

INTEGRATING CONTEMPLATIVE LEARNING INTO NEW MEDIA LITERACY:
HEIGHTENING SELF-AWARENESS AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS FOR ENRICHED
RELATIONSHIPS WITH AND WITHIN NEW MEDIA ECOLOGIES

by

JENNY TATONE

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Student: Jenny Tatone

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in the School of Journalism and Communication by:

Carl Bybee	Chairperson
Ed Madison	Member
Christopher Chávez	Member

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School
----------------	-----------------------------

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Jenny Tatone

Master of Science

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Title: Integrating Contemplative Learning into New Media Literacy: Heightening Self-Awareness and Critical Consciousness for Enriched Relationships with and within New Media Ecologies

This thesis explores the relationships and experiences that young adults have with and within complicated and always changing new media environments, such as those afforded by social media platforms and mobile media applications. By analyzing the ways in which digital realms are both open and interconnected and also marketized and restricted, this thesis explores how a contemplative approach to new media literacy pedagogy could help young adults to perceive new media from multiple, contradictory viewpoints at once, thereby supporting them in creating healthy, productive, creative, and imaginative relationships with the digital and public technologies mediating their lives, at the same time mitigating the challenges associated with commercialized, habituated new media experience. This thesis takes an auto-ethnographic approach, merging personal narratives with qualitative interpretations of where philosophies of technology, theories of media literacies, and the results of focus group studies intersect.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Jenny Tatone

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Portland State University, Portland, Ore.

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Science, Media Studies, 2016, University of Oregon
Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing, 2010, Portland State University
Bachelor of Arts, Journalism, 1999, University of Oregon

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Education (Language Arts)
Media Literacy
New Media Studies
Philosophies of Technology

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Adjunct Instructor of Writing, Chemeketa Community College, Yamhill Valley Campus, (2010-2014). Taught Basic Writing, Fundamentals of Writing, Introduction to Composition, English Composition: Exposition and English Composition: Argumentation and Research.

Adjunct Instructor of Writing, Mt. Hood Community College (2012-2014). Taught Writing Skills: Paragraph to Essay, Introduction to College Writing

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

University of Oregon Graduate Teaching Fellowship

Recipient of the Lucient Arant Scholarship from the School of Journalism & Communication, 1998-1999

PUBLICATIONS:

Tatone, J., Gallicano, T. & Tefertiller, A. (2016). I love tweeting in class, but ... A mixed-method study of student perceptions of the impact of Twitter in large lecture classes. *Association for Education in Journalism & Communication Journal*.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

It's 1997 and I'm sitting on the back covered patio of a dingy cafe, smoking a cigarette, drinking coffee black, and thumbing through the pages of Orwell's dystopian classic *1984*. Pausing, I look at the concrete beneath my feet, set the book down, pick up a pen, my favorite for the way it delivers thick black ink, and begin my essay in a worn-out, upholstery-covered journal: "Civilization progresses, technology advances and the roots of humanity wither and curl as if they were hiding in shame."

With a dramatic, naïve and youthful rebellion in my heart, I continue in my vehement abhorring of technology and industrialized culture, bemoaning the manipulation of language and thought made possible by the powers-that-be, telescreens and other machines.

Back at my tiny studio apartment, an oversized PC, handed down to me graciously by my computer programmer father, sits large and looming on my kitchen table, its cord unplugged and dangling off the edge, dust collecting on its thick plastic keyboard. Mostly, I refuse to use the clunky machine. Its black screen and blinking green cursor intimidate me with thoughts of Big Brother and doublespeak.

"It is time, for just one moment, to stop praising the up-and-coming new trend, the futuristic fad on the market," I wrote in the old college essay; "It is time to put away this futuristic ideology ... lest the soul of humanity crumble away."

My dad, an Orwell fan himself, put it this way:

“Don’t mess around with computers too much. They’ll drive you mad.”

As if I would have a choice.

Fast-forward two years and I’m 23 and working for a San Francisco startup called SonicNet.com, an online music news and reviews website. In an old warehouse loft, surrounded by young music nerds, colorful Apple computers, and the sounds of various genres of music rising out of various workstations, I sit at my desk, before my Tangerine Mac, read emails, upload album reviews, craft MP3 descriptions, and scroll websites and chat rooms for the first time in my short life. In the evenings, I ask my boyfriend: “Why do all these commercials need to advertise dot-coms now? It’s obnoxious.”

MTV buys the company. Every SonicNet employee gets a new Nokia mobile phone. My co-workers are thrilled, but not me. All I can think is: “Great, now they have a way to get a hold of me more often.”

A year later MTV swallows SonicNet. Some NY executives fly out to SF, stack a pile of boxes in the middle of the room, and, one-by-one, lay each of us off. They took back the phones, too.

About six years later, I’m writing a master’s thesis back in my hometown, Portland, Oregon, using a sleek white iBook (a futuristic ideological fad on the market), at one café or another, for an MFA program (I have a silver Verizon flip phone by now, too, but I’m not yet hooked into checking it constantly). Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and Kierkegaard’s fervent belief in the almighty spirit that music carries, my thesis—still dramatic, naïve and fueled by youthful rebellion—blames the Internet and digital media for ridding the world of meaningful encounters with music. The advent of MP3

downloads and the rising popularity of online streaming services cheapens music, kills its spirit, and leaves listeners—nay, *consumers*—numb and careless. In chapter after chapter, my thesis bemoans the great sacrifices that the Internet forces upon its users; in it, I wrote anxious passages as these:

As music becomes more embedded in business and technology, people not only distance themselves from the music because of the medium itself, but also because of the culture that results from the new medium. Music is still an omnipresent part of our culture, to be sure, but our relationship with it has shifted, and we can attribute that, mostly, to the commoditization of music, which created a disconnect between the music—and whatever special powers it holds—and the listener.

Every new medium further enforces the message: partake in the machine, not the music. It says: You may access what you want, when and where you want, and you may attempt to hear it all. What it won't state is that once locked in, you may feel too detached and scattered to listen. Logged on and overexposed, you may feel too restricted to care.

About the time the iPhone was introduced in 2007, I find myself sitting with a small circle of friends in a dark pub, somewhere in Southeast Portland, mocking the arrival of what so suddenly and pervasively infiltrated our public spaces, stealing the attention of people everywhere, buzzing on tables in the distance, sending out disruptive, irresistible waves of gravity and novelty, lighting up the faces of the masses, literally and figuratively, all over the world.

Sitting across the table from me, my friend Tim says fervently, with fire in his eyes, “You wanna know what the apocalypse looks like? You wanna know what it looks like? It looks like

this, man...” He holds an imaginary smartphone in front of his face, pretending to be engrossed, then slowly looks up at the rest of us with a dumbfounded, stoner expression on his shadowy face, as if to say: *Huh? Wha? Where am I?*

“People are fucking zombies, man,” he says, looking sadly into his beer.

About a month ago, on a wintery Sunday morning in 2016, I sat with Tim and his wife Chrissy on their mod living room sectional. Tim gazed into his iPad while Chrissy tapped out a text message on her smartphone. Don’t get me wrong: We had great conversation, too.

It’s just that I wondered whether Tim thought about the apocalypse anymore.

I don’t believe advancing digital technologies will spell the end anymore than I believe people will ever halt in their ‘natural’ urges to flourish and feel better connected to each other (though I’ve started to question what ‘natural’ means). Still, I’ve got to admit here, if it hasn’t already been made clear, I’ve been wary of the effects of new media, defined as the media made possible by digital technologies (Jenkins, 2006), for quite some time now. And now that, according to 2015 research reports from Pew, roughly nine in ten Americans own a mobile phone, two-thirds use social media and one-fifth report going online almost constantly (Perrin, 2015), I’m often disoriented and sometimes troubled by the rapid change: Are we paying careful enough attention to what has so suddenly transformed our existence?

I recognize that it’s dangerous to admit this in a culture that commonly celebrates technological innovation and progress. I also understand that fear, cynicism and techno-phobia can only make our experiences with the inevitable presence of technology worse: Avoidance and denial often only magnifies the stress of what one works to avoid (Rosen & Weil, 1995). I have worked hard to adopt the perspective that, when used with critical consciousness and collaborative care, new technologies may bring goodness into our lives (Jenkins, Ito & boyd,

2016; Levy, 2016). I want to believe in the potentialities of what boyd (2004) calls publicly, digitally networked publics and what Jenkins (2006) has coined convergence culture, wherein media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence come together, and from which new positive possibilities for creativity and togetherness emerge.

The only problem is my sister doesn't call me anymore; instead, the occasional text message has fulfilled her sense of maintaining obligatory contact. And my 11-year-old niece is already worried about the number of "likes" she receives on Instagram. And my mom feels stupid when she toys with her iPhone. And I'm frustrated with the fact that I have to almost always wonder where my mobile phone is. And I find it ridiculous that deactivating my Facebook account leaves me with the sense that there a gaping hole in my life. And, when I'm out in public, at a restaurant or cafe, I still find it enormously difficult to process the disorienting and abundant presence of tiny computers. And when students in one of my research focus groups tell me how pressured they feel by social media to keep up, to earn "likes," to be good enough in the face of all the curated, edited goodness, I wish I could hug them and tell them they're good enough just the way they are, that they are more than Facebook might lead them to believe. And when I stand in the corner of the tiny cottage I live in, leaning into a wall, iPhone in hand, head gazing downward, dog on her bed in the distance ignored, light breaking through the window unnoticed, I feel a wave of sadness wash over me as I ask myself: *What am I doing, and why?*

What am I doing, and why? These are the questions I asked my students to pose in the four or so years I spent teaching community college writing courses designed around a new media and digital culture theme, and meant to inspire students to reflect critically upon their relationships with the technologies and media embedded in their everyday lives. I did not set out

to teach writing courses around this theme but the inevitable and often irresistible presence of miniature computers in the hands of my students led me there.

Actually, originally, I hadn't even set out to teach. But the MFA led me there. In the winter of 2011, I found myself at the front of a small windowless classroom in the basement of a community college, which was located in a rural area about thirty miles outside of Portland. In the beginning, I taught writing, developmental writing, writing for folks who hadn't been properly taught - subjects, verbs, semicolons, transitions, the difference between *there*, *their* and *they're*, etc.

But I wanted more than to teach grammar. Like any good teacher, I wanted to change lives. I wanted my students to find meaning in their lives; I wanted them to feel that their lives mattered, that *they* mattered. And I wanted my students, many of whom struggled with difficulties related to poverty, drug rehabilitation, domestic abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder, to feel more alive in the world.

Having had endured my own share of challenges related to anxiety and depression, I had some ideas about how to help, ideas that would support both their wellbeing and their educational experience, ideas that were rooted in my history with acupuncture. Sometime in my early 20s, at the urging of my mom, I began treatment with a woman who would change the course of my life.

"Let me know when you're ready to quit smoking," my acupuncturist told me gently, patting my shoulder, as I lay on the patient bed, with needles poking out of various parts of my body (ankles and wrists mostly), during one of my first and most perplexing visits. I was surprised to hear her say this. Out of embarrassment and shame, I'd never told her I was a smoker. A handful of years later, after having benefitted from her treatment and wisdom in a

multitude of ways, I woke up one morning to a thought I'd believed would never come: *I'm done with smoking*. It was that sudden. It came without warning, and it took me over as though I had no other choice; I never smoked again.

My acupuncturist wasn't a miracle worker. But she was a life changer. Not only did she support my physical health, but she also helped me to see that my physical health was not separate from my mental health. She helped me to see that integrating my mind into my body reduced my anxiety and supported sensations of grounded-ness and peace, meanwhile reducing my craving for self-destructive behavior. And she helped me to see that when I pay attention to my thoughts, feelings, and environment with an open, nonjudgmental awareness—when I practice what I learned from her was called 'mindfulness'—I feel good and connected and whole. "What does it mean to feel connected to the whole?" I asked her one evening in a community acupuncture group that she'd designed to be part talk therapy, part mindfulness instruction, and part acupuncture treatment. "I've been reading about this concept and I'm not quite grasping it."

"Keep reading, Jenny," she said with a knowing smile that had long comforted me.

I did keep reading. I kept practicing mindfulness, too. On ritualistic morning walks with my Shepherd mutt, I now noticed the intricate patterns of nature in ways I never had before, and I felt good and light. In conversations with friends and family members, I now tended to spend more time feeling myself in their shoes, and I felt deep and connected. In dialogue with my own thoughts and feelings, I now offered myself non-judgment, acceptance, and compassion and I felt worthy. In challenging moments, I now consciously filled myself with oxygen, watched my lungs expand and deflate, and I felt alive, and grateful to be.

And so when I started my teaching career and became attuned to the challenges that many of my students faced, be they related to single motherhood, time spent in the Iraq war, or, simply, a fast food, Rockstar and cigarette diet, I decided I wanted to do something to support wellbeing in the classroom. Little did I realize I was about to start putting together some very big and disconnected ideas and practices by merging education with full-bodied wellbeing.

I started with breathing exercises. In the beginning, when I asked students to close their eyes, make themselves comfortable, and inhale and exhale, the students giggled and couldn't stay still in their seats. A few weeks into our group breathing exercises, students happily settled in, relaxed their shoulders and let the tension of a workday at Subway or a toddler's scream at home or a parole officer's call in the hallway melt away. By the end of the term, a handful of students told me that our three minutes of breathing were oftentimes the best moments of their day. "Sometimes, I can't wait to get to your class so I can just breathe and relax," one student told me. "When my kids are running around, driving me crazy at home, I stop and breathe now and it really helps," said another.

Immediately following our breathing exercises, I asked students to free-write—write without pause, write without self-criticism, and write with the peace of mind that no one would read their journal but them—for about ten minutes; I gave them both a topical prompt and the freedom to write on any topic of their choosing. The students did not hesitate. The classroom felt serene and still, free from anxious, unsettled energy. From where I stood, the breathing exercises appeared to have given them a sense of centeredness and presence, and supported students—many of whom, given that they often came from impoverished educational backgrounds, feared writing and lacked academic confidence—in writing fearlessly, allowing for an engagement with the writing process that often led to significant improvements in the way they handled language

for meaningful self-expression and deep encounters with knowledge. In this way, our breathing exercises both reduced stress by connecting students to their bodies, to their environment, and to the present moment, and also enriched the learning experience by freeing them, if momentarily, from the anxiety of self-criticism and self-doubt, allowing for new appreciation for educational process.

I enjoyed supporting the wellbeing of my students. So, inspired by the personal, transformative benefits of my own mindfulness practices, I invented some classes with a mind-body health theme. “Create a personalized health plan for yourself,” I said with excitement one dark winter evening. “Make a plan to do something that will make you feel good, inside and out. Then write an essay about your experience.”

Drawing on the ways in which my mindfulness and meditation practices had ignited a sense of interconnectedness between my mind and my body and my environment, I decided to go big and asked students in class to contemplate the interdependent relationships of our human existence. We looked at Google images of banana trees and almond plants and peanut farms and rice paddy fields so we could remember where food comes from. We discussed the relationship between physical activity and stress reduction. We shared success stories. We experienced the connection between movement and emotion. We drank more water. We overcame knee injuries and we did things outside we hadn’t done in years. We remembered that we had bodies and we felt good. We were happy and we were proud.

What else would make my students feel good about themselves, I wondered, while supporting their educational experiences with critical thinking? What else could get them back into their bodies and remind them of where they come from? What else might be preventing them from living in their bodies and environments, thereby limiting wellbeing and open-mindedness?

Right, of course.

I'd read about the "digital detox" concept on Adbusters' website sometime during the spring of 2011. I'd long admired the ways in which Adbusters offered creative, artsy, sometimes hilarious, other times disturbing, satires on consumer culture and neoliberalism, which Brown (2015) defines as the outcome of economic rationality having been plugged into all domains of life, and as "an understanding of the world and of the human beings within it as nothing but markets — an understanding of human beings as fully reducible to market actors" (Isquith, 2015, n.p.). As a longtime critic of consumer culture myself, I was quick to dig their digital detox new idea as a counter-cultural response to the forces of neoliberalism. They expressed the digital detox concept in a short animated video of stick figures happily leaving their digital devices behind and joyfully embracing new/old freedom in nature, next to a crudely drawn tree and beneath a childish sun shining, smiling. Unplug, take a break, look up at the sky, be with each other, reconnect to nature, experience a digital detox. I liked it. So I took it to school, and, in 2010, asked my Spring term Writing 115 students to be my Digital Detox guinea pigs.

After a few minutes of deep breathing, I said, "Pull your phones out of your pockets or out of your purses or from your backpacks, wherever they are, bring them out, bring them all out." Confusion spread across the room; students couldn't quite grasp being asked to do what most teachers had asked them to avoid.

"Hold your little computers in your hands," I continued. "Look at them. Touch them and cradle them. Play with them, enjoy them." Brows furrowed and bodies squirmed. "I want you to think about how you feel. How does this device make you feel? What kind of relationship do you have with your little computer? What does it mean to you? Have you ever lost it? What did that feel like?"

“Yes—and I felt like my heart would break out of my chest,” said one student, on the edge of her seat, with a trace of panic in her eyes.

“I don’t get it,” said another, sighing. “What’s the point of this?”

“It’s just a phone,” another said, turning his device over and over in his palm. “What’s the big deal?”

“Did you know that the *New York Times* recently published an article reporting that many of us are literally in love with our phones?” I said. “The chemicals that are released in our brains when we’re interacting with our phones are some of the same chemicals that are released when we’re falling in love with someone.”

Students laughed and nudged elbows and rolled their eyes.

“Think about it though, for real: How many of you sleep with your phones? How many of you cradle them in your hands and gaze into them and can’t stand to be away from them?” I asked, laughing a little. “But, seriously, that’s exactly what we’re going to do; we’re going to take some time away.”

Fear deadened the air in the classroom. One student shook his head, as if to say, *No way*.

“Hold on, hear me out, it’s an experiment, a fun temporary experiment,” I responded, working to combat the fear with enthusiasm. “It will bring exciting change into your life. Be bold and be brave and do something different - this makes life exciting. It’s temporary and you get to decide how to break away, maybe you go full-blown without, maybe you just take a little time away; you get to decide, that’s the best part.”

Relief spanned out, if only slightly.

I introduced the assignment: Come to class next time with a personalized digital detox plan. In the next two weeks, how much time can you take away from your phones, from social

media, from video games, from Netflix, and so on? You decide. Be realistic. Be sincere and be brave and bold and allow yourself to experience real change.

Change your life a little, *why not?* It's always already changing any way; if you don't direct the change yourself, someone or something else will. Here I was, unaware at the time, calling upon the classic work of American psychologist and philosopher William James (1890), whose ideas would return to me in future research.

One student reported that she would only use Facebook for three hours each night.

Another student reported that he would play video games only on the weekends.

Many would disable their social media accounts entirely for the duration of two weeks.

One student didn't have a phone or a social media account, in the first place. He said he'd try to watch less TV.

About a week later, a student walked into class and said, "I'm *so* mad at you," as she plopped into her chair, with half a grin on her face.

"Oh yea, why?" I asked, arranging papers at the front of the room.

"My best friend got engaged this weekend but I didn't find out until later because she announced it on Facebook. Everyone knew about it but me ..."

"Hmmm," I responded quietly, wanting to give her the chance to decide what to say next.

"I mean, I guess she could've called me ... wait, why didn't she call me? Or even text me?"

"Sounds like a great topic for an essay," I smiled.

She later handed in a poignant and thoughtful essay about the changing nature of friendship in the age of social media; in it, she questioned how social media reshaped the bonds and shared memories we make within our friendship experiences.

Another student wrote an essay that inquired into the psychological problems of the ongoing social comparison that social media affords, detailing the ways in which the performance- and image-driven qualities of Facebook often made her feel inferior to others.

Others bemoaned the lost time spent interacting with siblings in person, adventuring outside, painting pictures, strumming a guitar or simply having a face-to-face conversation with a parent (many of whom students criticized for being obsessed with smartphones themselves). And still others praised the new time made possible by breaking from digital devices and media, which allowed more space for meaningful interaction with children, significant others and encounters with the natural world: *I hadn't realized how much time I'd been spending scrolling gossip on social media*, was a common sentiment. *I'd almost forgotten how much I enjoy quiet walks outside*, was another. *I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to have free time*.

Building off these realizations and mini epiphanies, I evolved curricula for subsequent digital detox-themed writing courses to include the request that students select a supplemental activity that they could turn to fill the new time and space opened up by the absence of digital activity. One student chose to start writing songs, another would begin painting watercolors again, another would walk her dog more often, another would spend more time playing with her toddler, and another would simply lie on the floor, stare at the ceiling and do nothing.

Such supplemental activities encouraged students to think about the experiences they valued (online and off) and about how they'd best like to spend their time. By empowering students with choice (in that they chose how to “detox” from new media) and reconnecting them to personal passion (through a supplemental activity of their choosing), this curriculum was effective in inspiring students to become conscious and self-aware in the choices they make

(online and off); it also bridged what I hadn't at the time realized I was bridging: internal and external experience.

At the time, I was a writing teacher loosely experimenting with methods for enhancing awareness around the effects of technology on our lives. Guided by mostly personal experience and intuition, I hadn't yet connected to the serious group of scholars out there systematically investigating the question of our relationship to technology. Yet, I was asking students to enact and engage with internal processes, such as self-reflexivity and critical consciousness (though I wouldn't have known to use those terms at the time), as a means for reflecting on and directing external experience, so that they could eventually, hopefully see inner and outer experience as inseparable. By closing the gap, I hoped, students might mitigate the competitive, image-oriented influence of consumer culture while cultivating inner resources of self-love, compassion, and non-judgment for enriching one's sense of wellbeing, ultimately contributing to the wellbeing of one's community and environment.

What I was doing explicitly wasn't fleshed out in any official, credentialed way at the time. At the time, I just wanted my students to feel good, inside and out.

In the three years that I taught community college writing courses around a new media theme, I slowly merged what had begun as separate themes: New media literacy (via the digital detox) and contemplative learning (via wellbeing practices), hoping the two themes could work together to support students in meeting the reading, writing, and critical thinking objectives of freshman composition. New media literacy is a broad, newly emergent term that encompasses many pedagogies and practices and that often involves acknowledging and validating the ways in which new media technologies are thread into the lives of today's students, shaping the way they perceive, experience, and learn, in- and outside the classroom. The efforts of new media literacy

pedagogy tend to focus less on the dangers of mass media, and more on the new complex relationships made possible by new media environments (Buckingham, 2013; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Ito et al., 2009). American media scholar Henry Jenkins explains that today's new media literacy efforts "require a movement from thinking about literary as a personal or individualized skillset to thinking about it as a skill that has to do with how we relate to others in our community, thinking about how we create, circulate, collaborate and connect with other people" (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd, 2016, p. 97).

Similarly, contemplative learning embodies a wide range of pedagogies and practices; I find Barbezat's & Bush's (2014) open-ended definition most useful: "Seeing things as they are, being open to new ideas, appreciating the contribution of silence to learning, valuing each human voice, [and] honoring the constantly changing nature of ideas" (p. 5). In the beginning, the discussion and practice related to mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative approaches to engaging with reading, writing and critical thinking processes remained separate from discussions, activities and experiments related to new media and digital curricula, wherein we debated the pros (connectivity, mainly) and cons (commercialization, mostly) of the new media environments we now lived in.

But it didn't take long for me to realize how supportive contemplative practices as educational tools of inquiry could be for raising self-awareness and critical consciousness around living and learning within new media environments. In the final academic year I spent teaching at community college, I designed my courses so that the first half of the term focused on heightening critical consciousness around the relationships we have with new media, and the second half was spent learning about contemplative practices as avenues into reconnecting to one's whole self, as integrated into everything else, and to one's natural, physical world so that

we could begin to see how technologies are not substitutes for ‘natural’ existence, but rather extensions on life that could be productive and positive when encountered with mindfulness and care. Here are a few excerpts from essays that students wrote about learning to use new technologies mindfully:

We spend all day with our devices; it's the first thing we look at when we wake up and the last thing we look at, at night. We need to learn to use media mindfully and notice when it's time to pull away from the device, so we don't waste another beautiful day surfing the web.

