authority that calls for "silence" from students in the face of the professorial ego marks a transformation in the progressive agenda away from enriched learning environments offered by computerization. In this case, a kind of nostalgia for authority operates that controls knowledge flows within established power relations. In an era when information is diffused at ever faster rates (Rogers, 2003), knowledge is highly dynamic, presenting millennials with an opportunity for the critical positioning of themselves against established authority. This marks the moment for a step away from past pedagogical methods that rely on professorial authority.

Finally, drawing on stories about family and conversation around the dinner table may warm almost everyone's cockles, yet it does not address the need to engage in research about how social media operates as a tool for education within new forms of digitally mediated conversation. For example, much work is needed to understand the networked effects of interactivity that incorporate instantaneous digital communications across the visual, aural, and written landscapes, in vistas that may generate new ways of understanding human behavior and affect while mobilizing learning, social action, and transformation (Papacharissi, 2014). Then again, history may not allow such optimism. As Bill Ferster (2016) suggested in *Sage on the Screen: Education, Media, and How We Learn*, 50 years ago, television promised enormous educational benefits only to end up primarily as a vehicle for entertainment.

More Research in Digital Pedagogy

In May 2016, the same month Sherry Turkle was speaking at Boston College, three U.S. Military Academy researchers released a report on the classroom use of laptops for instruction. In their article "The Impact of Computer Usage on Academic Performance: Evidence From a Randomized Trial at the United States Military Academy," Carter, Greenberg, and Walker (2016) claimed a "negative effect" (p. 25) of 18%, or one-fifth of a standard deviation lower "in classrooms where laptops and tablets are permitted without restriction," (Notes to Table 5.) compared with "classrooms where students are only permitted to use tablets that must remain flat on the desk surface" (Carter, Greenberg, & Walker, 2016, para. 1). Superficially, the study reinforced Turkle's concerns. Importantly, the research offered caveats that made the research challenge clear:

We further cannot test whether the laptop or tablet leads to worse note taking, whether the increased availability of distractions for computer users (email, facebook, twitter, news, other classes, etc.) leads to lower grades or whether professors teach differently when students are on their computers. (Carter et al., 2016, p. 28)

Given such caveats, we know enough to know, as Nancy Baym (2013) noted, that the millennial generation has been deeply engaged through social media in "personal relationship maintenance" (p. 392). This deepening of personal interactions through Internet-based applications has been one of social

media's most popular uses, especially through Facebook and applications that extend the stickiness of networked "relational processes" (p. 392). For example, a study of U.S. college students indicates that there is an intensification in romantic relationships by Facebook users that adds multiple layers to human interaction across complex communication channels. How this operates is unclear, yet it is happening in a consistent cycle, as the authors suggest:

The ubiquitous use of Facebook (FB) among college students and indications that relational maintenance is a motive for FB use have caused scholars to begin exploring the effects of the use of social networking sites (SNSs) on the maintenance of romantic relationships. (Stewart, Dainton, & Goodboy, 2014, p. 14)

The impact of social media on all social relations as well as romantic relationships invites much more research on the way the *intensified* digital space collides with or adds to traditional classroom pedagogy. There is too much at stake to allow Turkle's public ethnography derived from her computer psychotherapy to stand uncontested. By portraying professor-directed classroom conversation as superior to new and emerging systems of knowledge production and dissemination, Turkle does a disservice to the opportunities available for critical and creative pedagogy—a pedagogy that responds to the conjunctures facing college students. Her approach further mitigates many of the ideas, theories, and options proposed in books, articles, working papers, and initiatives being put in place from public and private universities; technology corporations; charitable foundations; and local, state, and federal governments—all working on finding effective approaches to pedagogy brought about by digital disruption. (A Google search for "summary of impact of new technology, social media on pedagogy" produced 9,450,000 results in 0.72 seconds on June 20, 2017). Suffice to say, many books and articles explore the subject, from massive open online courses to classroom innovations, to media laboratories or make spaces (Doorley & Witthoft, 2012) and social media learning systems, as academics and public and private researchers and policy makers search for effective methodologies for "new learning" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2017).

What About Millennials?

Millennials, the students about whom Turkle was performing, need to be understood demographically and contextually for two reasons: They are participating with digital technologies as a way of life, and they are, as Sophia McClennen (2017) pointed out in *Slate*, paraphrasing political scientist Russell Dalton's 2008 book, *The Good Citizen: How the Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics*, "the most disparaged generation of young people in our nation's history" (para. 4). McClennen further noted a common myth about millennials: that they are "lazy, selfish and unengaged" (para. 7). The evidence suggests otherwise. For example, they are engaging in newly energized political campaigns and programs in remarkable numbers, such as with the 2016 U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. Eighty-five percent of those voting in the under-30 category and surveyed during the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries for the Democratic Party in 2016 voted for Sanders (Ekins & Pullman, 2016). The same under-30 demographic registered 43% in favor of socialism in a January 2016 YouGov (2016) survey, suggesting a significant shift in political orientation among millennials. The emergent energy informing these new interests saw millions of young people organize in the United States for Bernie Sanders, as a presidential candidate and Democratic Socialist,, suggesting that college-age

students are creating fresh perspectives that are unfamiliar in recent U.S. political history. It is likely they will continue to organize, increasingly utilizing Internet resources to mobilize the social movement (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2013) that Sanders led against student debt, low incomes, inequality, and climate change and in favor of single-payer health care in what has been described as “the millennial revolt against neoliberalism” (Johnson, 2016). They are, as Manuel Castells (2015) noted, participating in “multimodal, digital networks of horizontal communication,” offering “the most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history” (p. 15).

