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From “Filled” to “Fulfilled”: Tech-Minimal Experiences Bolster Core Honors Values

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Abstract: Post-pandemic exigencies such as isolation, technology fatigue, and financial pressures can be embraced as opportunities to return to, and strengthen, core values in honors involving student agency and community. This essay considers the pedagogical benefits of receding from technology in the classroom. Drawing on recent empirical research concerning the deleterious effects of tech in the lives of students, particularly as they relate to community and agency, authors make the case for providing students with tech-minimal experiences. The essay presents several examples of tech-minimal experiences from the authors’ own teaching inside and outside of the classroom—including *Tech Shabbats*, communal reading, and contemplative walks. Survey data and student reports indicate the positive effects of these experiences and an efficacy for bolstering community and student agency. Authors suggest that the temptation to go tech heavy in a pandemic (and post-pandemic) classroom must be reconsidered, especially in light of the amplified role tech already plays in students’ lives. Authors conclude that at a time when financial pressures threaten to constrain what honors programs can do, tech-minimal experiences are inexpensive ways to enrich students’ lives and make what is best about honors education flourish.

Keywords: educational technology; agency theory; whole student pedagogy; learning communities; Longwood University (VA)–Cormier Honors College for Citizen Scholars

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François G. Amar’s forum essay is a bracing presentation of post-pandemic challenges; it is also a reminder of how honors can rise to meet them by

attending to core values. We should view post-pandemic exigencies (such as isolation, technology fatigue, and financial pressures) as opportunities to return to and strengthen the central honors values of student agency and community. The best way to accomplish this goal is not by leaning further into technology; instead, we should provide students with tech-minimal experiences.

TECH SUBVERTS STUDENT AGENCY AND COMMUNITY

Five to ten minutes before class begins, students in an on-campus classroom are already in their seats, but from the professor's point of view at the front of the room, student agency and community are precisely what we do not see. Although gathered physically in the same room, students are isolated, scrolling through their phones with the glazed look of the mentally checked-out. For the moment, students are not agents but consumers as their smartphones rob them of communal experience. Seated mere feet (inches in pre-pandemic days) from interesting people with diverse perspectives and experiences, instead of conversing they scroll. This dynamic is not unique to the few odd minutes before class. In dining halls, dorm rooms, libraries, and nearly every communal space, students are forgoing community and ceding their agency to a social media algorithm. The pandemic did not create these troubling dynamics; it highlighted and exacerbated them.

After a year of masked, physically distant, often virtual campus life, students understandably complain of isolation, but when they have the opportunity to interact face to face, they regularly opt out with their phones. Even as masks come off, phones come out to mediate social interaction. In a recent Pew Research survey, 48% of adults ages 18–29 reported going online “almost constantly” (Perrin & Atske, 2021), and roughly half of teenaged girls with cell phone access report sometimes or often using the device to avoid social interaction (Schaeffer, 2019). When researchers have observed university, middle, and high school students studying in their homes, participants studied less than six minutes on average before task switching, typically due to technological distractions including texting and social media (Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). A large part of the story is the addictive, agency-sapping nature of smartphones and their apps. The futurist Barantunde Thurston predicts that

in 2030, most people won't . . . be more autonomous; we will be more automated as we follow the metaphorical GPS line through daily

interactions. . . [W]e may cram more activities and interactions into our days, but I don't think that will make our lives "better." . . . Given that the biggest investments in AI are on behalf of marketing efforts designed to deplete our attention and bank balances, I can only imagine this leading to days that are more filled but lives that are less fulfilled. (Anderson & Rainie, 2018)

BOLSTERING HONORS VALUES WITH TECH-MINIMAL EXPERIENCES

We, the authors, are not Luddites. We use technology in our courses when it makes sense and when it is likely to facilitate learning; in other words, we use tech sparingly. A well-placed YouTube clip can make a complex concept hit home; course management software eases the grading burden and facilitates timely feedback; but regardless of our own preferences, we see a growing need for technological disengagement. Consequently, we have begun to introduce tech-minimal experiences as required course elements, giving students permission to opt out of technology for brief (yet meaningful) periods of time. We use the word "permission" because students feel obligated to be perpetually available; they are anxious when away from the phone. In fact, more than half of teens, according to a 2019 Pew Research survey, associate the absence of their phone with loneliness, being upset, or feeling anxious (Schaeffer, 2019). Our students have a ready excuse, though: "I can't be on my phone right now, it's a course requirement."