It is becoming common in our society to neglect nature. And now even more with our advances in technology ... We are teaching our kids to depend too much on technology, and forgetting about nature. We forget that nature is something that is real, that exists, and is free.

Practicing mindfulness every day for at least ten minutes a day by putting our devices away to disconnect from technology and reconnect with the real world allows us to secure our feelings in human contact.

In essay after essay, I took pleasure in the new joys my students appeared to have found through deeply contemplating their relationships with new media. It didn't matter all that much to me whether they actually changed their habits and patterns in their experiences with new media; what mattered most, rather, was that they brought a new self-awareness and critical consciousness to their experiences with new media, habitual or otherwise, that they'd be

prompted to pose questions as: *What am I doing here, and why?* What I most wanted for my students was the capacity for looking at their worlds through new lens, by traveling avenues they'd never before traveled, and opening up possibilities they hadn't before realized were possible. True, this is perhaps the goal of all education; there's not much unique here. And yet, given that new media technologies and digital cultures are new extensions on human life, many of today's young adults haven't yet invested much time or space into opening to multidimensional viewpoints on the complicated new media spaces they live with and within. So, as teacher, I had a hunch, it was precisely this kind of time and space that they needed. But was I qualified to be their guide in creating this sort of educational journey into new media literacy?

I wasn't so sure. Sure, I knew grammar. I recognized the problems of passive voice and dangling modifiers. I knew a strong thesis statement from a weak one. I understood essay coherency and the ethos, pathos and logos of rhetoric. I had an MFA in Creative Writing to back me up on this. And, yes, I had learned, in both my personal and professional life, that contemplative practices, such as breathing consciously to feel better connected to the physical body and to the present moment, gave me and my students experiences of heightened awareness, greater focus and enhanced feelings of non-judgment, empathy and compassion (Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010). And I had recognized, like many others, that ongoing interactions within new media environments were beginning to take their toll on our capacity for feeling calm, centered and authentically engaged in and empathetic to our everyday life experiences (Levy, 2016; Turkle, 2015).

But did I actually know media? Was I qualified to talk about new media with authority at the front of the classroom? I wasn't so sure, and so I returned to graduate school, this time for a

master's degree in media studies, with the primary intention of becoming a better educator: One who could address what appears to be a growing need among young adults for guidance in navigating the plethora of ways in which new media ecologies complicate life, personally, socially, culturally, in every way imaginable, really (Ito et al., 2009).

Do I know new media now, now that I've dedicated the past year or so of my life to studying the multitude of ways in which people make sense of media, old and new? Not in any absolutist, fixed way, of course; media are like the air we breathe, and none of us breathe the same air twice. And yet, despite the complex, ethereal nature of media, I've expanded the ways in which I perceive media. In this way, I've also expanded the ways in which I perceive human life. These days, rather than focus on what new media make impossible, I seek out what they make possible. These days, thanks to the time I've spent contemplating media ecology theory—media as interconnected extensions on human life wherein there is fluidity, malleability, and a multitude of possibility—I now look beyond the ways in which I once divided natural and digital experience, off- and online spheres, to see that there is no separation. This allows me to understand how new media and digital technologies are embedded into the fabric of our lives, into the environments, online and off, that we live and breathe in, think and perceive in, feel, share, learn, imagine, and create in, leaving me with pressing questions as these: What are we going to make of the new contexts shaping our lives? How are we going to respond to the new ways in which they challenge us?

These are tough questions. But being human has always meant being challenged. Haven't our many challenges helped us get to know ourselves better? Don't our objects, technologies and ideas about them, in some ways, provide the perfect backdrop on which to work through the big, tough questions around what it means to be human? Don't social media offer up possibilities to

help us contemplate, in an integral fashion, the ways in which we value our relationships with others? Doesn't interacting with identities via a social network like Facebook prompt us to question our sense of self? Don't our smartphones, and the constant attention they demand, ask us to reconsider where we want to put our attention and how we want to invest our time? Don't the ways in which our eyes, hands and emotions reach ceaselessly, sometimes subconsciously, for screens and new media urge us to wonder about the origins and consequences of our urges? Can our new media habits not inspire us to reflect; do they not demand that we ask: What is this all about and why does it hold such power? And isn't the whole point perhaps, as the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1903)—whose work emerges, in part, from a reuniting of the mind with the body—once famously wrote, to live the questions, to live them in deeply, felt, and embodied ways, without attaching to some presumed or hoped for answer:

...I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

How might we live the questions we have concerning new media? Can we love, embody, and live them in ways that keep our minds open, and unhindered by presumptuously sought after answers (or by fears of Big Brother), for experiencing heightened awareness, self-reflexivity and critical consciousness in considering our relationships to new media environments? Can we live

our questions in ways that open us to seeing complex interdependencies we hadn't previously allowed ourselves to consider, and in ways that perhaps ultimately enrich humanity?

If new media offer possibilities of new environments, or media ecologies, that provide the potential for perceiving life, online and off, as fluid, interconnected, multidimensional, and open to human input and intention, then perhaps people can inquire into and engage with technologies in ways that make room for the flourishing of healthy relationships and communities, and the nourishing of social good and personal wellbeing. And if we can hold critical awareness around what's been baked into new media environments (the ideals of neoliberal culture, mostly), then can we also mitigate the sometimes negative consequences of materialistic ideology, meanwhile cultivating the capacity for discovering that we are made of more (inside and out) than habituated, marketized new media experiences would have us believe?

The new perspectives, potentialities, and relationships that arise from recognizing new media as open, interconnected systems won't come automatically. And recognizing new potential doesn't commonly come without conscious effort to open one's mind and heighten awareness. And conscious efforts and heightened awareness don't typically show up without some sort of prompting. So, what sort of prompting? What sort of prompting supports young adults, because they are often the ones most immersed in new media, to critically, consciously reflect on the relationships they have with new media? And, more specifically, what sort of pedagogy inspires students to engage with new media in healthy, productive, and self-reflective ways, in ways that enrich wellbeing, empower agency of the whole self, and contribute to social good? What sort of pedagogy asks students to see what's possible and what's rich with potential,

rather than what's grim, dystopian, and doomed to cause the soul of humanity to crumble away? What sort of pedagogy moves beyond technological determinism for uncovering hope?

I have a few ideas. Now that I've been exposed to an abundance of scholarly work posing similar inquiries and finding positive possibilities, I feel hopeful. And now that I've closely witnessed, as a teacher and an auto-ethnographic researcher the ways in which some college courses are responding to the pervasive presence of new media, and how some college students are contemplating their attachment to new media today, I feel a great need for rethinking media literacy. Like Buckingham (2013), Jenkins (2006), Ito et al. (2009), and boyd (2014), I feel a great need for meeting young adults where they are today—oftentimes confused, mixed-up and split into contradictions—so that acknowledgment and validation (not condemnation) can enrich their educational experiences with new media. Moreover, I believe integrating contemplative learning practices, involving openness, non-judgment, empathy, and love, can help provide such acknowledgment and validation, giving students a supportive foundation for thinking about their relationships with new media so that they can learn and grow (rather than wither and curl).

And so, drawing on my experience as a community college instructor, as a graduate student researcher, and as a person alive in a landscape thread with new media technologies, the questions that most centrally emerge in this project include: What sort of new media literacy pedagogy supports students in critically reflecting on the relationships that they have with and within new media environments? And can contemplative learning practices help students in raising awareness and heightening critical consciousness for cultivating healthy, productive, and creative relationships with and within new media environments?

To explore these questions, I begin, in chapter one, by laying the foundation for the philosophical framework informing the ways in which I perceive new media technologies. I draw

on the work of American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1916; 1925), Canadian philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg (1981), and French philosopher, social scientist, and anthropologist Bruno Latour (1991) because they have each, in their own profound way, helped me to perceive new media environments as interconnected, interdependent spaces that do not exist apart from any of the other spaces people inhabit, meaning the abstract thoughts and designs people have about new media are built concretely into new media ecologies, shaping the experiences people have there. In this way, I also take up media ecology theory (the theory that all media are extensions and expansions on human existence) as a metaphor for contemplating new media spaces as ecosystems that involve both closed, marketized systems and open, creative systems, thereby setting up the claims I will make about new media literacy pedagogy in chapters two and three.

In chapter two, I introduce the findings of my focus group study, which gathered insights from young adults about their everyday experiences with and within new media environments. Moreover, I interpret my findings as illustrating the various ways in which today's young adults frequently feel mixed-up and at odds as they make sense of what it means to live lives that are embedded within new media technologies, suggesting that the neoliberal culture of marketized new media are, in part, responsible for the paradoxes (i.e. I am so connected, I am disconnected) young adults face in their relationships with digital technologies. Finally, I focus one effort to explore and encounter these complex challenges: the 'digital detox' as a mainstream, cultural trend and as a new media literacy assignment, and investigate its value and its drawbacks.

In chapter three, I describe the ways in which contemplative learning practices—practices meant to open awareness, increase capacity for empathy, and allow for loving experiences with education—have supported my community college students in deeply and richly contemplating

the ways in which they perceive, experience, and critically reflect on new media, meanwhile enriching their relationship with learning and education. I also explore the experiences I had as a volunteer in a high school art class, wherein I taught a version of the digital detox that involved the creation and production of a multimedia project. I compare the different pedagogies as a means for inquiring into the value both in finding distance from new media and also in engaging meaningfully with new media. In this way, I show where contemplative learning practices intersect with the philosophies of technology introduce in chapter one, closing by pointing to the idea that when we recognize ourselves, our minds, our feelings, our bodies as interconnected with everything we experience (from offline physical space to online digital realms), then we can play an integral role in all that we encounter.

A Note on Method: This project takes a critical, narrative auto-ethnographic approach, blending self-reflective interpretation of personal experience with interpretations of empirical materials, which are viewed as performative rather than commodified, systematized, or reproducible (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Denzin, 2009). As such, this project aims to foster understanding, reflection, and action that are not bound by the conventional, narrow constraints of policy-oriented, positivistic framework. Counter to the positivist ideals and quantitative orientations that dominate the culture of research today, which often pretend that there is a fixed world ‘out there’ waiting to be solved, which often presume that data are neutral, and which often ignore the political powers influencing the shape and outcome of research, critical narrative auto-ethnography recognizes inquiry as actively integrated into that which it inquires into, employs storytelling and creativity as a means for understanding and reflexivity, and interprets the production and experience of knowledge as situated within empirical experience (Denzin, 2009).

In this way, critical ethnographers “think about experience, emotions, events, processes, performances, narratives, poetics, the politics of possibility” (Denzin, 2009, p. 142), emphasizing the importance of epistemology over prediction and accepting ethics, morals, and human biases as inextricably involved in the research process. This project acknowledges that qualitative research is both a process and a product, and draws on concrete, contextualized experience as much as abstract theory, thought and emotion, aligning well with the philosophies of the fluid, always-changing interconnectedness of human experience already informing this project.

Recognizing that researchers do not work in isolation but are always integrated within social networks and environmental contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 200), this method allowed me to witness myself, including my perspectives, senses, and emotions, as integrated into and thus in some ways shaping the observations I am drawing from my research. Furthermore, I see writing as a method of inquiry (Denzin, 1989) and feel that through the process of writing this project, I found myself in a dialogue with myself, as well as with my subjects of study (people, places, tools, ideas), and thereby discovered entry ways into deeply questioning the views and assumptions I brought forth. In this project, I employ a first-person voice for serving multiple purposes: For reflecting on personal experience to offer insight into where I am coming from and how I am thinking in perceiving media, education, and technology. For critically evaluating empirical data and encounters with literature, and for interpreting the experiences and voices of focus group participants, community college students and classroom activity. This approach offers a style of inquiry and investigation that is integrated into multiple areas of experience thus offering nuanced perspective, but it has drawbacks in that first person accounts can sometimes overlook other possibilities and potentialities. Finally, I believe in the power of stories, in Joan Didion’s famous line: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” and so, by employing critical,

narrative auto-ethnographic methods, I hope that this project, and the many stories it carries, will be experienced not as proof of any absolute truth nor as a set of hard, replicable rules to follow, but as stories that can be shared, passed on, and added to the multilayered, multidimensional ways with which we contemplate life (off and online).

CHAPTER II

WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES IN ORDER TO LIVE

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?
-W.B. Yeats

In the handful of years that I spent driving an hour each way between Portland and McMinnville, home to Chemeketa Community College's rural Yamhill Valley Campus, slipping between interstates, strip malls, patchwork pastures, goat farms, pig sties, peach tree orchards and rolling horizons, I often listened to cassette tape recordings by a pair of Rumi scholars reading English translations of poems by the 13th Century Persian poet and Sufi mystic. I'd picked up the cassettes from a thrift store for a buck with a bit of a chuckle; I thought they'd be entertaining on the deck of my old, beat-up Toyota sedan. Turns out, after having listened to these rhythmic spoken-word poems repeatedly for nearly five years now, having been pushed along by their wisdom to keep going (*though there's no place to get to*), having memorized and been altered by many of their lines (*actually, my friend, what you're eating is your own imagination*), and having played them night after night to lull me to sleep (*shhh, now listen, I'll say it again*), I find them quite profound, even transformative: "Start a big foolish project," says Rumi translator Coleman Barks atop tribal drum beats and a windy flute. "...It makes absolutely no difference what people think of you."

Start a big foolish project ... it makes absolutely no difference what people think of you.

The line played over and over again in my mind, and made me think often about the temporality

of time and space, as I moved through it on these long commutes, which delivered me from the commercial constructions of sameness into the shifting patterns of endless horizons and open landscapes, and then back again, asking me to contemplate often what we do with contexts, and what contexts do with us. *Start a big foolish project ... it makes absolutely no difference what people think of you* escaped the car speakers and made me think of movement and change. Take the same path, the same commute, long enough and you're sure to witness the great change inherent to the routines, habits, and spaces we take for granted. On my journeys to and from McMinnville, I saw the sudden appearance of nursing baby goats, the sudden scattering of moldy peaches on the orchard floor, the sudden disappearance of fattened pigs for sale.

I tend to think often about how to make the most of the limited amount of time we have to be here. Usually, awareness of mortality does not depress me; it inspires me. As educator and activist Parker Palmer (2010) wrote, "Cultivating a steady awareness of the fact that we will die can help us savor the gift of life and use it to the fullest" (p. 50). I could feel life changing and passing fast, sometimes too fast as I sped back and forth, between the city and the country, racing to be a good teacher, yearning fervently to do more, to be somehow better, while working hard to accept, with a full embrace, life as it was. I wanted to be better at the art of simultaneously accepting and making change: "When grapes turn to wine, they long for *our* ability to change," Rumi revealed to me. "When the stars revolve around the North Pole, they long for *our* growing consciousness." I wanted to make and accept change, to grow consciousness, from the heart, free from the anxious self-consciousness of social norms and paradigmatic expectations—free from the rules that the structures of our social lives often demand we follow. *Start a big foolish project ... It makes absolutely no difference what people think of you.*

Okay, I will. I'll do what I ask of my students, only I'll extend on the challenge: I'll spend the summer without a mobile phone, I promised myself in June of 2014, and I'll write blog posts about my radical experience. In the beginning, I was so hopeful. "Here's the deal: I want to know new media better," I wrote in my first blog entry. "I want to understand how these advances (and the new places, experiences and perspectives they bring to our lives) are changing us. In fact, I'll be going back to school in the fall to indulge such curiosities. And so I feel as though I ought to participate. I ought to know a thing or two about what I so often criticize. And I'm going to start with an experiment (my foolish project) and toss in some irony (using the technology of Tumblr to write about tech abstinence)."

At first, unsure as to how to actually shut down the Verizon service fueling my iPhone, I simply powered the mobile phone off and tucked it under a pair of socks in a dresser drawer, set up a land line, and borrowed an old avocado-green-colored rotary telephone from my mom. At first, the change excited me; it felt like time travel. When the telephone rang, and it rang loud, I ran giddily toward it, thrilled by the suspense of not knowing who was on the other end of the line. I stretched the telephone's long curly cord out the back door and onto the patio, held the thick telephone receiver to my ear, kicked back and felt like a teenager again.

Later, after some long and laborious conversation with a few Verizon employees who worked every bit of magic they could muster to convince me otherwise, I officially disconnected my smartphone service. I felt liberated, sad, courageous, and alone. My rotary telephone rarely rang. When a girlfriend finally did call, I asked, "What took you so long?" Her response: "I just don't think of this line as real, so I forget about it."

Being without a smartphone wasn't all that painful for me, not in the way that it would be for many teenagers today. I'd already made it my habit to walk the dog and grocery shop and

dine out without my mobile. And as someone entering her late '30s, popular smartphone app activity (Facebook messenger, G-chat, Snapchat, etc.) wasn't a huge part of my social life. I talked to my friends, with my actual voice, on the mobile phone; I was already old fashioned. And yet, away from my smartphone, I still felt the strangeness of being disconnected, of being removed, of being forgotten, and perhaps pointlessly so.

On the second day without my mobile, I walked along the sandy shore of the Columbia River, kicking at the pebbles, tossing gnarled sticks for my dog. I was there to meet a friend for a picnic. We'd simply made plans to meet on this stretch of the river; we weren't more specific. I looked around and thought it best to just stay put. So I set up camp. I laid out a blanket and arranged the cheese and crackers and olives and salami and red wine. I sat and I waited and I watched the vultures circling in the distance and I wondered what time it was, so I studied the light, but of course I was still unsure. I decided to walk upriver, even though I felt uncomfortable leaving my things, and after what felt like a long half hour, a precious half of an hour that could've been saved by a quick text message, we found each other. I was frustrated. The inconvenience felt pointless. "What's the point?" I asked in my blog a day or two later. "You can shut your phone down but you can't shut down the part of you that knows good and well: *This would all be so much easier if you just had a phone.* Why are you making life more difficult? What are you trying to prove? You can disconnect one line but you cannot disconnect them all."

And so, after only two dates, one for a family dinner and the other for the river meet-up, were inconvenienced by my lack of access to a mobile phone, I gave up. I'd set out to spend a summer without a mobile phone; I lasted two measly days. I felt embarrassed and ashamed. And yet, I also felt enlightened (if only a little): I realized that what I actually wanted was not to escape my reality but to perceive differently the world I live in, and thus embrace it differently,

as I wrote on my blog, “You are a stitch in this fabric whether you like it or not ... I cannot deny that I live in this world. Now what am I going to do about it?”

While I didn’t spend the summer without a mobile phone, I did spend the summer contemplating what my failed attempt to live without one meant. By taking a figurative step out of the traffic and noise and habit of new media environments—by *imagining* with my *whole* self what life might be like apart from new media—I realized that I am inevitably immersed in a multidimensional existence everywhere mediated by vastly interconnected digital networks, that there is no space separate from this technologically enhanced existence into which I can escape, and that, while we can’t live apart from the digitally-mediated fabric of our lives, we can, within the contexts of our lives, take action, cause a disruption, create a ripple in the waves of our semi-conscious habituated routines, and give ourselves a break from operating on unexamined, unquestioned default modes, wherein life feels automatic, reactionary, routinized, unnoticed, and wherein life is less likely to be deeply felt, embodied, and meaningfully connected to exchanges of empathy, compassion and love. “Here’s what I got,” I wrote in my blog: “I cannot deny that I live in this world. Now what am I going to do about it?” I am going to stretch my mind and grow my consciousness and examine, from an imaginary, embodied, and loving distance, this always technologically mediated existence. I am going to take a leap and I am going to accept and explore change; what I most want is to leap and to change, as Rumi once put it: “What I most want is to spring out of this personality, then to sit apart from that leaping, I’ve lived too long where I can be reached.”

I recognized, with mediated help from Rumi via Bark, that unencumbered by what others might think of us, by how we may not fit in with social norms, structures, and conventions, by how we can be constantly *reached*, constantly obligated to keep up, we can start a big, foolish

project. And in our foolishness, in what often appears to make no sense at all, and yet has so much to teach us and so many ways to change us, we may revel; *whoever's calm and sensible is insane*, Rumi reminds me. Backed by the insight into mindfulness practices I'd gathered from my acupuncturist, along with the experience I'd gained experimenting with contemplative learning practices in the community college classroom, I realized that, in my attempt to live without a mobile phone, I'd given myself the space (the leap) to reflect on the interconnected ways with which our lives are woven; I could now see more clearly how interdependent our lives are. In questioning the purpose of my foolish project, I concluded in my blog:

Maybe I needed to feel, in the richness of the present moment, just how wired into this world I am. Yes, I could take the phone out of my hand but I could not take the phone—the phone as a symbol of infinite connectivity—out of me and my mind and my life, which of course involves all of you, and all of your lives, too ...turning off my phone for a couple of days reminded me that we're all living on the same enormous piece of intricately woven fabric. From a distance, with my phone shut off, I could see how what each of us do causes a tiny ripple in the fabric; threads moved like waves as millions upon millions of people reached out, again and again, without end, to connect with one another. Without my phone, I could feel more than ever before the extent of our yearning to be close. And I liked that.

And my community college students liked that I “failed” my foolish summer project. They laughed and enjoyed that, in some ways, I was just like them (a little in love with my mobile phone). A sense of humor and relatability are always helpful in the classroom, both of which I would later find backed by experiential education theory (Dewey, 1916), and I was able

to bring both to school primarily because I'd attempted to *be* the change I wanted to see in the world (my apologies for the cliché). In deeply felt, eye-opening ways, I'd lived and embodied what I'd wanted for my students. And my students could sense this to be true, which helped them trust me when I said that an experience, such as a digital detox, might be worth their while, too.

Rather than come to the front of the classroom with a list of criticisms, condemnations, and I-know-better-than-you warnings around their experience within new media environments (though, admittedly, I did some of that too, as I wasn't yet privy to what boyd [2014] would later help me grasp, which I explain in chapter two), I began with a tone of relatability, understanding, and humor. And by incorporating contemplative practices, such as focused breathing exercises, mindful journaling, and deep listening group work (more on this in chapter three), I reminded them that love, compassion, and empathy were at the heart of our educational experiences together, a pedagogy I'd later find theoretically grounded in the work of Dewey (1916), Freire (1970), and hooks (1994). I reminded them that we were here together to discover not what new media make impossible, but what they make possible, which is precisely what many new media literacy educators and scholars are working toward today.

New Media As Interconnected Ecologies

To discover what's possible from our experiences within new media, educators and scholars may begin by recognizing that our smartphones and our tablets and our social media accounts are not objects, or spaces, that exist apart from us; rather they are elaborate extensions on our minds, on our bodies, and on our environments (Dewey, 1925; McLuhan, 1964; Latour, 1991). New media can make possible, not new separate environments, but rather experiences that

make visible the ways in which there has always been more to our environments (and to ourselves) than we conventionally allow ourselves to see. New media help us see that the contexts of our lives, be they natural or digital, artificially constructed or rurally grown, are expansive, fluid, open to our input, and always in the process of change. In this way, the sometimes multidimensional and robustly connected qualities of new media can reveal to us, in a more visceral way than perhaps any previous technology, the interconnected nature of human life. It may not yet be our habit to behave in ways that acknowledge the interdependence of our existence, but new media could act as a catalyst for such, especially if young adults are inspired by educators to perceive of the possibilities, not impossibilities, in new media (Jenkins, Ito, boyd, 2016).

With help from philosophies of mindfulness, contemplative learning practices, along with Rumi and several other poets and Buddhist authors since, such as American poet Mary Oliver and Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hanh, I'd already recognized the interconnectedness of life. But it wasn't until I was introduced by a cultural studies of communication course to the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in the winter of my first year in the media studies graduate program (2015) that I began to see media as interconnected spaces that were not separate from but rather elaborate extensions on our experiences in the physical, natural world. That winter, while reading Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art as Experience* (1934), I was introduced by another class to media ecology theory, which perceives media as interrelated environments wherein there are no separations between subjects and objects, or between abstract thought and concrete experience, or between conscious, imaginative intentions in one's mind and sensual experience in one's natural world of phenomena, or between how one perceives media and how one experiences media. In sum, media ecology theory argues that all

media are extensions and expansions on human existence. Studying media ecology theory involved reading Postman's (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Meyrowitz's (1985) *No Sense of Place*, and revisiting the theories of McLuhan (1964), primarily those in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), which I had first studied as an MFA student a handful of years earlier. To me, Dewey, Postman, Meyrowitz, and McLuhan, along with Rumi, Oliver, and Hanh, all used different language to express the same idea: There are no separations between the way we think and feel, and the shape of the experiences we have.

