

New Jersey English Journal

Volume 9 *What's Next? Embarking Upon a New Decade of English Language Arts*

Article 11

2020

Left to Their Own Devices

Hugh Kesson
Temple University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal>



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kesson, Hugh (2020) "Left to Their Own Devices," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Jersey English Journal by an authorized editor of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

“Left to Their Own Devices”: Smartphones in an ELA Classroom

HUGH KESSON
Temple University

Introduction

Part of English Language Arts (ELA) teachers’ instructional role is the integration of learning technologies in lessons. Learning technologies can be used in ways that are strictly controlled: for example, the screening of an educational video for a class. Strictly controlled use of technology is, however, less common than it was; the seeming ubiquity of personal smartphones offers significant challenges to teachers’ control of technology for learning in the classroom. In the research described in this paper, the challenges and opportunities of circumstances where technology is loosely controlled is explored in the experiences of five English language learners (ELLs) in a language arts class.

A case study approach was taken in order that a clear focus of one group of learners should add to growing understanding of the diversity of students’ experiences. This study concentrates on a motivated group of students who express their motivation to learn and succeed, in part, through the way they use technology. Although these students attend a school where they are not afforded significant opportunity or support in using technology, they all make use of their smartphones to assist their learning. The research presented here adds to current discussions about the role of technology in schools by focusing on the ways that students use smartphones in unsanctioned ways to learn.

The Myth of the Digital Native

Any consideration of the ways young people use technology for learning must contend with the character of generalizations

about young people and technology. Prensky introduced the term “digital native” (1) to describe a generation of young people different from their antecedents because of their exposure to and use of digital media.

Prensky’s claims that “today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors” (1) have been subjected to rigorous criticism, chiefly that the importance of the contexts of technology use are not sufficiently acknowledged. A number of studies have linked unfamiliarity with digital skills to social inequalities based, among other things, on race, sex, and socioeconomic status (Leu et al. 1; Hargittai and Shaw 425; Kirschner and De Bruyckere 136). Students in high-poverty schools, for example, often have very limited interactions with digital resources and tools (Warschauer and Tate 67). This work echoes Selwyn’s caution that we ought to “avoid the excesses of the digital native debate and instead concentrate on enhancing our understandings of the realities of technology use in contemporary society” (365).

Despite scholarship emphasizing the differences and disparities in exposure and experience, it is clear that the myth of digital natives has been hard to dispel. Blink, for example, suggests that young people that “have grown up with some sort of digital device at their fingertips...students today are wired.” (14). Dingli and Seychell write that young people “live online” and “have been doing so since they were born, they use the computer to play, for their research and now for their work. They have access to the latest technology both in their home and outside” (65). Others argue that young people have

“literally grown up with digital communications” (Taken 67).

Given the persistent mischaracterization of students’ abilities to use technology for learning, it is important that teachers gain an accurate picture of students’ technology use and level of familiarity. So, how do young people use smartphones in the classroom?

Research Approach

I undertook a case study to see how a small group of high school students made use of smartphones in lessons. This group of students are designated by the school as English Language Learners (ELLs), but they have also been classified as no longer requiring language learning support and as able to participate in “regular” ELA courses. School policy is currently that smartphones must not be used in class but the students in this study use their devices in clandestine ways to support their own learning—breaking school rules to access their education. In the classes I work in, the students use Chromebooks for their studies. The Chromebooks are a unique feature to this classroom, and the interaction between the personally owned and school-provided device provide a further opportunity for investigation. The research question posed in this paper is: how do ELLs in an ELA classroom in a northeastern US high school use mobile technologies for learning?

The students are participating in a pilot program where they are being introduced to argumentation techniques as a means of preparing them for college entry and completion. The program, funded by a large multinational company and run by a university in partnership with the school, provides resources and training for students, and opportunities to improve outcomes based on continued research. As a Research

Assistant, I visited the school on a weekly basis to observe and assist in the development and implementation of curriculum.

The participants, five in all, are all late acquirers of English (Pavlenko and Malt 19) and have relocated to the United States from Ghana, Mali, Haiti and Vietnam. Kim* and Henry are from Vietnam. Kim is friendly and socially active. She competes on the school badminton team, and has many friends from different language backgrounds. Henry is relatively introverted, preferring watching anime videos to social interaction with his peers. Sophie, from Ghana, hopes to follow the family tradition of a career in nursing. She and her twin are the youngest of four daughters, and the older siblings all pursue nursing careers. Joan is originally from Haiti but recently relocated from another large city. She is a conscientious worker, and she too aims for a nursing job. Maryam, originally from Senegal, has a close relationship with her ELA teacher, although she is most interested in math and science courses. She has recently become pregnant, and her ELA teacher is helping her navigate her studies.

