Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age

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**Introduction**

Sherry Turkle is a professor of Social studies of Science and Technology at MIT. MIT has an initiative called Technology and Self, and Turkle is the founding director of that initiative. She is also a licensed clinical psychologist.[[1]](#footnote-0) The topic of the book is virtual conversation: what it is like and how it affects life offline (especially offline conversation).

**Summary**

Turkle gives an overview of problems in conversations caused by technology and problems caused by virtual conversations. She starts with an introduction to the presuppositions and she provides some evidence for them. The first idea is that when most of our conversations are virtual, our empathy is underdeveloped. This is particularly true for children who grow up with technology and aren’t getting enough off-screen interaction time. The second idea is that we are becoming uncomfortable with face to face conversations and would prefer to communicate virtually or to escape to technology during an in-person conversation.

After this introduction, she moves to one chair: conversations with ourselves. We often use up all our free time with technology, and we may be uncomfortable with solitude and thus use technology to keep ourselves occupied and not having to be alone with our thoughts. When we allow solitude, we have time for self-reflection. In another section, Turkle mentions that self-reflection can also be influenced by algorithms (e.g., Facebook Newsfeed, fitness trackers): those algorithms tell us something about ourselves (even if we aren’t consciously aware of this effect), but it’s also up to us to interpret the results from the algorithms[[2]](#footnote-1).

The next section is two chairs: conversations with two people. Virtual communication can disrupt relationships because you aren’t present for in-person conversation. People can also be hypocritical about this (e.g., parents who tell their kids no phones at the table but then use their phone themselves). The current generation are starting to recognize these issues and be more concerned about the dangers of technology. Another topic in this is that virtual communication can be a way to avoid the emotions of difficult conversations (e.g., arguments, apologies). For example, a virtual apology is less impactful than an in-person apology because you don’t have to see the person you hurt and feel their pain. Virtual communication allows you to present your best self, which may make a relationship feel smooth at first but can lead to false promises and disappointment.

The next section is three chairs: conversations with more than two people. One finding is that multitasking is a myth and distracts everyone around you. In a study of work environments “Face to face conversation leads to higher productivity and is also associated with reduced stress”.[[3]](#footnote-2)

In another section, Turkle talks about the current cultural context of technology. For example, there is a catastrophe culture: we are expected to be always on and the threshold is lower for what is an “emergency” that we have to respond to right away. This is also the section where Turkle makes suggestions about how to handle the issues presented in the book. Her suggestions are as follows: remember the power of your phone, take your time and take quiet time, create sacred spaces for conversation, unitask, talk to people with whom you disagree, be patient with conversation (e.g., give it at least 7 minutes before going to your phone[[4]](#footnote-3)), challenge a view of the world as apps, choose the right tool for the job, learn from moments of friction, remember what you know about life, don’t avoid difficult conversations, try to avoid all or nothing thinking.

In another section, Turkle discusses conversation with AI. We may converse with AI as if it is human, but AI doesn’t have empathy, it can only simulate empathy. Additionally, AI companionship can be a way for humans to get out of companionship work they should be doing (e.g., carers for old people).

**Perspective**

This book covers several design norms. Cultural appropriateness: rather than trying to get rid of technology which is ubiquitous in our world, we need to be more intentional about how we use it and leave time for the things technology can prevent (e.g., solitude and creativity). Lingual and communication norm: miscommunication due to lack of context (e.g., body language) and misrepresentation due to presenting our best selves. Social norm: norms of when it is appropriate to bring out technology in an in-person interaction (e.g., 3-person rule: you can’t get out your phone in your group unless at least 3 people aren’t engaged in in-person conversation). Economic norm: moving away from in-person offices may seem more efficient and cost-effective, but the loss of in-person conversations reduces productivity.

While the book never discusses religion, it does have some themes that fit in with Christianity. It acknowledges technology as part of creation but also something that is fallen (which we can say is part of the Fall). We can also see the Fall in the broken relationships caused by technology. The book suggests that technology can be redeemed: we can choose to use it more intentionally. The book encourages us to avoid technicism (technology can easily cause more problems than it solves), reductionism (avoid binary thinking), and idolatry (don’t see virtual conversation as always inherently better than in-person conversation).

I think Turkle does a good job of presenting a variety of issues caused by virtual conversation and providing suggestions for how to deal with these issues.

**Conclusion**

This book is well worth reading if you are interested in conversation. It is well thought out and researched and covers a variety of topics that you may not have considered before.

1. Turkle, “Reclaiming Conversation”, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Turkle, “Reclaiming Conversation”, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Turkle, “Reclaiming Conversation”, 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Turkle, “Reclaiming Conversation”, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)