As a graduate student intending to blend new media literacy pedagogy into future teaching experiences, be they in a community college or high school classroom, be they in a language arts or social studies setting, I was thrilled to discover media ecology theory, because this meant that I now had a scholarly framework for bringing contemplative learning practices into the classroom as a means for prompting students to recognize the interconnectedness in their everyday life experiences, which are, these days, typically thread with an abundance of new media encounters. After a winter immersed in Dewey's ideas around the phenomenological richness of interdependence, followed by a spring with Hegel's philosophies about the importance of connectedness through community, I felt supported in the pedagogy I imagined for my future students—a pedagogy that would seek to resolve what sometimes leaves us feeling disconnected.

What leaves us feeling disconnected? Just being born can leave us feeling disconnected. But for the purposes of this project, I'll focus on the ways in which today's new media, situated in a neoliberal technoculture, can often leave us feeling incomplete and disconnected. And then I will explore how contemplative learning practices can support students in perceiving new media

as ecologies that extend on and mirror the interconnectedness of our everyday existence, in turn, empowering students, through heightened self-awareness and critical consciousness, to engage with and within new media ecologies in ways that mitigate the negative effects of feeling incomplete and disconnected while bringing into being the positive, productive, and creative potentialities of experiencing interconnection.

In this chapter, I will discuss Dewey's philosophies as I see them relating to encounters with and within new media ecologies today. I will then show where Dewey's (1916) experiential learning theories, along with his philosophies of technology, intersect with today's scholarly work in new media literacy (Ito et al, 2009; Buckingham, 2013; boyd, 2014, Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016), which often employs media ecology theory (as a metaphor) for encouraging open perspectives of interconnectedness. While this discussion is led primarily by Dewey's philosophies, as it was his thinking that led me, in the aforementioned winter, to bring media ecology theory and new media literacy together, I will also discuss the work of two other philosophers of technology (Feenberg, 1981; Latour, 1991), along with a handful of new media scholars who helped established theories around the interrelated infrastructures of internet technology, as a means for highlighting both how the assumption that objects exist separately from subjects problematizes experiences with new media and educational experience, and also how the potentialities in the reuniting of subject and object, of mind and body, support a productive, positive, and creative experience with new media literacy.

John Dewey's Philosophies of Media, Technology, and Education

Dewey's work helped me to see that our media, our technologies, do not exist separately from us, but rather are extensions of our minds and bodies, and are thus subject to and tied up in

human intention and reflection. In *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey explains how people do not exist apart, in any way, from the environments that support them. According to Hickman (2009), Dewey unified what had long been divided by ancient transcendental philosophy as much as by industrial, mechanical existence: Subjects and objects. Dewey's philosophy of re-unification is not a mystical re-unification, but a recognition of wholeness based on radical empiricism, Darwinism, and naturalism; it is a re-unification that is contextualized in time and space wherein people are neither separate from where they live, nor are they separate from how they think and feel.

Dewey's work explores how abstract thought and emotion, sensory, bodily experience, and physical, natural world phenomena, which emerge from encounters between organisms and the environment, altogether interact in the same expanse of time and space, wherein acting and receiving, or doing and undergoing, are entangled in a dance of reciprocity, which is grounded in the empirical phenomenological world rather than occurring in a some imagined, transcendental otherworld. Dewey's philosophy of interconnection is not one made manifest in some mystical play above or out there; rather it is built and empirically recognized from within the nature of life on Earth, biologically, socially, culturally.

Dewey attempted to resolve the dualistic style of thought that had come to dominate modern Western thinking: That man transcends the natural world and is thus superior to it and positioned to exploit it; that man can somehow act and live apart from the consequences of nature. He argued that when we recognize the interior as integrated into the exterior, we repair the disease of disconnect and we discover the potentialities in consummation and unity, which is a philosophical concept that Andrew Feenberg, who holds the Canada Research Chair in the Philosophy of Technology in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, also

explored in his book *Philosophy of Praxis* (1981). Like Dewey, Feenberg claims that human intentions, desires, and ideals are built into technological innovation, shaping what technologies afford and lead to, including the consequences that they have for the people and communities who engage with them. Feenberg offers a philosophy of technology that, similar to Dewey's work, attempts to resolve dualities by demonstrating how a reunification of the subject and the object, the consciousness and the technology it inquires into, can bring forth decision-making around technologies, in design and use, that ultimately serve the wellbeing of communities and societies. Both Dewey and Feenberg argue that by recognizing perceptions of technologies as enmeshed in the outcomes of technology, we can materialize experiences with technology that support relationship rather than, like subject-object splits, encourage division.

Further supporting the boundary-blurring philosophies of thinkers like Dewey and Feenberg is the work of French philosopher, anthropologist, and social scientist Bruno Latour. In his 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern*, for which he is perhaps best known, Latour interrogates the relationships between nature and culture, and claims that subjects, or scientists, study objects, or nature, from inside and outside, all at once, thereby interpellating, or bringing into being, what they find. Like Dewey and Feenberg, Latour recognizes that the various avenues through which we exist—for example, through our senses, our languages, and our material objects—do not exist independent of one another but rather are interwoven. In this way, Latour perceives the complex workings of the mind as, not separate from, but embedded within our shared, sensory, phenomenological experiences, challenging Scientism, which pretends with arbitrary authority that there is a single version of the “truth” and a narrow version of “reality” that somehow exist “out there” waiting to be discovered, meanwhile contributing to the feelings of disconnect and incompleteness that many encounter today. Alternately, the philosophies of

interconnectedness brought forth by Dewey, Feenberg, and Latour offer experiences of consummation, reunification, and social togetherness that support an endlessly interacting understanding of media, technology and education.

Some of today's new media and digital technology scholars have also pointed to the importance in recognizing the interconnectedness of publicly, digitally networked technoculture. Castells (1996) explains that the interrelated multi-nodal patterns of digital technologies mirror natural, biological patterns, illustrating how technologies are expansions on the mind and body. Pinch and Bijker (1987) argue for a shift away from the historical, deterministic inclination to draw hard lines between the social and natural world, between science and technology, and toward a flexible, integrative approach that acknowledges technological innovations and scientific advances as multi-directional socially constructed developments; thus, science and technology, along with the ways in which we think about them, are always, already enmeshed in the interconnected social contexts that helped to produce them. Similarly, Winner (1993) discusses the relevance in moving beyond the assumption that we can study technology from the outside, toward a philosophy that embraces intersubjectivity, interpretive flexibility, and always changing open systems. Finally, Terranova (2004) finds that information theory, when applied to digital networks, or new media spaces, expands perspectives for shifting away from analogous, relationship with culture and politics to relationships that are dynamic and open to the infinite possibilities that come from recognizing interrelatedness.

Today's digital networks make visible conceptual arguments Dewey made long ago, which claimed that people interact within vast, open, and fluid contexts in interrelated ways. But while the interconnectedness of interaction is inevitable, the outcomes are not. Instead, they can be directed by choosing to engage with environments, or technologies, in a particular, conscious,

and conscientious way. And so, these days, when I return to those Rumi tapes and hear, once again, the words: “When grapes turn to wine, they long for *our* ability to change. When the stars revolve around the North Pole, they long for *our* growing consciousness,” I think now of Dewey, because, though Rumi and Dewey existed away from each other in time and space, I see their philosophies as intersecting. To me, both claim that our capacity for change and growing consciousness are enmeshed in the phenomenology of our lives, and that such capacity is directed by human will, effort, and choice. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey explained the interdependent relationships between people and their contextualized experiences in the world this way (the idea that follows also informs the auto-ethnographic method this project takes):

When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return: such is the peculiar combination. The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness or value of the experience. Mere activity does not constitute experience. It is dispersive, centrifugal, dissipating. Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something (p. 139).

This is Dewey's hypothesis: *Mere activity does not constitute experience ... change is meaningless transition unless consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it.* Meaningful experience, experience that teaches us something, experience from which we can change and grow, involves conscious connection. And while there are many ways to prompt conscious connection, the most readily available way is through intending change, enacting it, embodying it, and living it (thus learning from the return wave it sends back) in everyday life experience, in natural places, emotional spaces, digital spheres, constructed contexts, inner worlds, exterior experiences, new media ecologies, in every layer of existence. Intended action and change must be lived from within its context, in deeply felt and embodied ways; it is not enough to think about the change, to think about what one ought to do in one's private consciousness; one must act it out, live it, as Dewey wrote:

Experience is primarily a process of undergoing: a process of standing something, of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words. The organism has to endure, to undergo the consequences of its own actions. Experience is no slipping away in a path fixed by inner consciousness. Private consciousness is an incidental outcome of a vital objective sort; it is not its source. Undergoing, however, is never mere passivity" (LW, 2:304).

To know in an abstract, intellectual sense, that the structures, systems, and layers we live in (whether we call them digital, virtual, natural, or physical) are interconnected is not enough; we must also experience, in deeply felt, embodied ways, the activity of our conscious minds, of our inner and outer contexts, as integrated into and oftentimes responsible for the structures, systems and layers of our interconnected existence. To do so calls for practice; practices such as

those that conjure present-moment experience, heightened consciousness, and expanded feelings of connectedness that help us to witness our minds and our thoughts and our feelings as inseparable from our bodies and our contexts so that we can see how the parts, all of the parts, inside and out, are involved in an ongoing process of feeding off of and learning from each other. We shape our lives to turn around and shape us; we act and we do and we choose and we undergo and, maybe, hopefully, we learn from what we undergo, and then, based on what we learned (from the return wave), we alter how we act, and what we do, and how we choose, and so on and so forth.

Dewey argues that we learn and grow in the embodiment of interconnected community. “But we but we are not born members of a community,” Dewey wrote (*LW*, 2:331). “...We are born organic beings associated with others (so we ought to) be brought within the traditions, outlooks and interests which characterize a community by means of education: by unremitting instruction and by learning in connection with the phenomena of overt association”—by learning in connection with the phenomena of overt association, of what today so readily, even overtly, displays (if we are paying attention) our associations, our interconnections: new media. Dewey’s work encouraged me to look for how the potential to perceive our associations is present in every environment, and led me to wonder how today’s new media literacy educators could support students in becoming aware of the interconnectedness, and overt associations, of the new media they’re shaping and that’s shaping them. Dewey might suggest that they could do so by meeting students where they are, recognizing that they learn in context, in relationship, in community, and, for young adults today, that they learn through experiences within new media ecologies.

Where Dewey's Philosophies Intersect with Media Ecology and Media Literacy

New media scholars as Jenkins (2006), Ito (2009), boyd (2014), and Buckingham (2013) have taken up media ecology theory, along with, consciously or not, the philosophies of Dewey, given that his perspectives of interconnectedness can be seen to be in sympathy with the roots of media ecology theory. Viewing media, like Dewey, as interdependent environments, these scholars argue for new media literacy education that acknowledges, as Dewey (1916) does in *Democracy and Education*, how students learn in collaborative, contextualized, and community-oriented ways, online and off, in- and outside the classroom, individually and collectively. These new media scholars argue for an approach to new media literacy that is supported by media ecology theory and experiential education. In the 2016 book *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, which is a conversation between Jenkins, Ito, and boyd, Jenkins writes that today's new media literacy efforts "require a movement from thinking about literacy as a personal or individualized skillset to thinking about it as a skill that has to do with how we relate to others in our community, thinking about how we create, circulate, collaborate and connect with other people" (p. 97). And in the 2009 book *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media* (Ito et al.), which is a collection of papers by thirteen different new media scholars, the integration of media ecology theory as a framework for thinking about new media literacy is explained this way:

We use the metaphor of ecology to emphasize the characteristics of an overall technical, social, cultural, and placed-based system, in which the components are not decomposable or separable. The everyday practices of youth, existing structural conditions, infrastructures of place, and technologies are all dynamically interrelated; the meanings, uses, functions, flows and interconnections in young people's daily lives

located in particular settings are also situated within young people's wider media ecologies (p. 31).

New media literacy, or digital literacy as it is sometimes called in the literature, takes on many different forms by both extending what has come before, through historical and conventional media literacy programs, while also experimenting with something new, typically made possible by an advance in technology and media, along with the ways in which people relate to such advances. But before elaborating on the emergent field of new media literacy, along with where we might be headed in this field, I will first briefly describe the history of media literacy to explore where we've been.

Historically, media literacy educators taught students to view the media as a separate, monolithic entity whose propaganda must be recognized, so that its poison could be deflected. While pedagogical approaches to media literacy have naturally evolved over the years, the positivist subject-object split has remained predominant, influencing educators to continue in their efforts to prompt students (subjects) to view media as separate, fixed objects for analysis, evaluation, and deconstruction (Hobbs, 1998). It wasn't until the 1980s and '90s that media literacy research and pedagogy began to speak to the interpretive and productive role that the subjects played in their experience with media (Masterman, 1985; Messaris, 1994). Around this time, media literacy scholars began to explore the multifaceted, multi-literate qualities of media experiences, be it through mediated encounters with representation and stereotypes (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000); point of view and purpose (Considine & Haley, 1999; Hobbs, 1999); production techniques and audience influence (Brunner & Tally, 1999); investigation into the economic and political structures behind media (Hobbs, 1994); and utilization of media tools for identity construction, self-expression, social activity and political advocacy (Hobbs, 1994;

Prinsloo & Criticos, 1991). Now, scholars and educators could see multiple layers and possibilities to media experiences that were not limited by a one-to-many viewpoint; now the audience (subjects) played a part in determining how media messages (objects) were experienced.

Many of today's new media scholars are working to close the gap between subject and object in the turn to new media literacy, where an emphasis is placed on the collaborative, productive possibilities new media can bring to the educational experience (Jenkins, 2006; Lopez, 2008; Ito et al., 2009; Mihailidis, 2014). In an effort to meet students where they are, educators often invite students to further their immersion in new media ecologies by asking them to engage with digital applications or platforms in ways meant to enrich learning experience, such as through multimodal projects (defined as involving multiple forms of text), political social media participation, multimedia storytelling, and digital arts production (Beavis, 2004; Goodfellow, 2004; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005; Kirkland, 2006; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006). In these ways, educators seek positive, productive, and creative possibilities from the new media technologies already shaping the lives of their students, while working also to elevate critical consciousness around the political and commercial power dynamics shaping and structuring new media environments. As Funk, Kellner, and Share (2016) explain, "This paradigm shift away from a positivist perspective of knowledge transmission toward a more critical sociological stance requires pedagogy that explores the complex relationships among audiences, information, entertainment, power, and ideology" (p. 9). Moreover, this shift is a move from a materialistic to relational view, as Schrage (2001) argued: "The so-called 'information revolution' itself is actually, and more accurately, a 'relationship revolution'. Anyone trying to get a handle on the dazzling technologies of today and the impact they'll have tomorrow, would be well advised to

re-orient their worldview around relationships” (p. 90). And finally, the shift is not a move from one kind of literacy to another, as Sew (2010) explains, but rather a move from psycholinguistic to sociocultural experience: “This paradigmatic sense of ‘new’ in relation to literacy is not concerned with new literacies as such but, rather, with a new approach to thinking about literacy as a social phenomenon” (p. 24).

New media scholars often advocate for new media literacy that empowers critical consciousness, social awareness and civic engagement, extending both the pedagogical philosophies of Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), and also on Wenger’s (1998) situated learning theory, which recognizes that students learn in context, and in relation to one another. New media literacies initiatives often seek to address the ways in which experiences, identities, values, and patterns of engagement with new media are interrelated across social spaces, fostering educational experiences that are active, dynamic and socially construed (Mills, 2010). As Jenkins (2006) notes, one key goal of new media literacy education is to “encourage young people to become more reflective about the ethical choices they make as participants and communicators and the impact they have on others” (p. 19). Jenkins (2006) has long argued that new media ecologies are spaces of collaborative public participation, wherein “what holds a collective intelligence together is not the possession of knowledge—which is relatively static, but the social process of acquiring knowledge—which is dynamic and participatory” (p. 54).

What I See Missing in New Media literacy Educational Initiatives

Most of what I’ve found in the literature related to new media literacy education emphasizes externally oriented experience; most focus on achieving empowerment, agency, and

critical consciousness through extroverted, performance-based engagements with and within new media environments (Mills, 2010). In these ways, new media literacy initiatives reinforce and perpetuate a sense of self that is tied up in the ideals of neoliberalism, which is, as Brown explained in an interview with *Salon* (Isquith, 2015): “an understanding of the world and of the human beings within it as nothing but markets — and an understanding of human beings as fully reducible to market actors.” Given that new media spaces are almost always commercialized spaces, so much so that we often forget, for example, that Facebook is a corporation that collects, markets, and profits from user data (Tufekci, 2014), new media are also spaces dominated by neoliberal ideology, incessantly impressing users—or market actors, as Brown (2015) would say—with the idea that what’s externally-oriented (what’s marketable, “likable,” etc.) is what most matters. New media literacy education, then, that embraces the use of new media ecologies for learning purposes cannot escape the externally-oriented, performance-based ideals of neoliberalism; thus, empowerment through new media literacy education can simply become an empowerment of the neoliberal self, of a disconnected self, of an incomplete sense of self that seeks completion through consumption, performance, and marketability, rather than through learning to value the interior as much as the exterior for consummation, interconnection, and reunification (I elaborate on neoliberal technoculture in chapter two). Thus, I call for the integration of contemplative learning practices into new media literacy pedagogy as a means for mitigating some of the negative consequences of interacting regularly with a positivist, neoliberal self.

While it appears that the field of media literacy has struggled to shift out of a positivist paradigm and into a perspective that recognizes the interrelatedness of human experience across various contexts—cyber and natural, digital and physical, individual and collective—and thus

argues for pedagogy that supports students in learning from within these digitally networked media ecologies (Ito et al., 2009), many new media scholars maintain a focus on what's projected (identity, image, structure) while neglecting the other essential part of such projections (imagination, inner experience, consciousness). And while the field of new media literacy has expanded to recognize how new media are integrated into all parts of life—in- and outside the classroom, in public and private, in recreation and education—it has yet to acknowledge that new media spaces don't exist separately from people, and that new media aren't 'out there,' waiting to be discovered, solved, deconstructed, reconstructed, and/or participated in. Instead, new media, I argue here, are integrated into our entire existence; what happens in our minds shapes our new media ecologies and technologies, which then turn around to shape our minds. By acknowledging how the inner workings of consciousness shape experiences within new media, we can see that different levels of consciousness lead to different ways of taking action or behaving within new media, which, in turn, produce different outcomes. Bringing this philosophical perspective, which is Dewey's (1925), to a scholarly exploration of new media literacy education could offset the ways in which current research centers mostly around external experience.

Thus, I argue for a pedagogical approach to new media literacy education that employs contemplative learning practices as one means for prompting students to experience time and space away from new media (if only in imagination) and support them in perceiving, with self-reflexivity and critical consciousness, both the problems in being excessively externally-oriented and also the potentialities in what can arise from turning inward and connecting to a sense of inner experience, imagination, and depth. Such a pedagogy, involving also Dewey's philosophies of experiential, embodied learning, could help students develop a sense of interconnectedness,

wholeness, compassion, empathy, and love for oneself and for one's community, all of which could mitigate the negative and limiting effects of living amid the neoliberal, technocratic pressure to perform, to be marketable, to be "liked" in commercialized new media spaces, and to live more richly and intentionally with our various technologies.

In part recovering and valuing the phenomenological traditions of research and practice, new media literacy pedagogy that employs contemplative learning practices can prompt students to raise self-awareness, expand critical consciousness, connect to imagination, and open to non-judgment, all of which could support them in understanding that what materializes from new media experiences are the outcomes, the return waves, of the conscious perspectives and subsequent types of engagement, behavior, and interaction they bring to new media. By acknowledging, with the whole self-reflexive and critically conscious self, the inextricable interrelatedness between one's "inner" state of mind and one's "outer" experiences with new media, students *could make space* for experiencing an "open, questioning, reflective, critical stance" (Hobbs, 1998) on their new media relationships. Such a shift from pedagogy that forces or assumes answers (such as assuming objectivity or otherwise reinforcing disconnect) to one that opens up inquiry and interconnectedness, as Morrell (2012) noted, "enlightens students to the potential that they have to shape the world they live in, to help turn it into the world they imagine" (p. 302), making room for students to imagine and experience how their intersubjectivity, their inner experiences, their growing consciousness and their potential for change, contribute to what they encounter in the structured, externalities of new media experience.

Such a shift could be, as I explore, supported by contemplative learning practices, such as exercises that invoke open, non-judgmental attention and raise compassion and empathy, which

could inspire students in taking an imaginary leap away from new media, only to return to new media experiences with conscientiousness and care. By asking students, for example, to give themselves time and space apart from new media habits to explore the value in sustaining the ambiguity and contradiction involved in Keats' notion of "negative capability ... without any irritable reaching after fact and reason," or to experience, as Barbara McClintock puts it, an "intimacy that does not annihilate difference," educators invite students to eat their own imaginations and, in a way, decide for themselves what kind of world they want to experience, inside and out, online and off (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010; Barbezat & Bush, 2013).

Why Bring Contemplative Learning Practices to New Media Literacy

Intersubjectivity, inner experience, internal dimensions, interior spaces—concepts as these are difficult to define, let alone measure, which likely accounts for the fact that such concepts rarely appear in research. And while inner experience would not exist without outer experience, the external characteristics of new media experiences, such as the curated social media profile, the online political identity, or the persistent thirst for productivity, novelty, and distraction, often outweigh attention to internal experience, and its ongoing interrelationship with so-called outer experience. Consumer culture has long impressed people with that idea that being busy and productive, essentially living a life of quantifiable activity, is superior to the efforts involved in pausing to examine one's inner landscape, to eat one's own imagination. Given that such consumerist ideals are inherent also to the commercialized, neoliberal technoculture of new media, which I examine in chapter two, I have chosen to explore whether or not young adults could benefit from educational experiences that involve not only a discussion of the value in internal, imaginative experience, but also an actual embodiment of such experience, which has

the potential to be what Dewey (1925) calls consummatory, which comes to fruition through the merging of all that we conventionally separate (mind, body, environment, inner, outer, and so on and so forth).

While I find it essential for new media literacy education to acknowledge the various ways in which externally-oriented new media experiences are embedded into every part of young adult life today, from socialization to entertainment to politicization to education to identity construction, and that corporatized new media technologies shape the broader environmental-societal structures and cultural systems that young adults live in, I also find it critical to acknowledge that the inner, imaginative worlds of young adults are not isolated from experience within new media environments, or any external environment, for that matter.

And yet perspectives of interconnectedness, which could consummate the internal and the external, have long been at odds with modern thought in the West, which traditionally seeks control through division (Latour, 1991). While the tendency to view our lives and ourselves as broken into separate parts permeates all aspects of modern life, it is readily apparent in the institutionalization of education where one need only glance at the layout of a college campus to view the many dimensions of departmental division. The separatist views of positivism and Scientism—such as the faulty notion that a fixed objective world exists apart from the subjects who live in the world—have dominated higher education in the United States throughout the 20th century, and continue to have dominating momentum in the beginning of the 21st been, positioning such views to mold the minds (as existing apart from bodies and environments) of students everywhere across time. Such separatist views may leave students feeling not only divided in their environments, but also in themselves. And such division, and fragmentation, causes many to be more susceptible to the negative effects of neoliberal technoculture, such as

the notion that one must be marketable in order to be liked, or that one invest entirely in the external in order to be worthy.

Thus, it seems there is a need, addressed in this project, for more scholarly conversation and discourse in the literature related to new media literacy around the problems of over-emphasizing the external and undervaluing the internal. In addition to elevating critical consciousness around the value-laden content and structures of new media experiences, scholars and educators could also inquire into the states of consciousness and open awareness young adults bring to their relationships with new media. Essentially, rather than examining mostly “the what” of new media, we could use more emphasis on “the how” (and how “the how” shapes “the what”). We might begin with this: How are new media experienced by an open and self-aware mind?

