Abstract

Literature and the use of digital technology have had a very significant influence in my life since I was a young child. Learning to read and write was just the beginning of my love for literature. However, as a child I hated the process of learning, I just wanted to know things. Technology made knowing things much easier than I could have imagined. When I turned eight years old, I had gotten my first computer, this computer opened up an entirely different world from the one that I was living in, it made connecting with people, and the things I wanted to know much easier than learning. I didn’t realize just how much power the computer would have over me and the people around me. This narrative will describe my first encounter with digital technology and this realization through different memories that display my relationship with technology and literature. This narrative will also display the effects digital technology has had on my brain and behavior using the article by Nicholas Carr “Is Google making us stupid?” and the essay by Neil Postman “Technopoly.”

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Through Memories and Literature

 It was the fall season; the leaves were beginning to turn light brown, yellow, and even red. The air had a crisp feel to it, not too cold, not too hot. I remember starting elementary school, dressed in my white buttoned uniform shirt and navy blue skirt with pigtails and navy blue bows to match. I remember walking into my kindergarten classroom with my older sister. The room was small; the walls were adorned with different kinds of inspiring posters and the alphabet in capital and lowercase letters. At the end of my first day, I remember that every student was sent home with a huge, heavy workbook, full of lines to trace the alphabet and numbers up to one hundred. This huge, heavy workbook included all of the elements I needed to understand how to construct words and do the necessary arithmetic. I thought nothing of this book because I thought we would only be using it in class, my older sister proved me wrong.

Every day my older sister would have me come straight home after school with my huge, heavy, dreadful workbook. She would make me sit at the dining table and practice writing out the letters of the alphabet over and over until I knew what the letters looked like and how to write them correctly. I remember specifically trying to trace the letters of the alphabet into my workbook. There were different capital letters and lowercase letters on each page. My handwriting looked like complete chicken scratch and my sister would always tell me that it was important to have good penmanship and even better literary skills because those skills define me. Every day I came home and did the same thing, I practiced over and over the letters of the alphabet and read books that involved different words using different letters of the alphabet. I hated this routine with a passion. It was something that I dreaded toward the end of the school day because I was not concerned with improving my writing or reading, I wanted to do much more interesting things like go to the park, play with my friends, or watch cartoons on television. I didn’t feel like I needed to know all the things that the letter A stood for and all the things it could mean.

Now, when I look back at all the times I sat at that dining table and practiced my literary skills, I mentally thank my sister for being so strict about it because I love literature now, I love to read it, I love to write it. However, it seems that as time continues to pass the need to write something out firsthand is slowly diminishing with the introduction of new technology such as cell phones, tablets, laptops, and computers. The act of writing something out physically is decaying like an old tooth. Technology did not play a big role in my writing and learning process until I was around the age of eight. Any time before that, I never really played with any game consoles; it was very rare for me. When Christmas came, I would write a letter to Santa every year. My letter would usually consist of wishing for new stuffed animals and dolls. However, the year when I was eight, I had gotten my first desktop computer for Christmas. I remember it ran on Windows XP and the only way that I could connect to the internet was through an AOL dial-up connection. With the introduction of this desktop computer came a virtual reality for me. I discovered so many things that I did not know before. I discovered that I was able to talk to people without leaving the confinements of my living room, my friends and family members, games, and different websites were all at my fingertips. I went from spending the weekend outside in the park to spending it inside on the computer. It didn’t seem like a drastic change to me at the time but now that I am reflecting on it, there was a huge change in not only the way that I began to perceive things but also in the way that the people around me began to perceive things too.