Although particular student and course characteristics will determine which experiences are apt, many variations on technological disengagement can renew a sense of community and agency. Here is what we have managed successfully so far.

Classroom as Tech-Free Oasis

In the classroom, unless a student has a documented accommodation or an urgent personal circumstance, we have a strict no-device policy (laptops, phones, or otherwise). As we explain on the first day of class, this policy is backed by empirical research. Recent reviews and meta-analytic summaries suggest a meaningful negative effect of devices on learning, particularly for university students (Dontre, 2021; Kates, Wu, & Coryn, 2018). In one experiment, students listened to a twelve-minute lecture and took notes while

receiving and responding to texts once a minute (low-distraction), twice a minute (high distraction), or not at all (phone away control). Kuznekoff and Titsworth conclude that “compared to those students who do not text/post, when students engage in these behaviors they will potentially record 38% fewer details in their notes, score 51% lower on free-recall tests, and 20% lower on multiple-choice tests” (2013, p. 248). When technology use is well-curated by the teacher and assiduously regulated by the student, it may benefit engagement and learning, such as using a laptop to take more detailed notes than longhand would permit (Dontre, 2021); but the negative effects of media multi-tasking are well-documented for both the user and those nearby (Sana, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013). Ultimately, people struggle to regulate their behaviors effectively on their devices (Dontre, 2021), so we opt simply to remove the temptation in our classrooms.

Going so far as to require that phones be turned off and put away as soon as students enter the room can extend the boundaries of the oasis to the informal time prior to class, prompting conversation with those nearby. In some cases, restrictive tech policies can prompt pushback in the form of negative student evaluations (Stowell, Addison, & Clay, 2018), but a policy that incentivizes the tech-free environment may benefit students without harming student ratings of the instructor.

Sarai offers students extra credit for abandoning their cell phones during class. In the syllabus, she describes the cell-free activity as a way to earn a small amount, usually 0.10%, of extra credit each class period by placing the phone, turned off, on a table at the rear of the room for the duration of the class meeting. Although voluntary, participation over several semesters was 100% on most days. At the midterm of one class, Sarai surveyed students about the experience. In surveys completed in week one of the semester, students reported feeling focused and somewhat relieved, experiencing lower levels of boredom and anxiety than they expected (Blincoe & Franssen, 2017). One student wrote, “I feel that it [cell-free activity] has increased my focus in class. . . . Ever since I realized how much more focused I am without my phone . . . I have found myself leaving my phone in my backpack or sometimes in my dorm room.”

Although 65% of students surveyed reported greater awareness of their phone habits and 50% agreed it affected their phone use in other classes, fewer than 15% agreed that participating in the cell-free activity affected their phone use outside of class (Blincoe & Franssen, 2017). Creating tech-minimal experiences beyond the classroom is important to establishing an enduring effect.

Communal Reading and Contemplative Walks

Students in Adam's courses are required to engage in practices outside of class that encourage agency over their leisure. One such practice is device-free reading. At the beginning of the semester, students pick a thick novel (related to course content) to read during a weekly hour-long session. They meet in small groups, often outside, to sit and read in silence, device-free. Students report feeling relieved and refreshed by this required leisure. To paraphrase feedback from several students, "I used to love reading, but when I came to college I no longer had time to sit down with a book. I never would have done so if it wasn't a course requirement. Now I realize how much I miss reading and plan to keep doing it." Device-free reading sessions provide a communal space that normalizes a deliberate use of leisure time. One result is a sense of empowerment to replicate this activity, beginning with the oft-neglected act of carving out leisure time in the first place.