This is the question I set out with when I first started teaching new media-themed writing courses at Chemeketa Community College (experiences that are explored in chapter three), and that I am not revisiting and re-exploring through new avenues of inquiry. How could I prompt my students to be self-aware in their contemplation of and engagement with new media? And how might self-awareness support both their personal wellbeing and also enrich their educational experience by opening them to new perspectives they hadn’t previously considered? Early on, I realized we couldn’t just talk about the effects of self-awareness on new media experience in the classroom; we couldn’t merely intellectualize it, read about it, or write about it. We had to live it, in deeply felt and embodied ways.

The practice is of course always harder than the preaching; the talking and the studying and the intellectualizing and the publishing and the competing about what to do and how to teach and how to learn are all typically easier than the practicing, the embodying, the living, the

undergoing, the doing, and the learning (in lived ways) from the return wave—getting the doing to align with the thought and the ideas and the return waves informing what to do, that’s the hardest of all; that is, in my opinion, what we educators ought to strive for. And we ought to do it together, with the students, in the classroom, but we educators ought to do it first.

It seems to me, then, that educators who embody a relational and experiential view of the educational process, in- and outside the classroom, are better positioned to experiment with ways of perceiving, thinking, and learning that are more readily accessible to students. Back in my community college teaching days, I wanted my students to pay close attention to the ever-present gravitational strength with which their smartphones demanded checking. So, I had to try to do the same. I wanted my students to pay close attention to the emotional qualities of their encounters within social media environments. So, I had to do the same. I wanted my students to pay close attention to the assumptions, judgments and values that arose when they scrolled Facebook. So, I had to do the same. I wanted my students to pay close attention to the ways in which ongoing engagement with new media, in part, shaped the way they viewed themselves, their lives, and their worlds. So, I had to do the same. I wanted my students to put forth effort, each and every day, to open to what’s least noticed, to what’s taken for granted, to what often goes unseen.

And, so, of course, I had to do the same. And when I say *to do*, I also mean *to be*, because as Dewey (1925) revealed to me, doing that involves self-awareness, consciousness, embodiment and the return wave of doing is actually, all in all, being. “Keep going, though there’s no place to get to,” Barks said to me once again, embedding Rumi’s philosophies deeper inside of me, on one of my long and tiring commutes back into the concrete slabs and city lights of Portland, away from the farmlands and grape-growing hillsides of McMinnville. “Don’t try to see through

the distances,” he continues, as I yearn to know how to best meet my students where they are, and to contemplate from there, in more meaningful way, how new media shapes their lives, in our next class. How can I best support them as they navigate the complicated and ever-changing terrain of acting and doing and undergoing life’s interconnected fabric of relationships, online and off? “...Move from within, but don’t move the way fear makes you move,” Rumi softens the pressure of what I find to be one of life’s hardest questions. “... I have lived on the lip of insanity, wanting to know reasons, knocking on a door. It opens. I’ve been knocking from the inside!” (Barks & Bly, 1989).

CHAPTER III

BUT DON'T MOVE THE WAY FEAR MAKES YOU MOVE

Do you think there is anywhere, in any language,
a word billowing enough,
for the pleasure
that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you
as you stand there,
empty-handed—
or have you too
turned from this world—
or have you too
gone crazy
for power,
for things?
-Mary Oliver

Back when I spent more time with Rumi than theory, back before I knew anything about Dewey or experiential education or philosophies of technology or neoliberalism, back when I was into my fourth year of working as a community college writing instructor, most of what I knew about new media came from personal experience, classroom conversations, and subscriptions to *New York Times*, *Harper's*, and *The New Yorker*. Back then, in 2014, I only knew that I didn't know much about new media, and I felt that my future students would demand I know more. So, I decided to do graduate work in media studies, hoping I could make some sense of the ways in which new media were changing our sense of what it means to be alive. When I started the work, I was surprised to find the graduate program rarely contemplated such.

Heck, I wasn't surprised; I was shocked. Was I in the wrong department? Was there another department on campus devoted to thinking through the social, cultural, and personal implications of new media? There wasn't. And, to me, this made no sense. Were new media not among the biggest factors reshaping human life? Didn't the fact that so many of us now devote

the majority of our waking lives to digital screens demand educational programs designed to help us understand why and how? Why and how have so many of us have come to feel deeply attached to our smartphones and social media accounts? Why and how have so many of us come to feel that, without access to new media, we do not exist? Why and how have new media technologies become embedded in the very fabric of our lives?

I understood that we needed to learn about where we'd been to make thoughtful guesses about where we might be going. And so I willingly slogged through positivist media theory (media as a hypodermic needle injecting the masses with poison), critical media theory (capitalist industry poisons people through media), cultural studies perspectives on media theory (subjective experience play a role in the media's poison), postmodern thought on media theory (everything could mean anything; poison could be everything and anything), and so on and so forth. Visiting these media theories was essential, to be sure; they do shed light on where we are (capitalist industry does affect social media experience; culture and behavior are imbued in social media). But when would we get to the part where we'd explicitly (and aloud) connect historical media theory to where we are now—living lives infiltrated by the pervasive presence of new media—and where we might be headed next? When would we delve into an exploration of the many insidious commercial and political ways with which it molds our new media experiences? With the exceptions of some brief nods to the role new media play in globalism and neoliberalism, we wouldn't.

The word Facebook almost never came up in class (of course, it almost always came up on the screens of students sitting next to me). I was shocked. Why weren't we discussing the elephant in the room? Were we too intimidated by its complexity to confront it? Were we too consumed by the power of social media to pay attention to it? Were we too seduced by the

marketing powers of social media, as illustrated by the fact that my department teaches undergraduates how to use social media for marketing purposes but rarely teaches them to critically reflect on new media, to question them? Were we too attached to the “given” set of theory-tools at our disposal?

I wasn't. Having lived six years without social media, between 2008 and 2014 (at a time when more and more people were turning to social media, I was turning away), and having had only returned to Facebook out of an obligatory sense that graduate school in 2014 would require it (it didn't so I deactivated my account), I have a long history of investing time and space into contemplating what it means to live with and without social media, mostly in my personal life. I was now ready to contemplate the implications and possibilities of social media in my scholarly life, even if I had to do it on my own.

Of course, I wouldn't be working entirely on my own. I'd long followed the work of danah boyd, who is a Principal Researcher at Microsoft, founder of Data & Society, a Research Assistant Professor in Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, a Visiting Researcher at Harvard Law School, and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of New South Wales; she received her doctorate in 2008 from the School of Information at the University of California-Berkeley (under Peter Lyman and Mimi Ito). In 2014, boyd published a book called *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, in which she argues for more understanding and less uninformed criticism about the ways in which today's American teenagers engage with new media. Let's not panic like we always do, she says. Instead, let's consider the factors driving social media use (the fact that teens are frequently blocked from comingling in public spaces, for one), along with the many creative, collaborative, and inclusive possibilities social media interaction and participation open up. As an early adopter of internet

culture, boyd once believed vehemently in the web's power to bring people meaningfully together, especially marginalized people, such as queer youth and people of color. These days though, while still a believer (after all, her job title demands it), she's more willing to acknowledge how messy new media can be.

In the summer of 2015, I wrote boyd an email, seeking advice on how to be a good teacher of new media literacy. "I'm working hard to figure out the best ways in which to both embrace the publicly mediated worlds students live in and also retain the space for critical thought around the new online (and often commercialized) spaces they inhabit," I wrote in the email, which I half-figured would go unnoticed, lost in the infinitely-expanding oblivion that surely is boyd's inbox. When her name (*her name!*) showed up in my inbox (*mine!*), my cheeks flushed, my stomach filled with butterflies, and my chest rose in excitement as I read her reply:

I think the key is to remember that most folks just want to live their lives and being critical of the world around them is often destabilizing, rather than empowering. And to be empathetic to that perspective and work with folks about where they're at and what would help them actually have agency in their lives. I struggle with this constantly because the academic in me wants everyone to understand, but I'm also painfully aware of how plying people with information without any agency to make change makes them feel like shit. Things are definitely different today than they were yesterday and still, much is the same as well. The change isn't simply tech; it's how tech is situated within broader social and cultural systems. And that's what makes it messy to negotiate. Folks just want to live their lives ... where they're at ... and that's what makes it messy to negotiate.

In her blog posts, talks, and papers, boyd often employs the word “messy”, and I find it to be a wise choice, as such language embodies the murky, fluid, and shape-shifting qualities new media spheres bring to our daily lives (online and off), oftentimes putting conventional social norms and values to the test, complicating our human senses in nearly every way, prompting us to ask questions like: Where am I?; Where did the time go?; Who am I with?; Is this real?; Was that true?; What’s ‘real’ and ‘true’ anymore? And so and so forth. Essentially, while corporations designed new media to make money by promising, in part, to bring convenience, speed, and connectivity into our lives, new media also often bring a messy and disorienting sense of confusion, especially for the young adults who are already confused by that strange place between childhood and adulthood. As boyd’s book *It’s Complicated* (2014) argued: It is within publicly, digitally networked spaces that many of today’s young adults construct and manage multiple identities, negotiate newly emergent social norms, perform before multiple publics at once, discover communities based on mutual interests and hobbies, begin and end relationships, gossip, flirt, joke, hang out, have fun, and experiment with making sense of what it means to be alive in the 21st Century—and it’s complicated, and it’s messy.

From the experiences I had teaching the digital detox assignment in my community college writing courses, I understood that new media complicated the lives of my students, and the contemplative learning approach to pedagogy had taught me to teach the assignment with non-judgment (to not “make them feel like shit”). But I hadn’t yet opened my eyes to the idea that their online lives are every bit as real and meaningful as their offline lives. It wasn’t until books like *It’s Complicated* (boyd, 2014), *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016), and *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out* (Ito et al., 2009), along

with the philosophies of Dewey (1916; 1925; 1934), Feenberg (1981), and Latour (1991), helped me to think metaphorically of new media spaces as interrelated ecologies that I could recognize how a social network like Facebook isn't just a place that kids sometimes go to; it's part of the fabric of their lives, ever-presently informing how they perceive who they are and where they live (whoever and wherever they may be).

So, instead of viewing participation and interaction in online public spaces, such as those created by Facebook, as separate from and somehow inferior to participation and interaction in offline public spaces, such as those created by town squares and college classrooms, I began to see the spaces as inseparable, as part of the same fabric of life, as constantly capable of shaping and reshaping one another in mutually informing, ongoing feedback loops, or what some might call, open systems (Halsall & Links, 1995). This shift in perspective opened up space for agency, and it opened up space for recognizing the importance of interdependent relationships: Our relationships to each other, to our environments, to ourselves. This was the insight I hadn't known, prior to graduate school, that I was looking for. True, the philosophy of interconnectedness was already embedded in the contemplative learning practices I brought to the community college classroom, but now I had the means for linking such philosophy directly to new media. Now, given that both contemplative pedagogy and new media ask us to notice the interconnectedness of life, it made perfect sense, in my mind, to create new media literacy curricula that is supported by contemplative learning practices as a means for acknowledging the ways in which new media compound the messiness, uncertainty, and confusion already abundant in the lives of many young adults, whose lives are increasingly immersed in new media today.

As a teacher, I've focused not merely on the fact that their everyday lives are increasingly immersed in new media—about nine per day, which is often more time than they spend sleeping

(Roberts & Foehr, 2008)—but also on the fact that their everyday lives are increasingly immersed in *marketized* new media. And it's the marketized, neoliberal qualities of new media experiences that concern me most, as I feel they are often responsible for the ways in which many of today's young adults feel incomplete, unfulfilled, and somehow 'not enough'. And if the new media world is being created first with markets in mind, there tends to be a substantial disincentive to reflect on Dewey's (1916) critical clue to learn from reflection and change: "...but change is meaningless transition unless consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made my action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something" (p. 139).

Continuing in my exploration into what sort of new media literacy education is effective in prompting young adults to critically reflect on, learn from, and perhaps change their relationships with new media, this chapter will, first, explore the ways in which the marketization of new media environments pressure young adults to habitually perform, behave, interact, and change without reflection in competitive, quantifiable fashions, meanwhile seducing them to subscribe to the neoliberal ideal that what's marketable is of greatest value (i.e. whoever earns the most new media "likes" wins). Second, I will interpret what a group of twelve undergraduates had to say about their everyday experiences with new media in a focus group study that I conducted in the fall of 2015, as a means for exploring the ways in which young adults perceive new media affecting their lives; such an exploration can assist me in making some sense of where they are, which supports me in contemplating a pedagogical approach to new media literacy that best supports them. Finally, I will discuss the digital detox, and my last encounter with digital detox, as both a cultural response to the popularity of mobile media and

also as an educational intervention aimed at prompting students to critically reflect on new media, and I will suggest that time and space apart from habituated experience with new media is essential for developing a sense of self that can recognize new media spaces as both structured by marketized, neoliberal ideals, and, at the same time, as open to revealing the potentialities in the interconnectedness reflected in new media ecologies.

Literature: The Marketization of New Media

I want people to think that I have a life, even if I don't. - focus group participant

Many young adults today don't feel alive without new media; at least, that's what I've taken from listening to them speak in both my focus group study and also in the work of scholars as boyd (2014), Ito et al. (2009), and Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016). In fact, many, of all ages, living in post-industrialized societies today couldn't imagine being alive without new media. According to a 2015 Pew research study, one-fifth of all Americans report going online "almost constantly," 67% of mobile phone owners find themselves checking for messages, alerts, or calls, even when they don't notice their phone vibrating or ringing, 68% of Americans own a smartphone, and 90% of the same age group use social media (Perrin, 2015).

New media play an integral role in the lives of many today, which is no mere coincidence: The corporate and governmental entities behind the designs and infrastructures of new media technologies have designed mobile devices, social media platforms, and applications to shape, regulate, and embed themselves into personal, social, and cultural life. Moreover, such powerful entities have architected new media environments to be both irresistible and essential—irresistible in that they offer novel, always-on stimulation, and essential in that they have become interwoven, in powerful and often invisible ways, into nearly every aspect of life, from

employment to healthcare to education. As Weisler (1991) notes, “The most profound technologies are those that disappear (and) weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it.” New media technologies are subtly threaded into our sense of presence, connection, and aliveness in society, culture, and humanity today (Van Dijck, 2013). Without internet access and a mobile device, many would feel alienated, cut off, and incomplete; for many of today’s young adults, smartphones and social media accounts constitute their very existence; they wouldn’t feel alive in the world without them. As one teenager told boyd (2007): “If you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist.”

The sense that one is less alive or incomplete without new media achieves, in some ways, the goals of neoliberalism, which, as previously noted, seeks subtle avenues for converting human experiences to market commodities (Brown, 2015). When individuals immerse themselves in a social network as Facebook to feel connected to friends and family, and also to stay abreast of “what’s happening in the world” via the news headlines that appear in social media feeds, they also immerse themselves in a neoliberal technoculture whose powers of marketization typically go unrecognized (Flisfeder, 2015; Lupton, 2013). When engaging regularly in online performance, through, for instance, the projection of a social media identity or through the act of clicking and collecting social media “likes,” many expose themselves, consciously or not, to the dualistic thinking and neoliberal ideals of radical individuation, reducing their sense of human experience to something that is isolated, fragmented, quantifiably “likeable”, and marketable (Marwick, 2013; Tufekci, 2014). In this way, those engaging regularly with new media are exposed in subtle and implicit ways to the dualistic thinking dominating modern Western thought (discussed in the previous chapter) that drivines capitalism and neoliberalism by perpetuating the ideal that people are individuals who are disconnected, cut

off, and incomplete, thus must seek completion through performance and consumption (or “prosumption” in new media terms), meanwhile neglecting the potentialities in learning and growing from interconnection and interdependency (Dewey, 1925; Feenberg, 1981; Latour, 1991). In the marketization and fragmentation of experience in new media environments, the individual is reduced to Deleuze’s (1990) concept of the “devidual” who seeks completion and wholeness from something that can’t offer them such: habitual consumption.

Flisfeder (2015) argues that neoliberal ideals are baked into marketized new media environments, persuading those participating and interacting there to regularly produce and perform an externalized version of the self, or what he calls the ‘Neoliberal Self,’ under the guise of freedom of self-expression, empowerment, and agency. Marketized new media experience persuades, Flisfeder (2015) argues, many who log onto Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and so on and so forth, each day into perceiving themselves as free agents, while overlooking the possibility that they are participating in a form of labor, which translates into a “prosumer commodity.” As Flisfeder (2015) explains:

There is also an added ideological dimension to the kind of exploitation of labor that we see in this instance: because social media involves play, on the one hand, and participatory political and cultural communication (i.e., organizing solidarity campaigns, community, etc.; perhaps the production of a new public sphere) on the other, and because use is apparently voluntary, it is difficult to see how it is a mechanism of exploitation (p. 553-554).

Dean (2005) describes this style of exploitation as communicative capitalism, which is a form of capitalism that thrives on the exchange or performance of communication as the basic

element of production. By regularly exchanging messages, and performing an identity, through Facebook, for example, social media users are producing data that can be bought and sold—data that is so huge in quantity, volume, and scale, it is referred to as Big Data (Kitchen, 2014)—reducing human experiences to commodities in the process. Neoliberal ideals convince those who regularly engage with new media that they are individual subjects free to creatively express themselves while at the same time seducing them into investing in the labor involved in producing, curating, representing, and branding an identity that is marketable and ‘likeable.’ In this way, social media users become entrenched in what Hearn (2010) calls the ‘digital reputation economy’ wherein they are obligated, and oftentimes forced (consider how employment applications often require access to a LinkedIn social media account) to present a branded self. Flisfeder (2015) elaborated on the concept of such self-branding this way:

Time spent on the production of reputation is an important element of investing in the Self. The subjectivization of workers, from this perspective, comes through the active agency of investing in the Self, making us all an entrepreneurial Self, or an entrepreneur-of-the-Self ... social media are designed to encourage users—by creating and fostering pleasurable incentives—to spend increasing amounts of time using the platform, voluntarily handing over data about themselves, and helping to create the prosumer commodity; second, the demands of the neoliberal labor market force users to employ social media as a means of further accumulating and representing their social, cultural, and symbolic capital as part of the Self (p. 560).

The neoliberal technoculture shaping new media experiences thrives, like any other kind of consumer culture, on new media users feeling incomplete and, subsequently, seeking completion, or fulfillment, through consumption (be it the consumption of material products or

immaterial digital activity). Thus, it is in the economic interest of new media companies like Google, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to design tools and spaces that reinforce the illusion that new media users are incomplete (and thus cut off) without their tools, products, or projections. Corporations, like Facebook, deliberately design technologies to hook users into a vicious cycle that perpetually promises fulfillment, and wholeness through fulfillment, whilst forever failing to deliver it; in this way they trap users by maximizing desire for incessant engagement through what Tristan Harris, a design ethicist who is also a product philosopher at Google, calls bliss-point techniques, which involve, for example, innovating the now familiar social media spaces that deliver bottomless stimulation and novelty. In a *New York Times* article called “Can’t Put Down Your Device? That’s By Design”, Harris revealed, “...there are 1,000 people on the other side of the screen whose job is to break down the self-regulation that you have ... Right now, many company leaders and designers would like to do these things differently, but the incentives aren’t aligned to do this.”

That’s because the incentives are oftentimes aligned to fuel capitalist culture, which, of course, thrives on consumerism (Slater, 1997; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). For new media, this means designing technologies that both increase exposure to advertising and also encourage the sharing of personal information, which assists in future marketing efforts (Fuchs, 2013). For example, corporations like Facebook collect and sell the massive amount of data, or Big Data, provided by the ongoing interactivity and participation of its users. Big Data companies employ algorithms to analyze the massive amount of data collected from social networks like Facebook, striving to get to know Facebook users better, and to make “insightful” predictions about them, so that they can more effectively market to them on Facebook. In this way, marketized new media environments encourage a valuation of the self and of others based on image and

algorithmic manipulation of how image moves around (who sees it) within new media contexts. By monitoring who interacts with whom, and who “likes” what, algorithms help to shape the culture of social media, influencing who sees what, who gets seen and how, rewarding what’s most seen with the most “likes”, meanwhile placing parameters around how identity is constructed and experienced (along with how that identity can behave, communicate, and perform), confining young adults to social norms that necessitate surface and neglect depth, treating the former as superior to the latter, while obscuring the potential in attuning to inner subjective-reflective experience (Turkle, 2015). Such a process not only raises questions about the rise of a surveillance culture, but also of the power of neoliberal technoculture, built on the algorithmic manipulations of Big Data, to shape and regulate the identities, and the senses of self, of those interacting and participating on social media sites (Marwick, 2013; Tufekci, 2014).

The phenomenon of Big Data can be defined as both an enormous amount of data (terabytes and petabytes) and also as an immense force of rapid change in the ways with which many perceive, experience, and understand both who they think they are and how they think the world is (Kitchen, 2014). As millions of social media users (or ‘market actors’) regularly input data into new media ecosystems each day, huge volumes of Big Data are created and then sold to be stored in warehouses where they are eventually analyzed by computers capable of doing what humans cannot: diving into and sorting through massive amounts of information to resurface with patterns, predictions, and assumptions typically made possible by algorithmic equations (Kitchen, 2014). In this way, data, computers and equations make sense of what it means to be alive (instead of people). This tendency to privilege computerized sense-making over human knowledge appears to be growing: As boyd & Crawford (2012) note, the Big Data phenomenon is invoking radical transformations in our ways of perceiving, learning, and knowing:

Big Data creates a radical shift in how we think about research . . . [It offers] a profound change at the levels of epistemology and ethics. Big Data reframes key questions about the constitution of knowledge, the processes of research, how we should engage with information, and the nature and the categorization of reality . . . Big Data stakes out new terrains of objects, methods of knowing, and definitions of social life (p. 3).

Marketized new media environments, and the algorithmic manipulation of Big Data that in part shapes them, are not subject to the laws of physics we experience in the natural world. New media environments are disorienting, which is potentially connected, in part, to what Baym and boyd (2012) call “context collapse,” wherein an engagement with new media environments means losing a sense of connection to a particular time and space, distorting one’s sense of how to be (social norms) given that one is never quite sure who’s in one’s audience, leaving many of today’s young adults feeling fragmented and displaced as they navigate marketized new media territories, which blur the lines between public and private, virtual and real, digital and natural. Regularly pressured to perform in such spheres of complicated context collapse, many of today’s young adults are deep in the process, consciously or not, of figuring out where they are, who they’re with, and who they might be while immersed in new media experience (Turkle, 2015; boyd, 2014). Such uncertainty is also likely related to the notion that we are currently, culturally amid transition, as Jenkins noted:

Right now, we are at a moment of transition. For many of us, we are experiencing a significant expansion of our communicative capacities within a networked culture, yet very little in our past has taught us how to use those expanded capacities responsibly or constructively. If that transition takes place, it's bound to be enormously disruptive. It's confusing, there are ethical dilemmas, none of us knows how to use that power (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016, p. 25).

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg designed the world's most popular social networking site, which hosts 1.2 billion users, around ideals of connectivity, transparency, and sharing, with the hope that such ideals would create worldwide social good via tolerance and equity, the environment made possible by Facebook instead tends toward the divided, individuated, neoliberal ethos of competition, performance, and image (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016), thereby feeding a desire for consumption, and competition through consumption (often in the form of "liking" or being "liked"), more than a will for social good. In this way, competitive social comparison has become a widespread phenomenon on sites like Facebook and the popular photo-sharing application Instagram, which Facebook purchased in 2012 for \$1 billion. Amid a wealth of image, competition, and attention (often in the form of "likes"), today's young adults construct an identity, or multiple identities, and develop a sense of self before a digitally, publicly networked audience (imagined, real, vast, and unknown) and from within a technoculture that binds them to ever-present opportunities for self-presentation, performance, and social comparison. Recent research findings showed that such ongoing engagement in social comparison can damage self-esteem and diminish some sense of self worth (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). Even while young adults often understand that the posts they see on social media typically have been edited for a particular effect, they frequently absorb them as

evidence that other people are living better, happier lives than they themselves are (Kross et al., 2013). True, people have been long known to invest in self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), but, given that many young adults today have constant access to social and mobile media, the amount of time that young adults invest into the construction and projection of identity, or multiple identities, today is greater than ever before.