Everyone was distracted by digital technology in some way, shape, or form. I didn’t have to dread sitting at the dining table with a huge heavy book practicing my multiplication tables and comprehension skills because no one was paying attention anymore. My older siblings were preoccupied with their cell phones and their friends, sure, they would still tell me that my literary skills were important and that I had to do well in school because going to college is something I must do because they never did, but they were not enforcing those concepts like before. My mom would still make sure that I did my homework because someone had to enforce rules and at the time, she was not very familiar with digital technology. Therefore, I still had to practice my skills but the routine was not sitting at the dining table practicing the letters of the alphabet; it was not reading books about the letters in the alphabet. The routine became homework, uniform, freedom on the computer. I had the freedom to play all the games and print all the pictures that I felt like I needed. Everything that I did began to be in relation to the internet because of this new routine. I did my homework with the internet at the back of mind; I went school with the internet at the back of mind. It was the one thing that I looked forward to doing at the end of my day. If I was having a bad day, I knew that the internet could make it better because all of the games and all of my friends were right there. Everything that anyone did seemed to be in relation to the internet. I remember seeing commercials on television for new technologies that you didn’t have to wait to go home to use. Digital technologies like the IPod touch, the PSP, the Nintendo DS were all things that could be used to connect to the internet and they were portable. With these commercials and ads that seemed to be everywhere, I couldn’t help but want at least one of those things because almost everyone I knew had one too. As technology continued to advance, the people around me were not only sucked into this advancement but they were also influencing me to be sucked into getting the newest and latest digital technology too.

As soon as I knew it, I had the Nintendo DS and I began to take it everywhere; without it I felt bored, I felt like I needed to count the dots on the ceiling to stay occupied. It felt like a necessity to have some form of digital technology with me. Even now, I still feel that necessity, that dire need for technology. I have this dependency on technology that has continued to grow and take root deep inside my subconscious. If I don’t have my phone with me, I feel weird, out of place, and awkward. If I do not have my TV on in my room, I feel like it is too quiet and I can hear myself thinking excessively. At this very moment, I’m typing this essay and my laptop is on eight percent; I’m putting my entire story into this document, hoping that it won’t crash or die before I can save my material. At this very moment, I have my IPhone next to my computer, my cat is amazed by the snow, and I’m thinking, “I really need a picture of this, I really need to get this on video.” I am depending on my digital technologies to get me through my assignment or to help me remember certain moments. Without these specific technologies, I would be handwriting this essay, I would have to recall my cat’s amazement with only my memory. Earlier today, I had a conversation with a classmate who said that he rarely writes anything by hand anymore. He said he uses his computer for everything because it is more convenient and he sometimes has to force himself to type his assignments. However, he also mentioned that all of the typing might be affecting the way that he thinks and the way that his hands function.

This particular conversation made me think about a few concepts that Nicholas Carr discusses in his article “Is Google making us stupid?” In the second paragraph of the article, Carr explains his reading process; he explains how his mind used to engage with the words, the sentences, and the meanings. However, due to the use of technology, his mind has slowly begun to lose interest in the words, sentences, and meanings of the things he reads, which results in the act of skimming. Carr also mentions how our brains have a certain neuroplasticity, which is why we are able to adapt to certain changes and technological advancements. As I reflect with these concepts in mind, I realize the significant changes that the use of technology has had on my brain and behavior. I realize that since the introduction of the computer into my life I began to focus on the things that the internet held instead of the things that my mind held. I began to practice searching things on the internet instead of continuing to improve my writing skills. I began to pay attention to social media websites instead of paying attention to the things that I actually needed to read. I developed the skill of skimming titles and paragraphs, searching for something remotely relevant to the essay prompt I would be given school. I began to text my friends instead of actually being with them in person, which lead to misunderstandings and discarded relationships due to misinterpreted text messages. I did not realize any of these things in the past few years because I became so preoccupied with the internet and digital technologies.

I only realized the huge impact that technology has had on my personality and brain because of Nicholas Carr’s article and Neil Postman’s “Technopoly.” Postman’s essay made me aware of just how much technology affects who you are as a person. “Technopoly” made me realize that digital technology has a very significant power over people because it makes them feel good about themselves, it makes them feel more productive, more intelligent, more efficient because their computers and phones can install different applications, remind them of how much money they have in the bank, remind of important events. Being conscious of the power that technology has over everyone around me causes me to fear that I will fall into the same hole. It makes me feel like I will abandon my relationship with literature for a new and different relationship with technology. I have realized through these significant pieces of writing that it is important to stray away from technology every once in a while because it really affects the way you think, speak, write, read, and even live. Using digital technology too much can affect our brains; can cause us to develop a dependency upon technology. Therefore, I try my best to continue to handwrite my notes, short stories, poems, and journal entries because I do not want technology to replace any of my literary skills. Although technology has helped me become more organized and structured, I still want to be in control of the things I write, do, say, and think for the remainder of my life. Therefore, my relationship with literature will always be much more significant to me than my relationship with technology.