All the students participating in the study owned smartphones, and one participant also had a computer at home. Observations of classes were undertaken and interviews conducted with all participants. Participants were all asked how they used smartphones in class, how they used their smartphones at home, how they understood the school ban on smartphones, and if they had access and support in using desktop or laptop machines. Beyond these broad questions, students were prompted to provide as much detail as they wished to offer. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following initial open coding, responses were divided into content

*All names are pseudonyms.

units, or “a segment of discourse designed to make a single point” (Smith et al. 14). From these content units, five themes are identified: technology, and the smartphone in particular, is seen by students as an aid to learning; students need support in using technology for learning; learning occurs socially; and students are resourceful in pursuing their learning goals.

Data Analysis and Results

Students See Technology as an Aid to Learning

Participants viewed technology positively and felt it to be useful for learning. They saw a particular benefit to phones around speed of access and convenience, as phones fit easily in bags and can be retrieved in the middle of conversations. These positives were relative to the benefits of dictionaries, which none of the participants used any longer. Kim’s response typifies the participants’ views: “I have one in the class downstairs but I don’t use it. Some words are not there. They don’t have in the dictionary. And it takes a long time to find.”

Respondents all noted smartphones’ educational possibilities as one of their main characteristics. Henry identifies the smartphone with learning, saying that he has one “because I need to learn.” Sophie recalled that her father also believes the phone to be an essential part of learning: “My father said that he thought it would help learning because if a teacher says a word that we don’t know then we can Google it so that we can participate in class.”

Students Need Support in Using Technology for Learning

Sophie’s previous comment reveals a general pre-occupation with phones as helpful for understanding individual words. Each respondent mentioned words as a crucial use of phones, and an essential part of their school work. Maryam reports, “I just use it for, the phone for words.” Joan says, “sometimes I don’t know the words, so I look on the thing that’s on my phone.” The preoccupation with words suggests that students have had correctness emphasized to them, but it also suggests that students have not had the opportunities for learning provided by phones fully outlined.

Continuing this theme, Henry revealed that he would only use the sites he believed had “natural American” speakers. His ESOL teacher recommended YouTube to him, and that has become the only resource he trusts. Henry’s worry is that he will use an app that leads him to incorrect information. His deference to his teachers has meant that he interprets their advice as the only way to go about the business of serious language learning. That they have led him to YouTube, and his trust of one application over others, speaks to wider issues of information literacy, particularly when credibility is important.

Each of the five students viewed Google as the first, and in some cases perhaps the only, source for information. In the classroom Maryam, after consulting her phone turned to me and asked a question because, “I tried Google, but I couldn’t find the answer.”

This situation does not mesh with the characterization of all youth as digitally empowered. Four of the five participants reported using only four apps for education: Merriam Webster, NBC, Google and

YouTube. Only Kim uses a range of apps. She explained that she used different apps for longer or shorter passages, and had now dismissed some of the apps that she had used at earlier stages in her learning, saying that she uses “Google Translate when I have long sentences so I take the picture and then it goes faster. I don’t want to type just get the idea.” Kim has also researched the apps she finds for language learning and explains that she uses a range:

Kim: I use six: Tra Cau, iTranslate, Speak and Translate, Tu Dien Anh Viet, Google Translate, Tu Dien dictionary. Sometimes I use Speak and Translate to speak to strangers when I don’t know what they’re saying. I use it at home or at school but usually with friends. I use Tra Cau, Tu Dien Anh Viet and Google Translate the most. They’re good for translating. Tra Cau and Tu Dien Anh Viet are English Vietnamese dictionaries.

Interviewer: Did you find these yourself or were they recommended?

Kim: No, I found them myself. And friends. I have friends out of school and some friends here too. In this school we have five Vietnamese students, so they tell me some.

It is not only in terms of applications that students work with a narrow range of opportunities; digital tools all require mechanical or functional skills. While all the respondents said they preferred phones to computers for the speed and convenience they provided, they also reported, with the exception of Henry, that they had not had a chance to develop typing skills. Henry is the only member of this group with a computer

at home, and, in my observations, he typed the fastest and was the only student to use more than one tab. Other students demonstrated how they might benefit from further opportunities with technology. Sophie, who only has intermittent access to her older sister’s machine, types with one finger on one hand. A further difficulty I noticed for Maryam, Joan and Sophie, was their struggle to adapt to digital reading and writing. Each one had a pad of paper on the desk despite the fact that their work has been exclusively on Google docs for some months. Joan was reading from the screen, writing out her answers in full on her pad, then transcribing to the computer.