MIT clinical psychologist and social scientist Sherry Turkle has long studied the ways in which people work to make sense of what it means to be alive from within their experiences of identity in digitally, publicly mediated spaces (1995, 2009, 2011 & 2015). Turkle's work explores the links between machines, identity and psychological wellbeing, between the rise in internet use and increased human experiences of alienation and loneliness, and between the ongoing use of new media and the capacity for empathy, which she finds is diminishing as people turn more frequently to screens for support than to each other. Turkle has written extensively about the construction of identity in the context of cyberspace and human-computer interaction, demonstrating how online spheres offer loose and open spaces for experimentation with identity as the practice of multiplicity and fluidity, extending on the notion that there is no unitary self or "ego", but rather that the self is a collection of ever-changing parts constantly in the process of becoming. Turkle (1999) argues that new media spaces offer the potential for heightened self-examination and self-knowledge through the practice of identity as multiplicity and fluidity, but warns that experimentation without self-reflexivity—without posing questions as: *What am I doing here? And, what is my sense of self?*—can lead to the construction of an identity that lacks awareness of itself and that, as Dewey (1916) noted, cannot reflect and learn. Moreover, an identity that lacks the capacity for evaluating and reflecting on itself is an identity that can be easily exploited, categorized, and constrained by marketized new media culture. As

Turkle (2015) recently wrote, drawing on her experiences interviewing teenagers about their relationships with new media: “...we risk building a false sense of self, based on performances we think others will enjoy. In Thoreau’s terms, we live too ‘thickly’, responding to the world around rather than first learning to know ourselves” (p. 62).

Entrenched in the “thickness” of a technoculture that has contributed to the production and reinforcement of neoliberal interests, many of today’s young adults are, then, too displaced from a sense of time and space in the physical world, as well as from a sense of interconnection to the wholeness and depth of being human, for first learning to know themselves, their whole selves. Given that today’s scholars are beginning to acknowledge the challenges in marketized new media environments, performance-driven online interactivity, Big Data collection and algorithmic manipulations designed to serve neoliberal interests, I conducted a focus group study designed, in part, to test investigate whether many of today’s young adults, habituated into incessant engagement with marketized new media spaces, learn to highlight external projections, meanwhile overshadowing the values in reflection, introspection, and imagination. Because ongoing interaction and participation with new media involve regular opportunities for self-presentation, social comparison, and algorithmic marketization, many of today’s young adults, living lives immersed in new media, experience quantifiable neoliberal identities, reducing their sense of self to one that feels disoriented and incomplete. Thus, I believe that today’s young adults could benefit from new media literacy education that, with support from contemplative learning practices, helps them to recognize that there is more to who they are, as humans, than the marketization of new media ecologies might lead them to believe.

Focus Group Study: How New Media Shapes Our Sense of Self

I wish I could go back to my old self and that's something you can't really get back.

- focus group participant

To gather insight into the ways in which young adults perceive and relate to new media, and to inquire into the effects of marketized, neoliberal new media experiences, I conducted a focus group study with a dozen or so undergraduate students from an introductory journalism course called J201: Mass Media & Society. My findings show that these young adults indeed feel pressured and obligated to perform and be liked via social media participation and interaction. Moreover, they appear to feel split, at odds, and incomplete, which I interpret as the outcome of the neoliberal ideals, which are baked into their new media experiences, given that neoliberalism, capitalism, consumer culture, and so and so forth, thrive on dualistic thinking, and that dualistic thinking commonly leaves us feeling split, at odd, and incomplete. This conception links up with the philosophies of technologies described in chapter one, explaining that, because positivist, dualistic thinking is designed into new media technologies, people engage with new media in ways that leave them also feeling that their life experiences are divided and incomplete, thus they are more apt to favor and attend to the externally-oriented or 'Neoliberal Self' (Flisfeder, 2015; Feenberg, 1981; Latour, 1991), while neglecting to notice the potentialities that could arise from Dewey's (1916) notion of interconnected reflection, change and education.

In a small windowless conference room, focus group participants, ranging in age from 18 to 22, sat around a large, oval table and shared stories and opinions related to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and less frequently, the internet in general. In the loose and unstructured focus group conversation, not only did I witness in person what I'd read about in boyd's (2014) work—when it comes to the experiences young adults have with new media, it's complicated—and I also experienced stories, opinions, and feeling related to the complex pressures of feeling

obligated to participate and perform in marketized new media cultures in, what seemed to me, unprecedented fashion.

In the two hours I spent with the giddy, fidgety and talkative group of undergraduates, I witnessed a lively exchange of opinions and stories about experiences with Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, and much of what they shared expressed a sense of being unsure and mixed up when it comes to perceptions of new media. Though I had prepared a list of twenty or so focus group questions about new media experience, I aimed to allow for an unscripted conversation because I wanted participants to feel at ease and free to share whatever came up in the moment and in relation to what others in the room had to say. By aiming to create a comfortable, conversational atmosphere, I hoped participants would feel free to be themselves, and share as openly and honestly as possible. This semi-structured approach also gave me the opportunity to ask follow-up questions on what the conversation's natural unfolding revealed, giving me greater depth of insight into the nuances of what participants had to share (Krueger, 1988). By asking open-ended questions and allowing the conversation to follow its own course, I sought to reduce the power differential between the teacher-researcher and student-participant (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Madriz, 2000) and position participants as consultants rather than as subjects of a research study (Lee, 1993). In this way, students showed a willingness to offer constructive feedback after the first few group members did this, resulting in a "safety in numbers" benefit. Additionally, the focus group setting enabled participants to further explore their initial reactions to questions by interacting with one another to reflect on and perhaps learning from the comments of their peers, thus enhancing the quality of the results by offering a range of perspectives (Madriz, 2000).

And informed by my own contemplative mindfulness practices, which involve open awareness, compassion, and non-judgment for loving connection, I strived to create a safe, open-minded and open-hearted atmosphere where participants felt truly heard and comfortable in the vulnerability of togetherness. This allowed for a conversation that felt less inhibited by direction, restriction, or, it seemed, any sense of being left out of or unheard in the group. With little prompting from me, participants had much to say, and what they shared appeared to be often charged with emotion, a sense of truth telling, and what appeared to be authentic, respectful listening. Frequently, they built off of each other's comments in both agreement and disagreement, growing from the conflict inherent to community. Our conversation, which was recorded and transcribed with participants' permission, rarely paused in its enthusiastic display of an intriguing array of contradictions.

They enjoy the connection and entertainment but dislike the inauthenticity of carefully curated self-presentations. They feel at home with their online communities of friends, but are uncomfortable with the insidious nature of algorithm-fueled marketing. They value staying up-to-date with what's happening in the world, according to social media news feeds, but deplore the ways in which overexposure causes desensitization. They love killing time with the stimulation of novelty provided by new media and, like many young adults, they vehemently dislike the restlessness of boredom; but they often feel they should be doing something else, something more worthwhile. Still, they're tired of the mainstream rhetoric, trickling down from parents, teachers and others in so-called positions of authority, that tells them their media use is "bad" or "wrong". Then again, many also wondered if maybe it actually is bad—maybe it actually has caused real loss. As one focus group participant said:

My life all changed in high school with Instagram and Facebook, and that's when I was like, Wow, can I just go back to my child self again when that wasn't a problem and I had time to concentrate on the things around me? It was so much simpler. And even though it's almost crucial to have it today, I wish I could go back to my old self and that's something you can't really get back.

Though many focus group participants nostalgically longed for a “simpler” time when their friends weren't obsessed with social media “likes”, when they could watch a television show together (the *same* television show together rather than different shows streaming from different devices at once), when they didn't feel obliged to check their smartphones every two minutes, and when they could cry at movies because they hadn't yet been desensitized, many celebrated the joy of easily, instantly connecting with friends and family across great geographical distances; with all of the convenience and connection of new media, they said, they couldn't imagine life without it, nor would they even want to. Still, they can see downsides, problems, and troubles, too; they feel split, at odds, unsure, and incomplete. For example, responding to an inquiry into what sort of advice to give a younger sibling or friend around how to best use social media, one participant responded this way:

Don't get so caught up in posting stuff. I mean, you can post as much as you want, I guess. It's just don't get caught up in the number of likes you get. But, I mean, that's pretty hard to not get caught up in. I would say I'm pretty not caught up in that. I'm more obsessed with comparing myself to people rather than the number of likes or followers I have but I guess actually kinda with both (likes and followers) ... it's interesting.

It was perhaps the ways in which I perceived focus group participants struggling with either/or dualisms and paradoxical contradictions that fascinated me most; such contradictory splits stood out to me, as they often do in everyday life, because they seem to speak to the human condition, to an longtime struggle, and to a place that, if embraced and accepted, could present great potential (more on this in chapter three). For the focus group participants, this meant that sometimes their new media use was a problem while others times it was a solution, sometimes it was essential, other times it was trivial, sometimes it was artificial, other times it was authentic, sometimes they praised it, other times they bemoaned it, sometimes it was so amazing, it was stupid, sometimes they were so entertained, they were bored, sometimes they were so informed, they didn't care, sometimes they were so projected, they were fragmented, and sometimes they were so connected, they were disconnected. In some ways, this paradoxical sense of disconnect makes good sense; after all, the absolutist, materialist ideals of the Enlightenment and Scientism have penetrated human existence for hundreds of years, weaving their dualistic values and perspectives into our personal, social, and cultural lives, paving the way for the exploits of industrial, political, and market powers, and leaving many of us feeling divided, split, and incomplete.

Perhaps it is this sense of feeling divided, split, and incomplete that drives, for many of the focus group participants, the need to seek a sense of self worth and fulfillment through the projection of a social media identity that is well “liked,” and through an interaction with other identities and brands that are also well “liked.” And if so, such experiences of incompleteness, and yearning for completion through marketized new media environments, appear to achieve the goals of dualistic thinking and neoliberalism discussed previously. In our focus group conversations, I often felt the weight of the social media “like”; nearly all of the participants,

with a mixture of pride and shame, said that the “like” held great power over how they felt about themselves, and others. So much so, in fact, that the number of “likes” one does or does not receive often dictates how one posts to and interacts within social media, sustaining one, it seems to me, in the mindset that it is the quantifiable image, the externally-directed behavior, the marketable attention, the “like”, that matters most, and certainly more than inner resources. The ways in which participants stressed the significance of the “like” led me to feel that perhaps not only does chasing after more “likes” alter how one posts to social media and impact one’s sense of self but it might also compound one’s sense of feeling split, incomplete, and caught in an either/or dualism, which is analogous, conveniently enough, to the digitally coded binaries structuring the backbones of new media, and which supports both the ideals of neoliberal technoculture, and also the previously mentioned notion that if you’re not on social media, you don’t exist. One focus group participant explained that she wanted others to see her social media posts as evidence of her being alive, and having “a life”:

When I post a picture and, like, one boy doesn’t “like” it, I’m like shit, what’s wrong with it? And sometimes, I’ll admit it: I will post a picture because my butt looks good, like, I have no shame, I’m sorry, it’s gotten to the point where I want to impress people on Instagram. I want people to think I’m cool, like I’m already planning my next Instagram post and I’ll ask my friends: What should I caption this? I want people to think that I live an interesting life and stuff, if that makes sense. I guess it’s kinda stupid of me, but I want people to think I’m having a great time in college and, I dunno, just that I have a life, I guess, even if I don’t.

Many focus group participants shared this sentiment, suggesting their sense of self, their sense of aliveness, is tied up in the outcomes of their social media interaction and participation. Participants expressed feeling both obligated to participate, and also pressured to perform in particular ways, primarily in ways that garner “likes.” Many noted that even while they understand that what’s posted to social media is often curated and edited for a particular effect, they experience it being as every bit as real as any other encounter with social comparison. As one participant noted, “I know it’s staged but it’s still really addictive and you can literally look at an (Instagram) picture and be like, I feel ten times worse about myself.” Participants noted that they are well aware of the careful strategizing that goes into the images and captions posted to social media (on both ends), but, even so, experience such posts as though they are “authentic” representations of reality anyway, which often drives them to compete and strive to post only what will be well “liked.” One participant explained that he will only post, interact and connect with what is well “liked” in this way:

On Instagram, I don't post pictures that I feel are not going to get a lot of likes. And I think that's just a thing with everyone who has an Insta in our generation, because if you don't get a lot of likes on a picture then you're not cool; your pictures are not cool and I'm guilty of posting a picture and then deleting it because it wasn't getting enough likes ... You go onto someone's Instagram account and you immediately look at their followers and look at how many likes they have and you're like, oh, they only have 20 likes on their picture? I've even been like, I'm not going to post a picture because I don't wanna have to worry about it, like, I don't want to have to be like, Oh my God, I'm not getting enough likes. So, I'm just not gonna do it.

While many social norms have emerged from new media contexts, giving young adults a shared sense for how to behave, interact, and participate with their peers online, young adults continue to experience the consequences of context collapse and of being displaced from conventional perceptions of time and space in the physical natural world (Baym & boyd, 2012). Apart from the comforting sense of knowing who one is interacting with, and disconnected from the comfort of being grounded in a particular location in time and space, many focus group participants shared stories that expressed the sense of disorientation that can arise from new media experience, as one participant explained, “I have a lot of followers on Instagram and there have been times when people have come up to me and say, *Hey, I know you from Instagram*, and that’s a weird feeling. *Oh, wow, you know what I’m posting? And you know who I am, but I don’t know who you are?* That’s a weird concept.”

Focus group participants also often struggled to make sense of not only the newly emergent social norms shaping online experience, but also the one’s reshaping offline experience, where they frequently felt both annoyed and excited by the pervasive presence of mobile media, annoyed by friends and family members who won’t put down their smartphones, excited by the ideas that come to them suddenly at the dinner table for how to post to social media. Many felt troubled by the fact that new media often interrupt, and sometimes replace, in-person social interaction, reducing occasions for in-person conversation. And yet they also acknowledge how integrated they are within such a phenomenon. One participant shared a personal story of this type of experience in this way:

I was visiting my friends and I was like the only one who wasn’t on her phone and it was kinda annoying because two of my friends are literally always on their phone and, like, I do use my phone, I use it for social media, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.

But if I'm at dinner, I'll put it away; I think that's fine 'cause that's like 30 minutes. But my friends are always like, Oh my god, what's my caption and like how many likes am I going to get? And, oh my god, I only have two likes in two minutes and I'm like, Shut up ... but I think about that too but it's like internal (lowering voice)... like, Oh my god, I'm not gonna get a lot of likes, but at the same time I don't think about that all the time and I think they kinda do and that's not my problem, but I wanted to be like, Can you not? Let's all hang out together.

For most of the focus group participants, everyday life experiences involve frequent encounters with attention-splitting and always-updating information and entertainment, or infotainment. Designed to hook users and increase traffic for profit, infotainment such as Reddit listicles, GIFs and memes gone viral, alongside the infinite number of news headlines populating often entertaining social media feeds, prompted many focus group participants to question the value of just what it is—and *what it is*, of course, is hard to define—that they're most exposed to through new media. Many felt that excessive entertainment was an obstacle to being informed in a quality, educational way. And, yet, they also felt that engaging with smartphones and social media was essential to staying informed and up-to-date with “what’s happening in the world” (via news headlines delivered by social media feeds). Participants worked aloud to make sense of the usefulness (or lack thereof) in new media environments, oscillating between pros and cons. One participant shared his thoughts this way:

The power (of new media) is no longer about overcoming barriers; it's about distraction and the blurring of entertainment and information and learning, not because we want to learn, but because there's nothing else to do. It's (mostly) for the sake of entertainment

... I think the obsession with social media is present in every aspect of our lives ... it's scary because like now Facebook is the gateway to all the information we encounter.

Contemplating the value of news updates delivered through social media, another participant expressed a sense of being at odds in both wanting to stay informed while also not wanting to be overexposed to or overly entertained by incomplete stories, and by the fragmented nature of encountering mainstream news in social media feeds where the inclination to skim, scroll, react hastily and keep moving often obstruct the capacity for pausing to question the value and merit of the news, information, opinions, and entertainment presented by new media. The participant explained such a predicament this way:

Social media is opinionated; for the most part, you see the opinions of the people around you, so you're not getting an objective view, you're just getting bits and pieces of a story ... so you don't really know, like how many people on this campus could tell you for real what happened in (the) Paris (attacks) on Friday? I know bits and pieces about what happened. I know there were attacks. It's just a current thing (to not know the full story) and I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing because part of me is, like, I don't wanna know ... it's not something you really wanna—I mean, we need to address it but it's not something we wanna think about, but I don't know how many could actually tell you the full story ... that's part of the danger: You're only getting the surface of something.

And this might be at the heart of the disorientation: The surface. Perhaps, because of the marketized designs and infrastructures behind neoliberal technoculture, today's young adults are

so enthralled by the surface, the image, the identity, the novel, the stimulation, the speed, that they're left confused, unsure, and uneasy about how to think, to feel, *to be*, given that perhaps they feel incomplete in their ongoing, irresistible desires to project and to feel connected (and thereby whole). Perhaps this is why many of the focus group felt at once appalled by and apathetic to their new media-inspired desires and actions; they brush them off as "only natural" and then condemn themselves for what they want and what they do with their wants. As one participant said: "My sorority is getting initiated this weekend and I'm already thinking about what I'm going to post on Instagram." She shook her head at the idea that the Instagram post had become more important, in her mind, in advance, than the sorority event itself; she pitied herself. But she also laughed and shrugged her shoulders, as if to say: *Well, that's just the way it is*. Many in the room nodded, showing how well they related to this experience.

Others took a similarly apathetic, that's-just-the-way-it-is stance to the notion that overexposure to violence in the news experienced through social media could cause desensitization, disconnect, and a lost capacity for empathy. As one participant said, "The shootings and the bombings, they happen so often now in our society that we've become numb to it and it's really crappy but it's like the way things are—"

"Which is scary," added another, to which another elaborated:

It's awful and we all acknowledge that, but unless you have a personal connection I feel like people don't really get super emotional. Like, we know about these things but we don't feel them as much but ... I don't really know what I'm saying ... like knowing these things, it's like we're taking it in and we're trying to learn from it and stay away from all

of these things and we're saying this is bad and that's bad, but it doesn't really affect us anymore.

Most focus group participants felt it was the norm to shrug off the desensitization they sometimes felt resulted from social media use. Recognizing the messy milieu of information presented by social media, many agreed that new media offered an experience that both overexposed users to information, oftentimes to violent information, while also offering a constant stream of novel and entertaining information. By blending entertaining animal videos with shocking ISIS videos with humorous political memes, social media, then, perhaps helps to make violence digestible by allowing it to intermingle with entertainment, which is not a new notion: Postman (1985) discussed this problem in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. But, once again, perhaps young adults today are more likely to experience this phenomenon more often. Responding to the uneasy blending of violence and entertainment that new media often affords, one participant expressed his disdain for the desensitization he believed was brought on by social media, and claimed that a recent experience he had taking time and space away from new media supported him in regaining sensitivity and empathy:

When I saw some ISIS videos, I found it grotesque that I didn't have that strong of a reaction to it. But I noticed, after a few days not being exposed to all that stuff, my sensitivity was exponentially greater because I was open and aware ... it was easier to put myself in others people's shoes ... I think social media is simplifying things for us ... like we don't need things to be that simplified, but of course it's marketing (and) this is the easiest ways to do things ... the two harmful effects are the desensitizing of us and simplifying so everything has to be black and white, and then we start applying that to

our lives where everything isn't black or white; things are multidimensional and things have different sides (but) we expect our reality to coincide with social media when it doesn't.

The expectation that what's seen on social media ought to coincide with some sense of reality by, say, offering a rich, nuanced, and meaningful reflection of the world, seemed to be a source of stress for many focus group participants. Struggling to make sense of the conflicting feelings they had toward new media, participants felt slightly frustrated by the fact that they couldn't settle on a particular outlook: Sometimes new media use was "good", other times "bad," sometimes it was "right," other times "wrong," and sometimes it was "real," while other times "fake." These struggles with the trappings of a dualistic, either/or style of thinking suggested, to me, that focus group participants were perhaps too caught up in the habit of fragmentation in new media experiences to recognize that new media, like their own personhood, like life, might hold a greater complex unity than they typically allow themselves to see, as one focus group participant explained, "All the potential that's in social media, we squander it ... it's kinda unbelievable. I was thinking about 'likes' and how pointless it is and how so many people obsess: What Instagram photo should I post? And how many like am I going to get?" Another participant described the ways in which the potential of new media is often overlooked this way: "There's so many things you could be doing online and sharing but a lot of the time, we're just using it as a tool to feel good about ourselves (by competing with others). I don't think people realize it because we're so focused on it all the time. It's just what is normal now."

The Digital Detox Assignment as an Educational Intervention

I actually discovered I am more than I let myself believe. – focus group participant

What is “normal” now? What do new media normalize? How have new media come to carry mechanisms of power, mechanisms that become hidden in their naturalization? The neoliberal mechanisms of power that corporate and governmental bodies bake into new media spaces, and that disappear, help to create one’s sense of what’s “normal” and what’s “natural.” And for many of the young adults engaging with new media, as evidenced in my focus group study and also through my research, what’s “normal” and “natural” is living lives habituated to the neoliberal ideals of technoculture, and subjecting oneself tirelessly to the rhetoric that says: *You are fragmented, incomplete, and not enough, therefore, you must consume, perform, and compete if you want to feel alive in this world*, meanwhile obscuring capacities for feeling oneself deeply affected in ways that are complexly interconnected with the effects and connections offered by the shiny surfaces of smartphones and digital spheres.

To discover that such states of affectedness are available entails effort and change, a shaking oneself from routine and habit, and loosening oneself from the states of semi-consciousness that tend to accompany habit. This is not to devalue habit; Dewey (1916; 1925) believed that the formation and experience of habit play a crucial role in the development of consciousness, free will, and social agency. Moreover, habit is valuable in that it can provide a repetition from which the urge to break free stems. Thus, the habit to check in with new media environments countless times throughout each day can act as an impetus for breaking free, for finding change.

In fact, it was habituated relationships with new media that introduced the concept of the digital detox into popular culture and education. As I mentioned in the introduction, I’d first become acquainted with through Adbusters. At about the same time that I was asking my

community college students to experience a digital detox (between 2011 and 2014), publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *The Atlantic* were publishing pieces about the increasing popularity of digital detox camps for adults, which offered comfortable woodsy, crafty, and kitschy spaces for a long and expensive weekend away from new media. I was turned off by the costs (typically several hundred dollars per person), the trendy, marketable cuteness, and the ways in which these factors sent the message that a digital detox was only available to wealthy executives from Silicon Valley, and in the case of these Bay Area adult camps, they often were. But this didn't stop me from keeping the digital detox assignment in my curriculum, just as the commodification of yoga doesn't stop me from stretching my body. In fact, it made the assignment that much more important. With support from contemplative learning practices and the perspective of wholeness they offer, I wouldn't let corporate, neoliberal culture co-opt it, reduce it, and empty it of meaning, at least not in my classroom (nor in my body). And as I described in chapter one, the majority of my community college students found new critical self-awareness through their digital detox experience, a phenomenon I will elaborate on in chapter three.

I'm not sure whether this was the case for the 400 or so undergraduate students who were asked to take a digital detox as part of the aforementioned introductory journalism course J201: Mass Media & Society, for which I assisted as a graduate teaching fellow during two fall terms (2014 and 2015), the latter of which became the focus of my research. The J201 version of the digital detox assignment stood in stark contrast to the version I worked with in my community college courses, where we benefited from the time, space, intimacy, and community of a small class experience. Having neither time to invest in community building nor the space for stretching the digital detox assignment to accommodate the unique array of ways with which

students engage new media, the J201 professor was in some ways forced to keep it simple and general. And so her version of the digital detox assignment asked students to abstain from all digital media for two days, with the exception of media needed for school purposes, such as university email accounts and Canvas (the university's online learning management system). They were also free to listen to music. Otherwise, the hope was they'd get a good feel for what life away from new media was like, and then write a four-page-long essay about what they found.

