Why Technology Isn't Always a Good Thing

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When I was a kid, the only options for writing were pen and paper or a typewriter. My only options for reading were books or newspapers held in my hand. The only option to communicate with my friends was to go over to their house or call them on the phone.

Now, I never use a pen and paper, and to be frank, it feels foreign when I do. I still read some books the old fashioned way and get the Sunday New York Times, but otherwise, my reading is all done digitally. I text or email rather than call most of the time and spend a tremendous amount of time in front of some device or another.

On the one hand, it’s hard to imagine not being able to communicate through IM, mobile phones, email and even Facebook. On the other hand, I often feel that my friends expect me to respond (rapidly) to their messages, comments, tweets and pictures online.

Too often I feel like there isn’t enough time to manage it all but I guess that it all becomes part of a routine that you don’t think much about. It is clear that technology has imposed new burdens on individuals and there aren’t many signs of improvement.

My kids are even more integrated with technology, and I have worried over time that this won’t be good for them in the long term. And you don’t need to be a parent to fret about the effect of all this technology on young people. Newspapers are constantly filled with frightening accounts of pornography addiction and aggression supposedly caused by violent videogames.

We've all seen the toddler who can barely walk unlock an iPhone and start tapping for an app. We've all seen children who at 3 are more comfortable with using a mouse than we are and who at 16 can code and write programs we can't even conceive of.

It's not all a bad thing, of course, but there is growing evidence that these digital natives are not as adept at reading people – a huge, important part of life in work and relationships. Their ability to read non-verbal cues is rudimentary and their ability to appear engaged by making eye contact and is becoming more limited.

How are we as a society going to adapt to this shift? Will we have classes in high school, not for typing or basic computer skills like I had to take, but instead classes to teach how to interact with each other to show attention, respect and interest in others? Should there be classes teaching kids how to behave online?

I think that as we shifted toward technology, we encouraged a disconnection from each other in ways that are hard to teach. Perhaps recognizing this side effect of technology use will allow us to craft a solution.

Whether it's turning off devices and having actual conversations or even using technology through video connections to forward relationships in a more ‘face to face’ way, adapting to the change and compensating for it are essential to ensure that real connections between people aren't going to go the way of the buffalo.