Adam's students also are required to go on at least three twenty-minute, device-free walks per week, cultivating solitude, a "subjective state in which your mind is free from input from other minds" (Kethledge & Erwin, 2017). Without an online algorithm directing their attention, students have space to exercise agency and restore emotional balance. As with the silent reading, students report relief to be unplugged, often to their surprise: they had no idea how many lovely walks are to be found in the surrounding town. This happy effect bolsters another important honors value: connection to and engagement with place.

Shabbats and Fasts

Tiffany Shlain has popularized the idea of the Technology Shabbat. Beginning in 2010, she and her family spent 24 hours each week completely screen-free, opting instead to get outside, spend time with friends, cook, read, and explore (Shlain, 2020). These purposeful, temporary unplugging assignments (not to be confused with a 'detox' that implicitly casts technology as an inherently harmful substance; Szablewicz, 2020) have been turning up in classrooms as experiential learning exercises for over a decade (e.g., Moeller, Powers, & Roberts, 2012; Wood & Muñoz, 2021). Sarai's version is an extra-credit option in a course unit on close-relationship maintenance. After reading a journal article about cellphone use and its effects on the enjoyment of face-to-face interaction, students have the option of planning and executing a Tech Shabbat. The minimum is smartphone-free, but completely tech-free

is encouraged. Students create a plan, including a description of anticipated difficulties and strategies to address them. Afterward, students reflect on their experience, including struggles, benefits, and what practices they might continue or recommend to others.

In a recent semester, 10 of 25 students completed a Tech Shabbat. As motivation for trying it at all, several mentioned constant interruptions from the phone and the annoyance this caused, particularly when attempting schoolwork, yet they felt powerless to turn off the phone. Many described how the phone normally structured the day: check it immediately upon waking, scroll until falling asleep. During the shabbat, they reported trading phone time for meditation and mindfulness in the morning and at night reading a book to fall asleep. One student reported spending an afternoon with family and noticing herself more involved with conversations and actually paying attention to those talking. Most of the students who completed the shabbat planned to try it again and to recommend it to others; one student immediately downloaded an app that restricts the time spent in certain other smartphone apps.

Whereas students seem eager to try 24 hours phone-free, the idea of a week without a smartphone—an extra-credit opportunity that Adam has offered for the past three years—has repelled all but one student. The reasons for not participating are telling: “I text my mom 20x a day. She would be worried”; “I would miss out on what my friends were doing”; “What would I do when I have nothing to do?” The report of the participating student was also telling. For the first few days, she was bored and anxious about missing out, but then she realized she did not need to be on her phone and was able to relax. She did not have to check her phone because she could not. Four months later, this student reports that her phone usage stats are roughly half of what they were prior to this experience. She has chosen to use her phone more deliberately, reducing the anxiety of constant accessibility and experiencing the freedom of being unplugged (at least for a time).

EXIGENCIES OF THE MOMENT, VALUES THAT ENDURE

Amar’s Forum essay highlights the financial pressures that most universities face in the wake of the pandemic. He warns that honors programs may have to reduce costs by eliminating valuable experiences, and he highlights how tech that rose to prominence during the pandemic can now serve to continue collaboration. The temptation to solve problems by going tech-heavy is understandable. Videoconferencing saved our last two semesters from

oblivion, and tech solutions will help us adapt to certain post-pandemic challenges. However, we should not mistake the exigencies of the moment for good long-term guides to broader practice. Students are already interfacing with devices and apps that burden self-regulation, diminish agency, and erode community. The faculty and administrators of honors programs can push back against the concerns that many experts have about human agency and community in an AI-infused future. At a time when universities are “enriching” student experience with costly rock walls and the latest in classroom virtual reality, honors programs can emphasize low-cost, tech-minimal practices that encourage the reflection and conversation of the classroom to continue outside of it. In doing so, we can invite our students to take agency over their time, engaging with each other, their community, and the place where they live. The result is a step toward lives that are not merely filled, but fulfilled.

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