Having read 90 of these essays, having received permission from students to publish excerpts from these essays, and having conducted a focus group study with a dozen or so undergraduates from this J201 class, I've had the opportunity to explore the outcomes of the digital detox assignment, and to contemplate further my research questions: What sort of new media literacy pedagogy is effective in meeting students where they are with and within their new media relationships, while also prompting them to create time and space for critically reflecting on those relationships in ways that allow for enhanced awareness and consciousness? Does a digital detox assignment—in this case, an assignment that asks students to experience 48 hours away from new media and then write an essay about it—allow for such?

From my standpoint, it was a good start, but ultimately, aptly enough, incomplete. Again, this likely has much to do with the fact that these students were coming from a large lecture course whose professor, given that J201 is a general education course, is required to cover a broad range of material related to media and society; there wasn't much time for delving too deeply into exercises meant to prompt critical reflection, nor was there much space for building an intimate sense of community, except for, ironically enough, through the interactions that took place on the course's Twitter hashtag. For the first time in her teaching career, the professor

introduced Twitter use into the lecture hall experience in hopes of heightening student engagement and building class community; the results were mixed, as were the results of my focus group study.

The students were confused. They were being asked to detox from new media while also being asked to use new media more often in the classroom. Had the professor more time, space, and experience, she could've offered more instruction on both the value of stepping temporarily away from new media and also the value in using new media wisely, and with care (such as for enriched educational experiences in the classroom). But given that, as Jenkins (2015) points out, we are at a moment of transition, it is understandable that teachers and students alike are unsure and uneasy about how to proceed in relation to the enormous presence of new media in and outside the classroom; after all, they're navigating new territories—territories that, as many of my focus group participants reminded me, cannot be escaped or avoided.

You can't actually take a true digital detox, they said; it's just not realistic in this day and age. Screens are unavoidable; they are inextricably, and sometime invisibly, entwined into the fabric of their everyday lives. As one focus group participant noted, "Even though I was detoxing from social media, I didn't feel at all disconnected from technology or screens, like in class, we had to pull out our phones multiple times for Tophat (an interactive teaching platform the professor used for tracking attendance and posing quiz questions in the large lecture class)." Another participant noted that a digital detox is "not realistic because, as I was doing it, I was getting notifications from (the professor) about stuff for class ... (and) as far as emailing, texting and going on Canvas or on the library site, I didn't go away from any of that because I had to use it." Similarly, in an essay about the digital detox experience, one student wrote: "The experience I had with this digital detox was unfortunately not as great as I had hoped. I expected to feel lost

without my technology, but to my surprise, the obstacle that I faced was that I wanted to get away from my electronics, but simply could not.” Finally, one other essay excerpt expressed both the inevitability of screen time and also the ways in which we often rationalize screen time, in this way: “The hardest part of this entire experience wasn’t staying off my phone, but not looking at other people’s phones. Throughout the 48 hours, people were constantly trying to get me to look at funny videos or cute pictures and it was really hard to not look at them.” Such responses to the pervasive, ever-present, and inescapable nature of new media today remind me again, as an adult, as an educator, as a scholar, that simply wagging fingers at the youth for being too distracted and consumed by smartphones and social media is unfair and misguided given that it is the adults who have helped new media technologies become embedded in everyday life, be it personally, academically, or commercially.

While many students could not find themselves “truly” removed from the screens that pervade the publicly, digitally mediated contexts of their lives, I found from both reading essays and listening to focus group conversations, that the digital detox experience, whether it lasted two days or two hours, prompted many to reflect on new media, and experience new self-awareness. As one participant said, “The digital detox didn’t make me stop using social media but it definitely made me more aware of just how much of my time is consumed by it,” while another said, “I think it’s made me question more things, like you look at something on social media and ask, *Is that real? What actually was happening?*” Another participant explained how the detox asked her to contemplate, deeply, meaningfully, the anxiety she experienced apart from Facebook:

In my digital detox, I found that I was so caught up in worrying that I didn't have that instant communication, that I couldn't function ... I was so bored! I was bored out of my mind! Like, I can't check Facebook? I was so frustrated after ten minutes with a Where's Waldo? book that I threw it at the wall. I couldn't function; I was so paranoid, like what if something happens? What if someone needs ... like (trailing off). This is awful, this is stupid, this book is for little kids and I'm so paranoid. Everything I set out to do (during the detox), like, oh, I'll play my guitar, I'll read a book, yea, no, none of that happened because I was so paranoid. But then I was like, wait a minute, there's something wrong with this picture if I can't function without my phone. I myself should be able to function with just the necessities for being alive.

Many focus group participants shared that they felt fearful away from new media. While they acknowledged that their anxiety and paranoia around feeling disconnected from 'what's going on' might be excessive and irrational, related to the culture of fear that media has helped create (Furedi, 2006), they felt that such fear and anxiety, like new media, was unavoidable, as one participant explained:

I was so preoccupied during the digital detox, like what if something happens? Like, I obviously still had my phone with me just in case an emergency happened. But the main part for me was the fact that something could go wrong and I wouldn't know about it. I was anxious about it and I know I was being paranoid and obviously nothing was going to happen and nothing did ... but I can't imagine going a super long time without my phone.

Another participant took a more defensive approach to the fear that feeling disconnected from new media can bring on when she said, referring to a younger sibling who recently received her first smartphone: “I think it’s beneficial for her because she’s gonna learn so much about how the world works early on so she doesn’t get hit by it later.” The notion that smartphones and new media protect people by keeping them prepared and ‘in the know’ came up frequently in our conversations, elucidating the idea that many young adults believe new media can teach them about how the world works, while failing to see the ways in which media often manipulate and distort perceptions and attitudes for particular purposes, such as economic or political gains.

Others, however, as previously mentioned, were aware of the manipulative, destabilizing, and desensitizing effects sometimes brought on through new media experiences, such as only becoming privy to the fragmented surface of a news story in a social media feed or being limited by the filter bubbles created by Facebook’s News Feeds, wherein one sees primarily what one agrees with or likes, missing out on opportunities to learn from views different from one’s own. Still, some claimed that it was the digital detox, the stepping away from screens, that allowed them to recognize desensitization and, as a consequence, regain sensitivity and empathy, as one student explained:

After the digital detox, my empathy exponentially increased. And that’s something I’m always aware of because when my parents describe me in birthday cards and stuff like that, like, Oh, you have such a big heart, I think that’s an attribute of my younger self and it sucks and it’s mind-boggling that I don’t have the same capacity for empathy as I did. When I got an iPhone my freshman year of high school, I noticed my ability for empathy started going downhill and I don’t exactly know what to attribute it to ... the fact that I

had access to a whole bunch of media that has gruesome things or ultra violent things ... you become numbed to it, and socially jaded to it, like you've seen that before and it's not like you're experiencing it. You're looking at Snapchat and you're not actually experiencing your own life and you're not actually experiencing the life of your friends. You're not really experiencing anything so how are you going to be able to put yourself in someone else's shoes who's going through a challenge in their life if you're not really experiencing anything in general?

Others in the focus group, particularly those who didn't consider themselves all that attached to their smartphones in the first place, were lighthearted and took the digital detox assignment in stride: "I thought it was really fun and pretty easy," said one participant. "It's just like a really nice excuse to say, *Oh yeah, talk to you guys in two or three days*, and then you get to like go for walks and read, it's just fun. There's no pressure to communicate once you're on the detox, like it doesn't matter if people wanna talk to you 'cause they just have to wait."

While many shared that sense of obligation to being available to others via smartphones and mobile media, along with the fear and paranoia that comes with feeling unable to relieve the pressures of such obligations, others found that, after the initial anxiety and panic passed, they enjoyed the opportunity to feel present in the physical, natural world. Many claimed that they noticed in-person social interactions, such as at meals times or in dormitory lobby hang out sessions, from a new perspective, commenting that they hadn't previously realized how often their friends and family members look at their mobile phones for escaping awkward silences, or for meeting one's habitual desire to stay connected, as one participant explained, "I went out to dinner with my brother a few weeks ago and he would not put his phone down the entire time we were out dinner. He's like, *Well, I like being connected to my phone all the time*. And I'm like,

Okay, I'm just gonna sit here and stare at you while you stare at your phone ... like where do you draw that line?" Similarly, another participant expressed concern about screens interrupting a lack of togetherness among her friends: "A lot of the time, when I'm with my friends, we'll all be on our laptops, and like I've sat in the same room with five other people who are all watching different things on their phones. And you could say well at least you're in the same room, but we could also be watching the same thing or like doing the same thing."

Others found, instead of being perturbed by the interruption of mobile media, they were able to connect better with friends in the moment, which, in one case, inspired their friends to also take a momentary break from their screens, as one participant explained: "It's just amazing what you can see and now I am more sensitive and think my friends have become more eye-opened too, after I told them about (the digital detox). People say, *Well, that's terrible*. But it's really not. You learn a lot about yourself and about what you're doing with your time. Like am I frittering life away when I could be going out and doing things?" Another participant described how the digital detox allowed her to be moved by the beauty of a present-moment experience with friends in this way:

I found myself connecting to people. I was able to be present with my friends and not having to, if I was bored, go on Instagram. If I was bored, I'd talk to my friends. Originally, I was like, Oh crap! I picked a bad time to do this, because it was over the weekend. But after the fact I was super happy that I waited because I would've been really bored had I done the detox in the middle of the week, because I have no patience at all; like, I would've been bored in two seconds. But I didn't have my phone while driving to (another university an hour away) and it's cheesy but "Something in the Water" by

Carrie Underwood came on and the sun was setting and I was like, O.K., this is perfect, and me and my friends were singing and it was like the most perfect thing that I could've asked for in that moment. It was really nice because if I had my phone, I would've been texting my friends or doing something else. It was really nice to be there.

What appeared to be new critical self-awareness and heightened consciousness came through also in the essays that I analyzed. The essay's assignment prompt asked students to describe personal media habits, describe their personal experience with the digital detox and subsequent insight into the experience, and to respond to a chapter from *The Shallows* (Carr, 2011), which argues that regular interaction and participation in new media environment weakens the brain's capacity for sustaining focus, engaging in critical thinking, and accessing memory. Carr's (2011) arguments around the damaging effects of internet use on the brain and cognition likely influenced many of the student essays to take the perspective that not using the new media meant better focus and thinking. Moreover, the essay's requirement for "new insights" certainly may have influenced the "insightful evidence" of new critical awareness I'm about to share, especially given that one focus group participant admitted, "I fluffed mine up, now thinking about it. I did learn something but it wasn't this transformative crazy experience that I made it sound like in my essay," to which another participant added: "Writing this paper taught me how to B.S. my way through it, but also to be honest ... I was honest in that I did say I did not fully detox from everything, but I kinda made it sound better ... that's annoying, you can see right through that."

I actually couldn't see right through that. Having first analyzed the essays prior to the focus group study, I didn't read the essays as B.S. fluff. Though I may have detected some exaggeration here and there, I believe most of what I read in the essays was genuine, a view

which is supported by the fact that, in the focus group study, only two participants claimed that their essays weren't entirely honest. The majority of participants appeared to speak freely and honestly about the meaningful, eye-opening experiences that time away from new media gave them. While I was aware of the danger in participants feeling influenced to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), I felt that they trusted me when I told them that anything they told me would not be shared with their professor or have any bearing on the course grade. In short, I hoped students felt free to be honest, though can't assume all were.

Similarly, in nearly all of the essays that I analyzed, at least one paragraph was dedicated to praising the value and beauty of feeling oneself present and attuned to the moment at hand in the physical, natural world; many claimed to have noticed the enormous oak trees, which qualify our university's campus as an arboretum, for the first time (previously, they'd been too distracted by their mobile phones), while also noticing, for the first time, just how many other students walking across campus were looking at their mobile devices. As one student wrote:

I let my eyes and brain wander and take in the environment ... I was amazed at the beautiful, vibrant colored leaves on trees. You could smell the crisp, fresh air. The fact that the leaves were literally falling put a smile on my face ... I felt like I was in a movie ... it was an unreal feeling.

The notion that being present in the physical, natural world felt like a movie, felt perhaps more mediated than habituated new media experience, intrigued me and made me question our shifting sense of "reality." Another participant, contemplating his values around sensory experience and "real" human connection, described his experience with the digital detox this way:

I took as much time as possible while walking, staring at the sky and the trees, treasuring the memories that slowly bubbled to the surface of falls past. The pleasure of raking up and diving into piles of leaves, the smell of decay coating my clothes and my nostrils, laughing while throwing leaves at my brother. ...the essence of what this digital detox is all about: learning to connect better with your fellow human beings, in an age of frequently shallower relationships. ...I long for the day when people stop caring about what other people think of them and their actions, and take charge of their lives and their futures.

Many students also valued the new experiences they had with simply sitting still:

“Everything was happening so quickly around me and I was able to just sit there and take it all in,” one student wrote, while another wrote of noticing her cravings and making an effort to redirect them: “Slowly, I realized that I was rationalizing indulging in my electronics, so I further embraced my detox. I picked up the harp collecting dust in my room, continued the watercolors previously left unfinished, and thought of the amount of stress created in the wake of constant media-related stimulation.” And another wrote about experiencing a new capacity for paying attention to the wanderings of the mind:

For 48 straight hours, instead of being able to fall back on the frenzy of information accessible through the internet and media, causing my brain to dart around from thought to thought, I found myself with the time to let my mind wander. I found that I was actually much more capable of deep, complex thought in areas I never knew I had any interest in. ...This process helped me see that, well to be frank, there is a much stronger emotional side to me than I would have ever thought. With this time to actually investigate the world

through a deeper, complex thought, I actually discovered I am more than I let myself believe.

In the introduction, I wrote that I wanted my community college students to find meaning in their lives; I wanted them to feel that their lives mattered, that *they* mattered. So, in reading the line “I actually discovered I am more than I let myself believe,” I feel that if a little time away from new media help students, whether they’re coming from a large or small class, find a greater sense of self-worth and wholeness, then I find that the digital detox assignment, whether it’s simple and generalized or customized and expanded, holds value and purpose. And yet, I also feel that asking students to temporarily abstain from new media is not enough; reflecting alone is not enough, no matter how critical it may be. Students also need loads of support in making sense of context, too, even if that context is messy and complicated. From where I stand, students need to understand that new media do not exist separately from thoughts, feelings, and actions. They need to understand that new media are thick with the interests of those who designed their infrastructures (corporate and governmental entities). And, finally, they need to experience, firsthand through the sort of experience a digital detox can provide, how we are, truly, in this together, personally, publicly, digitally, socially, culturally, biologically, naturally, in every way. These aren’t easy concepts to grasp.

So we’ve got to start with—well, I’m going to go ahead and say it: love.

But not the sort of love reduced to romance (and much of our media have led us to believe that romantic love is the best or only type of love to be had) but rather love that involves serious effort and work for experiencing interconnectedness, respect, compassion, and empathy for others, an understanding of the value in encountering the interrelatedness in community and

environment, and an embracing acceptance of the work and the hardships that are inevitably entwined in the “most difficult of all our tasks:” learning to love, as Rilke (1903) wrote:

To take love seriously and to bear and to learn it like a task, this what (young) people need ... For one human being to love another, that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but a preparation. For this reason, young people, who are beginners in everything, cannot yet know love, they have to learn it. With their whole being, with all their forces, gathered close about their lonely, timid, upward-beating heart, they must learn to love.

Or, as one student put it in an essay: “Would I rather be well-‘liked’ or well-loved?”

CHAPTER IV

LOVE, WE'D RATHER BE LOVED

Sent forth by your senses,
go to the very edge of your desire;
Invest me.

...

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror
Only press on: no feeling is final.
Don't let yourself be cut off from me.
Nearby is that country
known as Life.
You will recognize it
by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.
-Rainer Maria Rilke

My acupuncturist first introduced me to the concept of mindfulness, and my dog inspired me to put it into practice (*it's true*). I adopted or rescued my dog off Craig's List (*thank you, new media*). And given that, at the time, I lived in a small apartment, daily walks were not an option; they were mandatory. In the beginning, I didn't want to roll out of bed and out into the damp cold of the Pacific Northwest. But it didn't take long for me to reorient myself to experience these morning walks as, oftentimes, the best parts of my day. And much of that had to do with moving like a dog moves, pausing to absorb the details, alert to the sensations of the environment.

Guided by the various philosophies that connect with mindfulness, I made efforts to be present and aware, watching both my thoughts and my environment, as I walked the same loop with my Shepherd mutt in my old Portland neighborhood for more than five years; this repetition led me to see just how much the same ten square blocks of neighborhood change day to day, season to season, year to year. I noticed how quickly the leaves of an oak tree turn from green to red to yellow to brown and crunchy on the concrete in the fall. I noticed the shape of a naked tree and the slumber of heavy clouds in the winter. I noticed the symmetry of veins on painted petals

and the melodies of young chickadees in the spring. And I noticed the hot and bursting vibrancy of overhanging vines in the summer. Most importantly perhaps is that I noticed how integrated into these cycles of change I felt; with the changing leaves, the new and dying blooms, the shifting patterns in the sky, I too was changing. And on these walks, away from the flatness and static of everyday habit, of one thing after another, I experienced a multidimensionality of time and space, which prompted in me reflection and introspection, and which, I believe, supported me in a multitude of ways, including my experiences with creativity, thinking, teaching, and new media (later, as graduate student, I would find that mindfulness practices also prompted me to take on a narrative, critical auto-ethnographic approach to research by supporting me in being open to interpreting multiple possibilities and perspectives in experience).

Having benefitted from the ways in which mindfulness helped me to be less judgmental of myself and others, more open to acceptance of myself and others, more integrated into a sense of community and into the beauty of the natural environment, less stressful in work and traffic, more attuned to my sensory experience (music, food, aesthetics, etc.), less anxious and more imaginative in my creative work, and more deeply connected to inexplicable experiences of love, I was inspired, in 2010, to bring mindfulness as a concept and a practice into the community college classroom. In the next four years, I would witness many of my students discover intellectual, emotional, and physical support from mindful practice. While mindfulness played a small part in all of my classes, it took on its largest role in my fourth year of teaching when I experimented with the integration of contemplative learning practices into a new media themed course curriculum. Some things changed, while other stayed the same.

Here's what stayed: Students kept a log of new media exposure, experienced a digital detox, read articles from the *New York Times*, *Atlantic*, and *The New Yorker*—such as Nicholas

Carr's *Atlantic* piece "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" and Stephen Marche's *Atlantic* feature "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?"—wrote an essay about new media, engaged in class conversations about the digital detox experience and new media effects in general. At the term's start, the students selected a two-week window for "detoxing"; I aimed to give students an empowered role in this process, as I believed, and reminded them of this regularly, that they were ultimately in charge of the educational experience they'd have. Each student typed up a "customized plan", in which they'd describe how they would like to detox, what would they break from and for how long; this approach gave students a sense of agency, while acknowledging that each student has a different relationship with new media. The plan also gave students the opportunity to articulate their goals and intentions, helping them to both clarify their plan and also feel accountable to it.

Here's what changed: They'd mindfully engage with an activity or hobby of their choosing throughout their detox; when they were tempted to turn to Facebook, they'd have a backup activity to turn to, with mindfulness and, it was my hope, with love. Many students opted to return to activities they'd once enjoyed regularly, before social media came around to take up much of their free time, such as playing guitar, painting water colors, reading novels, playing with children and pets, spending time at the park, and talking with loved ones. At the end of the term, one of my students, who was a mother of three from Mexico, a full-time housekeeper, and who had been struggling with writing essays in English, wrote this beautiful excerpt after having dedicated herself to spending more time in her garden (and I include it here with her permission): "It is becoming common in our society to neglect nature ... We are teaching our kids to depend too much on technology, and forgetting about nature. We forget that nature is something that is real, that exists, and is free."

Here's what else changed: Instead of starting the class with one to two minutes of conscious breathing exercises, we experienced five to ten minutes of meditation, wherein we focused on a variety of prompts I offered (one's own thoughts, a natural landscape, the rise and fall of one's belly, etc.). In addition to reading articles about new media, we read pieces related to contemplative learning, such as Brady's (2007) "Learning to Stop, Stopping to Learn" and Zajonc's (2006) "Love and Knowledge: Recovering the Heart of Learning Through Contemplation." We discussed the transformative potential in present-moment awareness, open attention, close, empathetic listening, sustaining contradiction, accessing the imagination, and embodying phenomenological experience. And we attempted to contemplate all of the above in the context of new media: We posed inquiries as, *How do smartphones affect our capacity for presence? How does social media affect our capacity for empathy? How do new media habits affect our capacity for imagination? How do new media habits interrupt embodiment and the wellbeing that can result from such?*

We paused halfway through our two-hour-long classes for five minutes of stretching or for a five-minute mindful stroll around campus, wherein we all (typically 20-30 of us) walked together in silence and made effort to walk as if "our feet were kissing the Earth," a technique I'd learned from Hanh (1991). One student wrote of her experience with mindfulness this way, "When we began our mindfulness study, I was irritated with having to take the time to sit and do nothing. Little did I know that it would be the best part of my day." Another student wrote of a similar experience, "Though I was skeptical at first, I can say this term I have learned the importance of mindfulness ... The greatest benefit for me, when practicing mindfulness (by either taking walks or just sitting still and trying to clear my mind) is how it slows down your life. I feel it allows you to take advantage of a moment you would otherwise quickly pass

through. I learn to appreciate things more, something I could not experience with a clouded mind.”

The Media and Mindfulness course started the term by exploring the presence of new media in everyday life and asked students to track their personal new media use in what I called a “data log”. At the same time, we read articles as Gladwell’s (2010) *New Yorker* piece “Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted”, Franzen’s (2011) *New York Times* article “Liking is for Cowards, Go For What Hurts”, Vara’s (2014) *New Yorker* article “What You’re Worth to Facebook” and Marwick’s (2014) *New York Times* review “How Your Data Are Being Deeply Mined”. The first part of the term also introduced students to the basics of mindfulness practices, which involved instruction from me, along with a handful of introductory reads on mindfulness, such as Hurley’s (2014) *New York Times* article “Breathing Vs. Spacing Out”, along with some chapters from Kabat-Zinn’s 1994 book *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. About midway through the term, students would experience some version of a digital detox, and by this time they could now do so with the support of contemplative, mindful practice, which would, I hoped, give students new self-awareness around their experiences both with new media and also with their physical, natural environments, their relationships with other people, and their relationships with themselves, their *whole* selves, inside and out.

Following their unique range of experiences with the personalized digital detox plan, students began to come to class with stories of new appreciation for walks in the woods, or watercolor paintings, or new songs on the guitar, or new conversations with loved ones; most claimed to have had their eyes opened in some small (or large) way, as one student wrote in an essay: “The first thing I noticed about practicing mindfulness was how I was able to focus afterward. Even after relaxing and focusing on the environment around me and how my body felt

for just five minutes, I was able to think clearly afterward and focus on the task at hand. After practicing mindfulness, it was like my mind had wiped away all of the other thoughts and ideas in my head.” Another student described her experience this way: “In order to be fully present one must be open minded and non judgmental. We tend to live disconnected from nature in a media centered world. When doing our data journals, I realized how much precious time I’ve wasted on social media. During that time I didn’t know what was going on around me or even how much time had lapsed.”

The Media and Mindfulness course curriculum had an arc. I had a specific agenda for where I’d hoped to take them, something that is clearer to me now, in retrospect. We’d start by analyzing the new media in our lives. We’d take a mindful break from new media. We’d learn we were spending too much habitual, mindless time with new media. We’d reconnect to nature. We’d return to new media with a new self-awareness that would support us in using new media mindfully and moderately, while maintaining time and space for meaningful, loving experiences within the physical, natural world, with others, and with ourselves. We’d end the term by both writing an essay about our eye-opening experiences with detoxing from new media, practicing mindfulness, and reconnecting to nature, and also creating a collage that artistically, visually expresses our media and mindfulness experiences. Much good came of this plan; of course it had its limitations too. It wasn’t either/or; it was both and more.