Promoting research about the needs and interests of the millennial cohort is one way of responding to Turkle’s protests about this generation of college students, who, in contrast to her dismissive criticisms, are increasingly engaged as “networked young citizens” through their use of social media platforms (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014, p. 143). Surely not to recognize innovative political formations empowered by new communication technologies while insisting on classroom conversation is to fail to acknowledge the dubious claims of agentic power.

Furthermore, to discuss students as inattentive and problem-like in the classroom is to misunderstand millennials who “create their own publics,” presenting a generational challenge to old ideas of sociality within new meanings of “the public” (boyd, 2014, p. 201). And yet in questions following her Boston College presentation, Turkle joked about the way students shopped online, noting that MIT students preferred the local Boston outdoor firm REI while Harvard students shopped for shoes. The comment brought sustained laughter from the audience—laughter that bordered on the derisive—while offering little insight about the pressures students are under to be consumers all the time due to social media’s personalization and algorithmic tracking capabilities, which facilitate targeted advertising and marketing (Pariser, 2011).

This is not to deny classroom challenges due to the “narcotizing dysfunction” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, p. 238) of new media. Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton used this concept to theorize that, in an increasingly complex society, attention to public interest concerns lose their appeal in the face of new media saturation. These days, in an even more complex society than the one Lazarsfeld and Merton were describing, the pressing question is: Does Sherry Turkle know how to teach millennials in the new learning environment, or is she seeking to teach them redundant skills using old methods, by invoking nostalgia for conversation from the pre-laptop era? Millennials, as suggested earlier, appear likely to be more engaged in public interest concerns because of their connectivity, begging the question of what even qualifies as instruction in a classroom in the networked era? It is a question that should not be foreclosed by an appeal to established types of social interaction.

These are tough questions, intended to advance the discussion about new pedagogy. The answers are unlikely to be found in the application of computer psychotherapy, public ethnography, maternal feminism, or claims of professorial and celebrity authority. Answers are likely to be found in detailed analysis of social media in the classroom, which is altering how knowledge is created, gained, learned, and shared (Garcia-Alayon, Khabbaz, & Breen, 2014).

One final criticism can be added to Sherry Turkle's role as a spokesperson for traditional pedagogy. Her ethnographic, agentic methods, as well as maternal feminism and computer psychotherapy are grounded in the disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields of anthropology and psychoanalysis. And yet the contemporary learning environment requires cross-disciplinary methods informed by communication and media theory and cultural studies, about which Sherry Turkle made little comment in her public performance. Social media and Internet-based media embody new forms of communication, where human agency and collective action feed into global networks and new knowledge formations, all of which are aspects of millennial student life (Hegarty, 2015).

By reworking and enriching learning environments, every new media raises questions about their use and value to public life and culture, often escalating to become "moral panics" (Cohen, 1972) before gradually being accepted into social life. It would not be far-fetched to interpret Sherry Turkle's public performance as an extension of the moral panic argument in favor of conversation and against networked pedagogical prospects (Breen, 2011, p. 24). Omitting the rich history of communication, media, and cultural research in favor of agentic ego, public ethnography, and moralistic judgments discourages the development of new methods of classroom activity that engage millennials along new learning trajectories. Furthermore, the concept of the discreet university classroom in which an instructor offers conversation creates the impression of a pedagogy that has lost its way, of a nostalgia for teaching that resorts to moral injunctions to stop interactions that are unstoppable. In other words, it acts against the vista of enriching interactive engagements for millennials.

Conclusion

Public intellectuals who promote, prompt, and provoke public discourse are essential constituents of a democratic program of education. The research published by Sherry Turkle over many years about new computer communications and the media environment has been important, especially where her aptitude for performativity extends public discussion about her research. In contrast, when critically evaluated, her negative response to laptops and social media in classrooms is a barrier to broadening discussion. Her public ethnography imbued with psychoanalytic strategies, including computer psychotherapy, influences a public unsure of how best to respond to digital technologies when set against an appeal to traditional pedagogy. Backward-looking and conservative options grounded in the singular perspective of an agent-egoist fail to encourage classroom approaches that reflect the opportunities for new pedagogy in the present tense. Certainly, part of the response is to be found in communication, media, and cultural theory that combines the best of humanities, liberal arts, and social science with research that fills learning spaces with options for innovative collective interactivity. For millennials and those younger than them who apply new ways of advancing social life and opportunity in the networked environment, the conversational style of yesterday does not support where they are located in the culture. Critical research needs to advance their interests through pedagogy that recognizes the contextual and contingent nature of their interests, to connect new ideas about conversation to online forms of interaction using "alternative communication practices that allow greater democracy and more creative and productive cooperation" (Deetz, 2005, p. 85).

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