Learning Occurs Socially

When Kim comments about dictionaries that “some words are not there,” she reveals an interesting point about technology responding to users’ demands. Whether she means that she has only experience of concise, or older dictionaries, or if she has attempted unsuccessfully to find local colloquialisms, the phone, for her, with the range of search facilities, has surpassed the book. Smartphones also offer opportunities in social settings. Sophie reports that she uses her phone “with friends so that I can speak to them the way they speak to me.” The phone, with quick and inconspicuous access, gives Sophie a way to see herself as present and involved. It reduces her sense of visibility, of being an outsider; her behavior is not marked as different. Kim’s comments about her friends helping her with her language learning also return us to the importance of what Soobin et al. call the “socio-technical network” (26). Kim has friends that help direct her use of apps for learning. If the others have not had this opportunity in their peer groups, is it something that can be fostered?

The school culture of smart or cell phone use, and the inconsistencies of approaches, might be an object of future study. In this classroom, the teacher was content to let the students use their phones for their own purposes, but these purposes were limited, at least in formal class time, by the way students had been habituated to using phones only for word definitions by past teachers.

Students Are Resourceful in Pursuing Their Learning Goals

The classroom teacher did not have a defined policy for how phones might be used, and indeed, she was perhaps unable to elaborate a way for phones to be used in class, given that the school's phone policy also precludes use of phones for learning. In this class the teacher has attempted to collect phones and store them in return for commendation points. For students who do not use their phones for educational purposes, this may be an aid to their learning, but I asked Kim how she dealt with this practice: "I give in my phone and if I have any questions, I ask the teacher. I ask what words mean but I ask a lot then she gives back phone cos it's kinda annoying. So she's like lets me use the phone."

Kim's negotiation around the rules shows that she recognizes how her needs conflict with institutional demands. The teacher only grants such flexibility in knowledge that she may be challenged by school administration. As a well-established teacher, she is confident enough to bend rules, but this may not be the case for a new teacher.

Conclusions and Limitations

The broad characterization of the digital native is inaccurate. The young people participating in this study have little access

to many new learning and communication technologies. They do, however, have access to phones—powerful and practical tools, which are not always recognized as aids for learning. Guided use of technology may well contribute to learner confidence and a sense of autonomy and achievement.

More needs to be gleaned about the ways in which students, particularly those in disadvantaged and minority groups, use, and might use more fruitfully, the technology they have. Students are part of rich and complex social and educational contexts, many with significant digital dimensions. Learning takes place in many different ways, among them, through apps and the social interactions they mediate. A student may, apparently, be limited by their trust in only a small number of apps, but at the same time may be provoked and inspired by a social media post. Teachers guide students to new knowledge, abilities, and skills by building on prior knowledge, ability and skills. We should not imagine what our students can do with technology, but rather we should find out what they do with technology and how they can be motivated to use technology, technological skills and social insights to build towards continued personal, social, and academic success.

Works Cited

- Blink, Rebecca J. *Leading Learning for Digital Natives: Combining Data and Technology in the Classroom*. Routledge, 2016.
- Dingli, Alexei, and Dylan Seychell. *The New Digital Natives-Cutting the Chord*. Springer, 2015.
- Leu, Donald J., et al. "The New Literacies of Online Research and Comprehension: Rethinking the Reading Achievement Gap." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2014, pp. 37–59.

- Hargittai, Eszter, and Aaron Shaw. "Mind the Skills Gap: The Role of Internet Know-how and Gender in Differentiated Contributions to Wikipedia." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2015, pp. 424–442, doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2014.957711.
- Kirschner, Paul, and Pedro De Bruyckere, "The Myths of the Digital Native and the Multitasker." *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 67, 2017, pp. 135–142, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.06.001>.
- Pavlenko, Aneta, and Barbara Malt. "Kitchen Russian: Cross-linguistic Differences and First Language Object Naming by Russian–English Bilinguals." *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, vol.14, no. 1, 2011, pp. 19–45.
- Prensky, Marc. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part 1." *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2001, pp. 1–6, doi:10.1108/10748120110424816,.
- Selwyn, Neil. "The Digital Native – Myth and Reality." *Aslib Proceedings*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2009, pp. 364–379, doi:10.1108/00012530910973776.
- Smith, Michael W., et al. "Complements or Conflicts: Conceptions of Discussion and Multicultural Literature in a Teachers-as-readers Discussion Group." *Journal of Literacy Research*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2001, pp. 137–167.
- Soobin, Yim, Mark Warschauer, and Zheng Binbin. "Google Docs in the Classroom: A District Wide Case Study." *Teachers College Record*, vol. 118, no. 9, 2016, pp. 1–24.
- Taken, Katherine. "Mobile Advertising to Digital Natives: References on Content, Style, Personalization, and Functionality." *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2019, pp. 6780, doi: 10.1080/0965254X.2017.1384043.
- Warschauer, Mark, and Tamara Tate. "Digital Divides and Social Inclusion." *Handbook of Writing, Literacies, and Education in Digital Cultures*. Edited by Kathy Mills et al. Routledge, 2018, pp. 63–75.