It was good, wonderful in fact, to read of the value students appeared to have found in bringing mindfulness practices to their encounters with new media. Given that I had grown close to many of my students, I was overjoyed to read essay excerpts as these (keep in mind that these are passages coming from students who typically had impoverished educational backgrounds and

thus were often academically unmotivated; these examples show great progress in handling language):

...mindfully choosing how you spend your time on media will really help you notice where all your time is going and we complain that we don't have enough time ... technologies can be controlling so we have to use them mindfully to allow us to have the full experience of knowledge so we can capture and share the creativity within us.

In order to not forget the world around us and coexist with the new dimensions that internet technology brings us we must observe and recognize the use and problems of the internet. Rather than disconnecting from the world while being absorbed in today's new technologies we should regularly fully disconnect ourselves from them. Optimally we should only use them sparingly and for the better with specific intent. We need to know when it's time to let go, put our phones down, and live within the world around us.

And yet, while there is great worth in these essay excerpts, there is also a tone of judgment. Didactic phrases as “we have to”, “we should” and “we must” reveal to me now, ironically enough, the judgmental perspectives that resulted from a course that had hoped to teach non-judgment. This is likely because I mostly reserved our contemplative, mindful practices to experiences in the physical, natural world; at the time, I knew not to bring judgment and condemnation to our conversations about experiences in the physical world, but I had not yet realized the importance in leaving judgment and condemnation out of our conversations around new media, too. Just as focusing on what nutrition *offers* is more supportive to wellbeing than focusing on what junk food *lacks*, focusing on what healthy relationships with new media could

give, rather than on what habitual new media experiences *take away*, could have been more supportive to these Media and Mindfulness courses, and could have helped to prevented the limitations involved in narrow-minded perspectives, as demonstrated in this essay excerpt:

I know people say they can't afford to pay rent, so they're homeless, yet they still own a smartphone and pay \$150 cell phone bill a month, or more. If you're homeless and have no job, why would you need a cell phone with the internet? That's what I mean: People let it consume their lives way too much. The world and people survived without all this social media before and I believe in a lot of ways we're better off than they are now. It interferes without our way of living, our relationships, and the way we raise our children. People need to learn moderation and use it for what it was meant to be used for. But I don't see that happening anytime soon.

While I'd asked student to bring mindfulness practices to their encounters with new media, I mostly focused practices of non-judgment, loving-kindness, and present-moment awareness for the experiences they had with the activity they'd engage with in lieu of screen time. In this way, I left out the value that could have come from validating their relationships with new media, from acknowledging the important ways in which new media are integrated into the fabric of their lives, and from pointing to the potentialities that could emerge from recognizing the interconnectedness, and potentialities therein, of their new media experiences. I may have destabilized my students, which is an obstacle to learning and growth, thereby inadvertently urging them to live from fear (rather than from love), which perhaps accounted for essay lines as these: "It is scary to think that we are allowing technologies to separate our minds

from our social and emotional states,” and: “New media might be like a sword, but as long as people know the dangers, then they can avoid cutting themselves.”

Still, the principles of mindfulness were present in my teaching, in myself (from lived experience), and in our togetherness. It seems to me that most students gained some sense of self-awareness, which they brought to both new media and physical nature. After all, as the Dalai Lama (2010) reminds us, once found, self-awareness tends to follow us, like a shadow, everywhere we go, be it to the woods or to our smartphones. While I wasn't discussing philosophies of technology's interconnectedness or employing media ecology as a metaphor for new media environments, and while I often focused more regularly on the problems, rather than the potentials, of new media, thereby perpetuating the problems of moralistic, dualistic thinking discussed in previous chapters, I was stepping into the classroom each day as someone who practiced, in deeply felt ways, contemplation, meditation, and mindfulness daily, who worked to be the change I wanted to see in my classroom, in the world.

And I think students could sense this and, consequently, trust me. From trust, then, students perhaps felt more willing to experiment (Barbezat & Bush, 2013), to do breathing exercises, to take mindful walks around campus, to participate in close listening group exercises, to take time and space away from new media habits, to journal with love, to practice mindfulness at home with family members, and at work with colleagues, and in transport to other places. And from practice came self-awareness, heightened consciousness, and an expanded sense of interconnectedness, as one student wrote: “...we could live in harmony with the new dimensions that technology has brought us today; such would require a certain mindset ... we must be aware of our surroundings and try to slow down a little so that we can see that life does not have to

move fast in order for us to exist.” Another student elaborated with descriptive sensory detail on the value he found in this way (keep in mind that English is his second language):

I have learned a new thing called mindfulness. It is something very spectacular and peaceful ... I noticed how much technology is around us. Those items truly crave for attention ... I decided to take a walk with nature. I took a walk through a field ... it leads to semi-big hills ... as I was strolling through the tall wheat field, I fully took in what it meant to be mindful. To just take in everything nature had to show. It was beautiful ... the scenery the nature has was marvelous. Feeling the gentle cool breeze that passes through the tall wheat grass as the dim sunlight still gives a bit of warmth. The birds that chirped as they chased after each other and the gentle noise that nature alone creates. Having all my senses worked through this way, tasting the air, feeling the soft soil ground beneath my feet ... a colorful sunset ... it was a world I had not been to in ages.

Our Media and Mindfulness courses revealed that converging new media literacy pedagogy with contemplative learning practices made perfect sense (to me at least). What began as simply asking students to practice mindfulness for reflecting on new media and reconnecting to nature evolved into an interest in contemplative pedagogy. Somehow, sometime in 2014, in the last year that I taught composition at community college, I stumbled across the online publication of a 2006 talk titled “Love and Knowledge: Recovering the Heart of Learning” by physicist and interdisciplinary scholar Arthur Zajonc, and it seems that I fell in love with all of it, all at once. “I would like to suggest,” Zajonc said in the talk, “that knowing itself remains partial

and deformed if we do not develop and practice an epistemology of love instead of an epistemology of separation” (p. 2).

Though I hadn't yet fully realized the value in teaching non-dualism, I realized, like many educators before me, a great need for muscular and robust love in the classroom, the sort that requires serious effort and work (Dewey, 1916; hooks, 1994). I'd encountered the anger of single mothers abandoned by their partners, the bitterness of recovering drug addicts, the trauma of veterans returning from Iraq, and the heartbreak of poverty and abuse—and also, the challenges of everyday “average” life. In short, each one of my students, each being human and thus facing some form of suffering, could benefit from love. And so, in the winter and spring of 2014, I began to experiment with the practices suggested in Zajonc's (2006) talk. In class, I spoke of the transformative power in intimate participation with reading and writing exercises, in openly sustaining contradictory ideas at once (without feeling compelled to take sides), in respectfully listening to peers with full attention and non-judgment, in allowing presence and patience for imaginative wandering and insight, and in interacting with others (other people, other ideas) in gentle, non-reactive, and vulnerable ways that acknowledge the potential in navigating, shaping, and co-creating our open-ended contexts of discovery together.

In class, I often spoke of the tremendous important in learning to love. Contemplative learning practices, Zajonc said, “not only yield insight but also transform the knower through his or her intimate (one could say loving) participation in the subject of one's loving attention” (p. 2). And I emphasized the value in understanding ourselves as alive and interconnected from within the uncertainties, contradictions, and paradoxes of the unknown; after all, it is through difference that learning emerges. “The so-called ‘context of discovery’,” said Zajonc, “is a contemplative context full of passion and sustained uncertainty” (p. 7), noting also that we first

come to know ourselves through separation: “It is precisely through the irreconcilable complexities of our lives that our identity emerges ... the architecture and life of love is animated by impossible contradictions” (p. 11). Through individuation and amid contradiction, then, we are positioned to embrace our existence as connected, in interdependent ways, to everything else, as Zajonc explained: “We know by virtue of connection, not disconnection, because we are identical with the objects of our attention ... education is concerned with precisely enhancement of our mental powers in this direction, with the journey from blindness to seeing” (p. 6).

This journey begins when we can, as Zajonc pointed out, “integrate these diverse elements without dissolving them, and it starts by leveraging the inconsistencies in ourselves. This can only happen if we love the contradictions, and so love ourselves” (p. 11). When we can begin to see love as knowledge and knowledge as love, when we can see, as Rilke reminded us in the close to chapter two, that learning to love is the *most difficult of all our tasks ... the work for which all other work is but a preparation*, and when we can see that new media experiences are human experiences, that they are complex and messy and full of contradiction, that they are alive, then perhaps we can love them too, and from there, from love, from connection, from interconnection (not dualism or separation) we open and we grow and emerge our potential.

Still, even with the loving and intellectual guidance of Zajonc, I was not yet sure, as community college teacher, how to contemplate new media in ways that moved beyond either/or judgment to embrace both-and-also perspectives, to sustain the contradictions inherent to life (online and off), and discover the multiplicity of possibilities therein. And I am only now beginning to experience the holding of contradiction, multiplicity, and complexity; the graduate work I immersed myself in during the past two years somehow led me back to what Zajonc first introduced me to, sparking in me the inquiry I pursue here, for this project, and for the

educational experiences that will follow: How can contemplative learning practices prompt students to both critically reflect on new media experiences and also engage creatively, imaginatively, and mindfully with and within new media ecologies? How can contemplative learning practices support students in recognizing both the problems and also the potentials within the digitally, publicly mediated qualities of their lives today?

In my final exploration of these inquiries, this chapter will first discuss the literature on contemplative learning pedagogy to offer a framework for the ways in which I take seriously love as essential to the prompting of self-awareness, to the experience of knowledge, to the enactment of creativity and imagination, to the learning in community, and to the building of critical consciousness around new media. Next, I will describe my recent experiences working as a volunteer teacher in a high school classroom as an ongoing auto-ethnography, interpreting both what worked and also what didn't in my pedagogical approach to new media literacy.

A Review of the Literature on Contemplative Learning

While contemplative practices appear to have been supporting human experience since before recorded time, it wasn't until about the 1840s that Eastern worldviews gained popularity in the West, bringing with them contemplative practices, such as Buddhist meditation and mindfulness skills; a trend that re-emerged in the 1960s (Morgan, 2014; Suzuki, 1960). In the late '60s, educators and scholars began to pick up on the health and wellbeing benefits of contemplative practice, primarily for psychotherapy, self-development and stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, Burney, & Sellers, 1986), and sought out ways to integrate such benefits into the educational experience. Kabat-Zinn, who is a Professor of Medicine Emeritus and creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, has offered scientific evidence

for the effectiveness of meditation on mental and physical health (see Kabat-Zinn & Hanh, 2009), and also helped to develop the mindfulness-based stress reduction program (MBSR). And while there are a variety of ways to define mindfulness, I find Kabat Zinn's (1994) definition of mindfulness most helpful: "Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality" (p. 4).

There are also a variety of ways to define contemplation. Originally, the word 'contemplation' was linked to the idea of carving or marking out a space for observation; contemplative learning, then, is meant to support students in marking out space for observation of oneself, one's experiences, and one's environment, as a means for gaining new insight (Barbezat & Bush, 2013). Contemplation primarily involves meditation and introspection, both of which are most often associated with Buddhism, though can be found in most spiritual traditions (Barbezat & Bush, 2013). In Buddhism, practices of mindfulness, contemplation, meditation, and introspection work to escape the limitations of dualism by embodying a dialectic that takes an imaginary leap for sustaining and growing from a both-and perspective (Biel & Mu-Jeong Kho, 2009). Historically, as Armstrong (1994) explains, contemplative practices emerged as a response to the difficult disorientation brought on by imperial expansion, political upheaval, global trading networks, mass migrations, and urbanization. Facing such social and cultural shifts, many sought to move beyond human hardship and suffering to embody a "transcendental consciousness" that made space for stepping away from the world to mindfully observe it and contemplate it without prejudice or precondition.

In explorations of introspection at the turn of the 19th Century, a research program led by Pierre Maine de Biran established some validity and credibility for introspective research, which

involved training individuals to become acutely aware of (or meditate on) their perceptions, collect data about their perceptions, and report first-person accounts based on this data. This research helped develop the science of mind, psychology and behavior we know today. Introspective psychology, though, was later criticized for being too full of self-contradiction and too immersed in its own subjective work for generating reliable data about the mind (Comte, 1868; Searle, 1992). Auguste Comte's (1830) philosophy that introspection cannot know what happens before thought (*a priori* subliminal perceptions) re-emerged in modern cognitive science, which has showed that people cannot always understand why they make the decisions they make, or feel the feelings they feel thus they are continuously kept from making accurate observations about their first-person experience (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Nevertheless, introspective psychology helped pave the way for considering the value in first-person self-examination. Furthermore, Barbezat and Bush (2013) argue that by becoming aware of what one can't know, such as the ways in which the subconscious works, one can maintain an openness to both one's tendency to make assumptions and also to one's implicit unknown subconscious influences. In this way, then, the introspection that is part of contemplative learning practices can support students in studying and interpreting, with self-awareness, first-person experience that does not assume "truth", but rather that works to open students to new possibilities and insights they may not have considered otherwise. Self-awareness, introspection, and contemplation do not need specific accuracy or reportable reliability to be valuable; instead, as Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) note, becoming more aware of an inner state contributes to wellbeing, which then disciplines and cultivates the mind for higher order thinking and creativity.

Moreover, several studies have found that meditation practices support mental functioning by increasing efficiency in attentional processing (van den Hurk et al., 2010; Lutz et al., 2009), and through reducing the consequences of “attentional blink”, which is the brain’s tendency to take in only a portion of the information available to it, typically what’s most salient (Slagter et al., 2007). Furthermore, Lazar et al. (2005) have showed that meditation practices helped to slow the thinning of the brain’s cortex, which naturally occurs with age, maintaining a thickness that supports brain health, efficiency, and processing. And, Zylowska et al. (2008) have reported that meditation practices result in measured improvements related to symptoms of anxiety and depression associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Furthermore, meditation has been linked, in general, to reductions in anxiety and depression (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998) and to supporting students in the regulation of emotion and enhancement of a sense of stability (Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2011). For learning, Roberts-Wolfe, Sacchet, & Britton (2009) have shown that meditation supports concentration and focus. Perhaps the most well known of meditation studies is the one conducted at Richard Davidson’s lab at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, in which the brains of Tibetan Buddhist monks were studied to show that compassion meditation activates regions of the brain “thought to be responsible for monitoring one’s feeling state, planning of movements, and positive emotions ... these data suggest that emotional and empathetic processes are flexible skills that can be trained and that such training is accompanied by demonstrable neural changes” (Lutz, Dunne, & Davidson, 2007, p. 543). Similarly, Birnie, Speca, and Carlson (2010) showed that practices of self-compassion and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) supported participants in adopting the perspectives of others and feeling increased empathy for others and for oneself.

In the past decade or so, educators began publishing scholarly works about first-person experiences with contemplative learning practices, as tools for both investigative inquiry and also for enhancing other learning processes in the classroom, demonstrating how the capacities for contemplative practices to quiet the chatter of the mind, raise awareness, open imagination, deepen concentration, sustain contradiction, and support embodiment could enrich learning experience for students at most any age and working with most any subject (Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010; Hart, 2004). These scholars value rational, empirical approaches to education, but are troubled by the ways in which a narrow understanding of “rationality”, “the empirical”, and logic have long dominated institutionalized education in the modern West. While they find usefulness in an empiricism that deals in quantifiable evidence and facts, they also see new educational possibilities stemming from the ways in which contemplative learning practices afford new, often phenomenological and embodied, encounters with previously unconsidered perspectives, such as those in opposition to one’s own, and those that can sustain Keats’ notion of “negative capability ... without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”, for experiencing, as the esteemed scientist Barbara McClintock famously put it, an “intimacy that does not annihilate difference” (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010). By opening students to the holding of contradiction and difference without feeling compelled to reduce either to a closed system (as narrowly defined ideas of empirical practice require), contemplative learning practices can prompt students to perceive the world as interconnected, relational, and multidimensional understanding, rather than as, in the materialist view, reduced to parts, categories taxonomies, and so on and so forth. (Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010; Zajonc, 2006; Healey, 2015).

Because contemplative learning practices are drawn from a history that dates back to ancient times, and because contemplative learning practices encompass a wide range of approaches and activities, it doesn't make sense to attempt a precise or rigid definition but rather to point to the idea that they involve "seeing things as they are, being open to new ideas, appreciating the contribution of silence to learning, valuing each human voice, [and] honoring the constantly changing nature of ideas" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Though having roots in religious and spiritual traditions, contemplative learning practices can be secular experiences. While they can be experienced in a multitude of ways, contemplative learning practices typically involve the principle of mindfulness for turning one's attention to an inner gaze for self-reflection, attuning oneself to the phenomenological aspects of external experience for an embodied realization of interconnectedness, and for feeling oneself meaningfully, lovingly connected to one's subject of study, as well to those one studies with, for an enriched sense of learning community and togetherness (Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010).

While contemplative learning as a pedagogical initiative is growing, finding support and credibility in interdisciplinary organizations as the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education and the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University, the ethos of modern Western culture (narrowly defined empiricism, neglect of the value of experience, quest for a fixed idea of "reality", efficiency, productivity and control) remain the primary markers for human success, particularly in educational institutions, relegating what's too "soft" to be considered accomplishment, such as learning to love learning and development of self-love and compassion, to the sidelines. Often for political and economic purposes, modern culture celebrates the habits we assume allow us to multitask (even though multitasking is actually a myth: see Ophir, 2009), praising productivity

while overshadowing the potentialities and underestimating the importance of present-moment awareness and a deeper sense of connection to oneself, to others, and to one's community (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010). In his 1994 book *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, Kabat-Zinn describes how mindfulness-based practices can help mitigate some of the negative consequences of a materialistic, reductionist view of human experience, while supporting a sense of interconnectivity with and within the world:

(Mindfulness) has to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive. ...It also offers a view of the world which is complementary to the predominantly reductionist and materialistic one currently dominating Western thought and institutions. ...Mindfulness provides a simple but powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back into touch with our own wisdom and vitality. It is a way to take charge of the direction of and quality of our own lives, including our relationships within the family, our relationships to work and to the larger world and planet, and most fundamentally, our relationship with ourselves as a person (p. 3-5).

By highlighting both the importance in the relational experiences students have with their communities, their environments, and with themselves, contemplative learning practices can offset the limitations within the institutionalized dominance of objective, third-person pedagogy, which tends to operate from a foundation of separation, division, and the assumption that knowledge can be transferred from teachers to students in a uniform fashion (and tested using uniform standards, too). In this way, contemplative learning acknowledges the first-person experiences and unique dispositions that students bring to the classroom, a context of

community that is unique and ever-changing in itself, thereby opening up space for introspective experiential learning, which is well known to support education, for the individual and the community (Dewey, 1986; Piaget, 1973, Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Barbezat and Bush (2014) describe the educational benefits of contemplative learning practices this way:

Researchers and educators have pursued the objective of creating learning environments that are deeply focused on the relationships of students to what they are learning as well as to the rest of the world. We have found that contemplative practices respond powerfully to these challenges and can provide an environment that supports the increasing diversity of our students. While contemplative practices vary greatly, they all have the potential to integrate students' own rich experience into their learning. When students engage in these introspective exercises, they discover their internal relationship to the material in their courses (p. 4-5).

Contemplative learning initiatives exist within the same field as integrative and transformative learning; in fact, oftentimes the adjectives contemplative, integrative, and transformative are used interchangeably (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott & Bai, 2014; Hart, 2004). While each provide a different emphasis, all embrace perspectives of interrelatedness and interdependency, approaching education as experience that ought to blur the lines among various disciplines, contexts, and communities (in- and outside the classroom). Working to open minds to the creative, imaginative, and intellectual potential that arises from perceiving interconnectedness, those working with contemplative pedagogy strive to inspire students to practice non-judgment, acceptance, and loving-kindness as a means for experiencing the insight that comes from acknowledging life as multidimensional and always

changing, as Zajonc writes in *The Heart of Higher Education* (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010):

Transformative learning rests on an enriched view of the human being, one that affirms our multidimensional nature and fundamental malleability. The methods by which we challenge our students, open them to change, will vary, but to be successful, they should include cross-cultural studies in which worldviews radically different from their own are encountered and appreciated (p. 107).

Contemplative, integrative, transformative education seeks intimate experiences of relationship that support students, be it through inquiry, empiricism, or imagination, in recognizing the power of sustaining the disagreements, contradictions, and paradoxes inherent to human existence. Contemplative learning practices also support students and teachers alike in embodying, in mind and body, a love and respect for the unknown, thereby resisting tendencies to assume anything is absolute or final. In this way, contemplative learning assists in creating relationships with educational topics, study materials, peers, colleagues, environments, the self, and so on and so forth, which nourish the community and, thereby, the world. As Palmer wrote in *The Heart of Higher Education* (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010):

Our pedagogies must have the power and precision to clarify some of the world's messiness and help students find their way through it rather than multiplying the mess and leaving students more lost ... Doing integrative education well depends on our capacity to hold a paradox: we must open free space for the unpredictable and enforce an educative order. In contrast to a top-down delivery of information that leaves the

teacher in control, integrative pedagogies involve a communal exchange that is fluid, complex, and confusing (p. 39).

Engaging New Media to Reflect on New Media

On one spring day last year, from the back of the high school art classroom, next to the plastic tubs of red, yellow and blue paint, near the aprons splattered with primary colors, and beside the worn-out paintbrushes of all sizes, I felt a tug at the back of my throat as tears began to well into my lower lids; thankfully, the lights were low for the screening of a video put together by a pair of students who I'd asked a few weeks earlier, along with the other thirty or so students in the classroom, to put together a multimedia project expressing their thoughts and feelings about the effects of new media on everyday teenage life.

This particular video, titled *Life Through Closed Eye*, begins with scenes meant to show how mobile media can interrupt friendship. In one scene, one teenager plays a basketball game on his smartphone while another tries to earn his attention with an actual, physical basketball on the court; in another, one studies a textbook in an involved and focused manner while the other distractedly scrolls social media. The video starts off with singer-songwriter Gary Jule's gloomy, meandering song of loss, titled "Mad World" and then, halfway through, following the song's fitting final line ("Enlarge your world") transitions to One Republic's upbeat, acoustic pop-rock track "I Lived" as the two teens discover, following a literal slow-motion slap in the face, togetherness; together now, they play ball, climb trees, and run down hallways. The video closes with the two teenage boys walking down a school hallway, laughing, smiling, running, and jumping as One Republic's lead singer sings with emotion and urgency: "I owned every second that this world could give / I saw so many places, the things that I did / With every broken bone,

I swear I lived.” The video made me think of how quickly life sweeps by; I cherished the fact that these two students captured a piece of it in a way that I hoped they wouldn’t soon forget. Absorbing the video from the back of the classroom, I realized the sentimental music had something to do with the tug at the back of my throat, and the chills running up my arms, and the tears I wanted to hide before the lights came back on. And I also didn’t overlook the irony of this meta moment; this on-screen reminder to not lose ourselves in our screens. But I was touched, deeply, nonetheless.

They actually made this; I couldn’t believe it.

I’d started the spring term of 2015 as a volunteer at Churchill High School with high hopes in an art class whose teacher gave me four periods, two days per week, to teach her students about new media in most any way I liked. Given that I’d experienced much success with the digital detox curricula I’d experimented with in my community college writing courses, I thought I’d try it out in a high school setting, too; this time, though, with the addition of actually using new media to reflect on new media.

The results were mixed, perhaps revealing that trust, community, time, and willingness to try something different are all parts of what is needed to make a detox experiment work. I felt that effects of the digital detox were minimized by the fact that I had limited time to develop strong, trusting relationships with the high school students, meaning I was also less able to help create a sense of community in the classroom, community that could inspire a shared willingness to try something new and different together. My impression is that approximately a quarter of the class (there were 37 students in all) actually attempted to spend a couple of days away from new media. But because these classes, 50 minutes each, sped by so quickly, we had little time to discuss digital detox experiences (and there was no room in the curriculum for assigning a digital

detox essay). And, other than the few brief moments we spent doing deep breathing exercises at the start of class, I had no time to integrate contemplative learning practices for inspiring self-awareness and critical consciousness. Finally, my lectures weren't, from where I stood, all that engaging or provocative given that the students didn't see me as their primary teacher because, well, their primary teacher was there in the room, sitting behind me as I lectured. Still, I detected some effect by the term's end, and the effect was both enough to bring me to tears, and also enough to teach me how to do better. In essence: It wasn't either good or bad; it was both, and more, revealing itself to be an eye-opening auto-ethnographic experience.

In the limited amount of time I had with the Churchill High classes, I asked students to contemplate what I'd been researching: the consumer culture of social media, the social comparison common to new media experience, the diminished capacity for experiences of empathy linked to ongoing social media use, and the statistics from 2014 Pew Internet research reports claiming that 44% of cell owners have slept with their phone because they wanted to make sure they didn't miss any calls, text messages, or other updates during the night, and that 29% of cell owners "can't imagine living without" their cell phone. While I talked, about half of the class listened, while the rest, ironically, predictably, looked at their smartphones or laptops (not being their primary teacher, I felt less comfortable enforcing any media policy in the classroom).

Had I been their primary, full-time teacher, we likely would have created a stronger sense of togetherness, as we had in my community college classrooms, which could have supported the effectiveness of lectures and exercises. What also stood in the way of my capacity for inspiring students to reflect on their experiences with new media was the fact that I may have done what boyd warned against (in chapter two): Made them feel like shit, thus destabilizing them, and

distancing them from whatever I had to say, or offer. In reviewing my lecture slides now, a year later, I can see the ways in which they frequently condemn media use and rarely show respect or thoughtfulness for the ways in which their lives are naturally and invariably enmeshed in the new media, such as Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat that keep them consistently connected to friends and a sense of community. Last spring, I hadn't yet come to my own awareness around valuing the complicated lives that young adults lead, on- and offline—I hadn't yet recognized new media as, not separate from, but rather built into the fabric of their existence.

Still, as evidenced by the *Life Through Closed Eyes* video, along with the dozen or so other videos resulting from an assignment that asked students to work in groups or on their own to make a video that expressed something artistic and reflective related to everyday life experiences with new media, there was some positive effect, some new, albeit small, hints of seeing differently, hints that became apparent also through an in-class exercise, which I designed to prompt students to compare experiences in the natural, physical world with those of digital, virtual spheres. I wanted the comparisons to be experienced in not just abstract intellectual ways, but also in physically embodied ways, with all of the senses. In the classroom, they could already touch their digital screens; I wanted to balance the presence of smartphones with something that has clear roots in the natural world.

And so, on one bright Spring morning, when the dewy sunlight felt wet and new, I walked my dog around the neighborhood, picking flowers from neighbor's yards. I felt a tinge of guilt with each pull, pluck and snip and looked over my shoulder. As I tucked camellia, daphne, daffodil, iris and daisy flowers into my satchel, I felt like a robber. No, not a robber, I assured myself. Robin Hood, more like Robin Hood.

I needed these flowers, desperately, I told myself in justification. Sure, I could merely talk about flowers, and about physical nature, but the students needed to experience it, fully, richly, sensuously; it wouldn't be the same otherwise. I wanted them to smell flowers, and touch them and study, up close and personal, the intricate patterns and the fine details majestically painted onto their petals.

That morning, I arrived to the classroom early with a box full of mason jars and a satchel full of flowers. Happily, I arranged flowers in jars and then jars on desks. Slowly, sleepy students poured into the room as their usual humdrum expressions turned to surprise: *What's this all about? Did someone die?* They laughed, teased, and rolled eyes. Few would admit enjoying the colors or scents the flowers brought to the room, but I sensed some of them liked to wonder what they were there for, and appreciated that they broke up the monotony of everyday life.

"I want you to observe the flowers closely," I said. "Smell them and touch them and look closely at their tiny details. Spend real time with them. Be patient with them. Then, draw or paint pictures of them. When you're done drawing or painting pictures, pull out your phones and take pictures of the flowers and post your pictures of the flowers to social media, if you'd like."

After the exercise, we started a discussion comparing natural and digital experience. What's it like to encounter the flower directly in the natural world compared to creating a representation of the flower through a drawing or a smartphone photo? What's it like to edit a picture of the flower and then view it on a social media feed? What's it like to experience that flower through social media? What's it like to experience something, be it a flower or a face-to-face conversation, with all of your senses in the natural world? And how does that kind of experience compare to the sort of experiences you have in digital spaces, such as typing a text message or viewing a Youtube video?

In an effort to integrate new media technologies and digital spaces into the educational experiences of critically reflecting on new media, I created a Wordpress blog. After reminding them of the public nature of the site and that, as a graduate student researcher, I may be publishing some of their comments, I asked students to post comments about the ways in which they compare natural, physical experience with digital, virtual experience. In all, I received 43 responses, some short and succinct, others long and exploratory, and, though one or two were sarcastic, the majority of comments appeared to express sincere contemplation and depth. As an example:

When we experience something digital, we are not taking in every detail of what we are doing. In the natural world, we are 'forced' to take in and be aware of what we are doing. We may not feel as though our actions online are something that can cause consequences because we are not as easily hurt. We don't always think before we say/post things online. In the digital world, we are able to hide behind our screen(s), and we feel almost invincible. In the natural world, we have to actually deal with people and socialize. We have to know how to respond to certain situations and hold a conversation. We are not able to hide from the natural world all the time, but it seems that with technology advancing and becoming such a large influence in people's lives, we are not able to hide from it either.

Given my vantage point as a teacher and researcher, and informed by both the research discussed in previous chapters and also by the auto-ethnographic method, I interpreted the above passage as an example of a young adult working to make sense of the complicated ways with which new media are built into the fabric of life. By acknowledging the inevitability of living a

life entrenched with new media, this student's comment shows what's often missing from digital experience (lacking a felt awareness of the consequences of one's actions, for example), and what's "forced" by experience in the natural world (having to "actually deal with people"). And yet it doesn't offer what is working well, on or offline, nor does it propose any potential solutions to the problems it presents. This, perhaps, resulted from the fact that while I acknowledged the value of integrating sensory experience (real flowers) into the educational experience (Kolb, 2014), I hadn't yet realized the importance in recognizing digital spaces as integrated into natural spaces. Instead, I pitted the two against each other, condemned media use, made students feel poorly or guilty about where they were in their relationships to digital technologies, and unsettled them in the process, leading some to a negative, defensive, and nonproductive orientation toward new media.

Most of the comments posted to the WordPress blog, along with the majority of the video projects, claimed appreciation for natural spaces and criticized digital realms, leaving me to feel that students both genuinely appreciated nature and also felt obligated to tell me, in a public context, that they appreciated nature; they'd been led, by my approach, to perform as nature lovers and as new media haters, which left me with a collection of comments that dutifully expressed nearly identical ideas: Nature is good, digital is bad. In the end, this meant students were reinforced in their tendencies to view the world through a lens of separation, division, duality, leaving a few students plain angry and frustrated, as evidenced in these comments posted to the blog (exactly as they were typed):

...digital media is not making us stupid and neither is Google. its progression folks.

I think digital experiences are way better than natural i hate people i really like digital experiences cause i dont like seeing people

I don't think the internet and the distraction of social media affects me because I have been dealing with this my whole life. Everybody has been harassing me about how 'technology is evil and it shouldn't be trusted, it's what the reptilians want you to think!'

By condemning the new media environments that are inextricably entwined into the lives of today's young adults, I'd reinforced either/or judgment: Your media use is "bad" while your abstinence from media use is "good." I'd confined students to either a sense of guilt or rebellion, thereby limiting them from the creative possibilities that could arise from open-minded, non-judgmental and accepting encounters with new media, which could assist them in sustaining multiple contradictory views at once, ultimately enriching their educational experience (Zajonc, 2006). I'd circled back, in some ways to what I'd been doing as a community college teacher, and to what so many of us do as humans: Perceive life experiences through a limited set of lens, as Dewey (1925) reminds us when he explains that we encounter our phases of experience, in which we are sometimes willing and other times not, depending on our reflective capacities and levels of engagement, to widen our viewpoints to see multiple possibilities at once, all of which depends on whether or not we feel ourselves as intricately embedded within our experiences.

Still, I'd begun to expand my horizons: By asking students to create and produce multimedia projects, I'd begun to embrace the multiplicity of possibility available in sustaining contradiction, in holding the view that new media involve both problems and potentials; I'd begun to inch myself in a direction that, today, feels like the "right" one. I'd begun to *both*

prompt critical consciousness and self-awareness around the challenges in new media, such as those presented by the marketized, technologically intensified neoliberal culture of social media discussed in chapter two, *and* also invite students to discover positive, creative and productive ways with which to engage new media experience. I'd begun to teach young adults to *both* challenge *and* love what is.

Moving Beyond Either/Or to Experience Both-and-Also-More

As mentioned in chapter two, some new media scholars today are also seeking to embrace the interconnected, and sometimes contradictory, ways with which the lives of many of today's young adults are immersed in new media. For example, the Digital Media and Learning initiative, with support from the MacArthur Foundation, is working to support pedagogy that addresses the publicly, digitally mediated qualities of life for many students today. Led by the same new media scholars who put together *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out* (Ito et al., 2009), the initiative, as Ito (2015) explained, "focuses on connecting young people's interests and peer-centered learning with academic, civic participation, and career possibilities. The settings that we found were most effective for these connections are guided by a shared purpose, are centered around production, and have an openly networked dimension to them" (p. 94). Similarly, David Buckingham's 2008 book *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, also a collection of articles by 12 new media scholars, including boyd, Ito, and Jenkins, seeks to close the either/or gap by acknowledging that new media is experienced by young adults in diverse ways, and with numerous purposes, ranging, on social media for example, from scrolling and viewing to producing, creating, and collaborating. Rather than either celebrate technology or panic over it, we ought instead to understand that new media experiences carry both "good" and "bad" (and

beyond) characteristics at the same time. Essentially, it's not either/or; it's both/and, as Buckingham (2008) wrote:

...technology is both socially shaped and socially shaping. In other words, its role and impact is partially determined by the uses to which it is put, but it also contains inherent constraints and possibilities which limit the ways in which it can be used, and which are in turn largely shaped by the social interests of those who controls its production, circulation, and distribution. This approach thus begins to move beyond the notion of technology as a simple 'cause' of social change (on the one hand) and the idea of technology as an easy 'fix' for complex social problems (on the other) (p. 12).

When we, as educators and scholars, move beyond either/or mentalities to consider and act reflectively in response to both-and-more perspectives, we can, by embracing multiple viewpoints at once, set a foundation of acceptance, from which students can grow, and also hold the range and fluidity of possibility carried within new media, enhancing our capacity for sustaining the varied types of contradictory, paradoxical qualities that we face in life, be they personal contradictions between what we believe and what we do, social contradictions between capitalism and creativity, or cultural contradictions between science and art. Such capacities are supported by both contemplative learning practices and also by the philosophies of technology discussed in chapter one (Dewey, 1916; Feenber, 1981; Latour, 1991). Both ask us to recognize the mutually informing interconnected relationships between our minds and our bodies and our environmental contexts. Both ask us to recognize how our thoughts and feelings are integrated into our contextualized sensory experience. Both ask us to recognize how the ways in which we choose, intend, design, and engage with our contextualized sensory experience interpellates, or

brings into being, whatever it was we intended. And, finally, both contemplative learning and the philosophies of thinkers as Dewey (1916), Feenberg (1981) and Latour (1991) ask us to recognize that when we choose, intend, design, and engage with consciousness, care, and critical awareness of the whole, of the interwoven fullness and richness in life, what we bring into being supports our existence by supporting the existence of everyone and everything else (Dewey, 1916; Feenber, 1981; Latour, 1991; Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010).

By merging such philosophies of technology with the philosophies of contemplative learning practice, I believe we are better positioned to recognize that digital experience is not separate from natural experience, that the performance of an identity in a digital context does not exist apart from the performance of an identity in the natural world, and that the experience of making sense of oneself is tethered neither to a natural context nor to a digital one, nor even somewhere in between, but rather extends and expands into the interconnectedness of all human experience. When we can bring such recognition to educational experiences with new media literacy, we can help students find the space for seeing themselves as integrally involved in helping shape the quality of their life experiences (online and off). As Morrell (2012) noted in chapter two, we ought to “enlighten students to the potential that they have to shape the world they live in, to help turn it into the world they imagine” (p. 302). And to do so, as Dewey (1916) reminds us, involves serious efforts that heighten awareness for understanding oneself as overtly associated with and within everything else because “we are not born members of a community,” Dewey wrote (*LW*, 2:331). “...We are born organic beings associated with others (who ought to) be brought within the traditions, outlooks and interests which characterize a community by means of education ... by learning in connection with the phenomena of overt association.” Heightened awareness and critical consciousness around the interconnectivity of life do not come

easily, especially given the enormous influences of the dualistic, positivist thinking that dominates Western culture along with the neoliberal ideals built into it. And although there appears to be some shift away from positivist paradigms in media literacy education (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016) and a recognition of the significance in re-orienting ourselves to acknowledge the powerful dynamics and potentialities in relationship (Lopez, 2008; Schrage, 2001), the scholarly views shaping the landscape of new media literacy today, and perhaps educational experience in general, tend to focus on what's to be addressed in the external structures and projections of experience more so than on the potential in internal, imaginative, introspective experience (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, Ito, boyd, 2016).

While scholars as boyd, Ito, Jenkins (2016), and Buckingham (2008, 2013) are working to illustrate the significance in bridging individual identity with social identity, classroom learning with out-of-the-classroom learning, digital literacy with media literacy, education with civic engagement, critical evaluation of new media with creative, collaborative production of new media, and so on and so forth, I've found few (Levy, 2016; Turkle, 2015; O'Donnell, 2015) investigating the value of cultivating introspective, reflective reservoirs—such as elevating self-awareness for non-judgment to mitigate the sometimes negative consequences of social comparison and competitive “liking” via social media—as a means for supporting new media literacy pedagogy that seeks to create positive, productive relationships with and within new media ecologies. By focusing on the externalities and infrastructures of new media experience, scholars as Buckingham (2013) and boyd, Ito, Jenkins (2016) have neglected to explore the reflexive role that internal, introspective experience can play in shaping the relationships students create with and within new media ecologies. In helping to fill such a vacancy, I propose bringing contemplative learning practices to new media literacy pedagogy.

So far, as a teacher, I've experienced part of what that might look like. With Churchill, we benefited from using new media to reflect on new media. But we made little time for contemplative practice to support that process. While with community college courses, we benefited from contemplative practice. But we made little time for using new media to reflect on new media. Though there are significant differences between these two teaching experiences (the main one being I spent four years at community college and about four months at Churchill), I compare them to show how a certain path of experimentation brought me to the pedagogical approach I advocate for today, to ideas around what I now feel might and might not work (though of course pedagogies, teachers, and students are always already changing, too). This path of experimentation, informed by both Dewey's radical notion of viewing things and thoughts as interconnected and mutually constitutive, and also by Palmer and Zajonc's (2010) notion that every way of knowing (every epistemology) becomes an ethic, led me to believe that educational experiences ought to be directed by the perspective that how we think and how we inquire shapes what we experience, and what we experience shapes how we think and how we inquire. And, perhaps most important, this perspective, essential in my mind to education, ought to be directed by love, and when I say love, I mean love as something practical, robust and muscular, not romantic; love in all its difficulty, fullness, and possibility.

American author, feminist, social educational activist bell hooks writes often about the transformative power of love in education and social justice, particularly in a dominant culture that devalues loves and reinforces oppression through the perpetuation of scarcity and fear. In books as *All About Love* (2000), *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (2010), and *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (2013), hooks speaks to the essential need for experiencing love as the primary means for change, growth, and education, and for connecting

theory and practice in an embodied way in every day lived life so that transformation can be found. In a recent article called “Toward a Worldwide Culture of Love” that appeared in the online version of the Buddhist journal *Lion’s Roar*, hooks wrote of the critical need for love in a culture of domination:

...when I write provocative social and cultural criticism that causes readers to stretch their minds, to think beyond set paradigms, I think of that work as love in action ... when lecturing on ending domination around the world, listening to the despair and hopelessness, I asked individuals who were hopeful to talk about what force in their life pushed them to make a profound transformation, moving them from a will to dominate toward a will to be compassionate. The stories I heard were all about love (n.p.).

hooks elaborates on the transformative power of love by discussing it as a practice that requires effort, work, will, and commitment; she notes that there is a growing body of literature beginning to take seriously the value of practicing love for supporting social justice, political participation, and educational reform. Throughout about four decades of work as a scholar, educator and activist, hooks has come to value learning to love, like Rilke, as the most important and most difficult of all tasks, and in this task, she sees great potential, as she wrote in the previously mentioned article:

When love is the ground of our being, a love ethic shapes our participation in politics. To work for peace and justice we begin with the individual practice of love, because it is there that we can experience firsthand love’s transformative power. Attending to the

damaging impact of abuse in many of our childhoods helps us cultivate the mind of love. Abuse is always about lovelessness, and if we grow into our adult years without knowing how to love, how then can we create social movements that will end domination, exploitation, and oppression? ... Dominator thinking and practice relies for its maintenance on the constant production of a feeling of lack, of the need to grasp. Giving love offers us a way to end this suffering—loving ourselves, extending that love to everything beyond the self, we experience wholeness (n.p.)

In closing: Keep Going Though There's Nowhere to Get to

In 1997, while reading Orwell's *1984*, I was a University of Oregon (UO) undergraduate in love with the new ideas and perspectives I found in a comparative literature course. But I had little love for the UO; I couldn't wait to flee. And yet, the inevitably winding path my life took somehow led me, more than a decade later, back to the UO; I've spent a good part of the last year questioning why. In fact, I've spent most of the past year *questioning, period*, and living the questions perhaps. Have I lived my way into any answers?

Not in any absolutist way, of course—as I too, like Rumi, believe there is nowhere to get to (in the definitive sense of arriving at some finality). And like Dewey and Zajonc, and many more, I believe in the constancy of change, in the multiplicity of possibility, and the potential in participation. After a second round through graduate school, my views haven't dramatically transformed; rather, some have been reinforced (grounded in scholarly theory) while others have been expanded (to see and experience previous unseen connections between 'natural' and 'digital' experience; to teach with compassionate validation more often than with narrow condemnation). As I prepare to close one chapter and open another, I can see that I am the student I've been seeking to teach, that this has been, in fact, an inquiry into how I want to live

and learn with the new media built into the fabric of my life, and that I have had to dive into my own stories, my own first-person reflections, my own subjectivity to discover that there are no lines, no splits, no divisions, no separations, no walls nor even windows, between me and everyone and everything else.

Appendix A

Advice for Educators Interested in Contemplative Pedagogy

1. Begin with yourself. Ask yourself what you want from your students, and from the educational experiences you will experience with them, in community. If you want focus, respect, empathy, and critical consciousness, then practice, in all aspects of your life, being focused, respectful, empathetic, and critically conscious. Consistently practice being, in embodied ways, what you want from the educational experiences that will emerge from classroom community.
2. Question your assumptions and preconceived notions constantly. Regularly remind yourself that your assumptions shape and limit what you experience with your students in the classroom. Remind yourself that your assumptions are often narrow and incomplete. Maintain openness to what your assumptions limit you from seeing. Your openness will lead to wonderful surprises.
3. Stay attuned to change and emotion; your work as an educator is forever a work in progress, and in an ongoing state of experimentation that involves change and intense emotion (like life). Every new student and every new classroom community will present a new range of challenges; be willing to change as the dynamics of the educational environment change, and stay attuned to the emotions that arise as opportunities to learn and grow from.
4. Reduce conventional student-teacher power differentials by recalling that you can learn as much from your students as they can learn from you. Give close attention and listening to what your students have to offer you; notice the opportunities for change and growth that the challenges they present provide. Recall that we are never in total control, that conditions, conventions, and structures are inventions, and that when we stay aware of such, we can be more clear, honest, and accountable in our educational experiences.
5. Give yourself permission to take healthy risks. Let your self be fueled by a sense of humor, lightheartedness, and a capacity for taking neither yourself nor your life too seriously. Entertain wild, outlandish ideas for sparking imagination and creativity. “Embarrass” yourself, give up self-consciousness, loosen adherence to institutionalized “norms” and blaze new trails so your students feel safe doing the same.
6. Recognize the suffering of your students and the suffering of the environment, society, culture, in which you teach. In facing social injustice, inequity, and other hardships, recall that suffering can become compassion with the right sort of prompting; with prompting that invites critical awareness of the importance in seeing how we are all more alike and related than we are different and isolated.

Appendix B

Exercises for Contemplating New Media

Exercise I: What are new media?

Following five-to-ten minutes of meditation, of getting student to feel their minds as integrated into their bodies/contexts, begin to discuss the follow topics as a way to create some sense of understanding for how they class will define new media.

1. Discuss the marketized, public qualities of new media [define neoliberalism]; discuss new media as environments.
2. Discuss the pressures and obligations to perform and participate.
3. Discuss some of the problematic outcomes of habitual use [mind-body disconnect].
4. Discuss the potential in seeing new media as interconnected, and in viewing ourselves as capable of participating in integral ways.
5. Ask students to get in pairs or groups and have a conversation about the following questions; remind students to practice close, present, empathetic, open-minded listening. Ask students to first have the discussion and, second, take notes on ideas they came up with that they'd like to share with the rest of the class once everyone comes back together.
 - What is your/my relationship with social media and mobile media?
 - What are some of your/my routines with social and mobile media?
 - Do I/you need social and mobile media in order to go to sleep?
 - What are the greatest takeaways of your/my new media experiences?
 - What are the greatest drawbacks of your/my new media experiences?
 - If you/I could change three things about your/my new media experiences, what would they be?

Exercise II: What is the value and effect of the social media “like”?

Following five-to-ten minutes of meditation, of getting student to feel their minds as integrated into their bodies/contexts, ask students to get in pairs or groups and have a conversation about the following questions; remind students to practice close, present, empathetic, open-minded listening. Ask students to first have the discussion and, second, take notes on ideas they came up with that they'd like to share with the rest of the class once everyone comes back together.

1. What does it feel like physically and emotionally to receive a “like”?
2. What does it feel like physically and emotionally when a post does not receive “enough” “likes”?
3. Why and how do we judge posts based on the number of “likes” they receive?

4. Why and how do we often measure our own self-worth based on the number of “likes” our posts receive?
5. What factors do we often ignore when making value judgments and assumptions about social media “likes”?

Exercise III: How are social media experiences shaping your sense of self?

Following five-to-ten minutes of meditation, of getting student to feel their minds as integrated into their bodies/contexts, ask students to participate in an individual writing exercise that responds to the following inquiries. Before student begin this writing process, define concepts of identity (online and off) and concept of audience:

1. Make a list of the social media accounts you use regularly.
2. Describe the individual identities curated, maintained, and projected by each account; include details that characterize identity (demographics, hobbies, interests, styles, tastes, brands, music, etc.)
3. Note the ways in which social media identities are the same and different, explaining why certain accounts call for certain types of identities.
4. Explain purposes and benefits of each social media account and how and why different social media platforms urge you to present yourself in particular ways.
5. Contemplate and question, with openness, self-awareness and empathy for oneself, via the writing process, the various identities you maintain and project and how these identities contribute to your sense of who they are and how they feel about who they think they are. To do so, consider the following [consider taking breaks for sharing/group discussion between each inquiry]:
 - From an imaginary distance, how might I best describe my social media identity or identities to someone? What is he/she/they most interested in?
 - How are my social media identity or identities similar to and/or different from my identity or identities in the offline or “real” world?
 - Do my social media identity or identities speak to a particular audience and, if so, who’s in the audience?
 - Do I feel that there is a separation between who I am online and who I am offline? If so, how? If not, why not?
 - What do I see happening in social media that influences the way my social media identity or identities act, behave, perform, etc.?

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