Digital Detox: One Strategy for Establishing a More Ethical Relationship to Educational Technologies on Campus

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Abstract

This paper reviews the Digital Detox project at TRU. At TRU, the Digital Detox is not necessarily about abstaining from technology altogether, but rather establishing a more ethical, healthier approach to the tools we are required to use every day. Conceived this way, a Digital Detox offers an approachable opportunity to discuss difficult and controversial topics in educational technologies. The objective of this paper is to offer description and analysis of one strategy to improve university community engagement on issues of ethics and educational technologies. In addition to understanding our own process for creating this resource at TRU, this paper provides a "toolkit" for starting a Digital Detox event at any campus.

Cet article passe en revue le projet Détox technologique à TRU. Chez TRU, la Détox technologique n'est pas conçue en termes d'abstinence technologique, mais en termes d'instauration d'un rapport plus éthique, plus sain aux outils que nous sommes amenés à utiliser au quotidien. Conçu de cette façon, un Détox technologique offre une opportunité accessible pour discuter de sujets difficiles et controversés dans les technologies éducatives. L'objectif de cet article est d'offrir une description et une analyse d'une stratégie pour améliorer l'engagement de la communauté universitaire sur les questions d'éthiques et de technologies éducatives. En plus de comprendre notre propre processus de création de cette ressource à TRU, ce document fournit une «boîte à outils» pour démarrer un événement Digital Detox sur n'importe quel campus.

Keywords: educational technologies, ethics, digital toolkit

Introduction

Opportunities to "detoxify" your digital life are ubiquitous but are often primarily about abstinence – delete your Facebook, turn off your Wi-Fi, limit your screentime. These are perhaps valuable strategies for some for living a simpler digital life, but they don't get at the digital toxicity that we are steeped in within the world of education, raising questions around the ethics of surveillance, data privacy, and more. Educational technologies offer profound opportunities for learning and growth, but they can also be predatory and ethically questionable. As an educational technologist, my job is to help faculty make better decisions about the technologies they bring into the classroom, which includes being responsible with student data and teaching faculty what is means to establish an ethical digital practice.

As part of the Thompson Rivers University (TRU) Learning Technology and Innovation team's outreach to this effect, and inspired by the successful Digital Detoxes hosted at Middlebury College[1] for the last few years, we built our own Digital Detox at TRU to help faculty, staff, and students understand the challenges of using educational technology. This project offered the TRU community a synthesized literature review of the most up-to-date research on key concepts like algorithmic processing, accessibility, and data privacy. It also offered critical perspectives on many technologies currently in use within the TRU community. More than 200 users signed up for Detox emails each year, with approximately half coming from the TRU community and half from outside. At the end of the 2021 iteration of the project, there were 188 posted comments on 18 posts and 50 attendees across the six live sessions offered, with over 200 subscribers participating annually. The Detox essays have been used as assigned readings in courses at TRU and beyond, and the site archive has been accessed over 19,000 times by nearly 6,000 users. The 2022 Digital Detox launched on February 1, 2022, and it is underway at the time of this writing. Interested readers can browse the entire Digital Detox archive at http://digitaldetox.trubox.ca.

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[1] The Middlebury detoxes began in 2018 and the archive can be reviewed here: https://dlinq.middcreate.net/digitaldetox/ While the TRU Digital Detox takes inspiration from Middlebury's outreach and engagement efforts, the tone and topic focus of the TRU Digital Detoxes have differed significantly.

This paper reviews the Digital Detox project at TRU. The objective of this paper is to offer description and analysis of one strategy to improve university community engagement on issues of ethics and educational technologies. In addition to understanding our own process for creating this resource at TRU, this paper provides a "toolkit" for starting a Digital Detox event at any campus.

A Note on Terminology

In undertaking the TRU Digital Detox project, we spent a long time considering whether "detox" was an appropriate term to use. There are explicit limitations to the metaphor of the term "detox," and its clinical evocations may distress some users (Sutton, 2017). Often, "detox" is used to refer to processes of abstention that are difficult on the body, like abstaining from alcohol or drugs. More colloquially, diet culture uses the term "detox" to refer to diet modification that is intended to make the participant heathier, with or without clinical evidence to support the practice; this use of the phrase is particularly damaging and inaccurate, amounting to a "mass delusion" according to one *Lancet* opinion piece (Dixon, 2005). Drug and alcoholic detox programs are health procedures that involve considerable and perhaps incapacitating discomfort and illness, often representing the first step on the road to addiction recovery; food detoxes are not real and have no marked benefit on the body. The former we don't want to make light of, and the latter is not a useful invocation.

And yet, despite this, we maintained the term "detox" for our Digital Detox, because we are attempting to undertake a very literal "detoxification" process with our community. The relationships our institutions have to educational technologies are often toxic at the core. The neo-liberal university seeks technological solutions to systemic problems like understaffed departments and over-worked faculty. For example, tools like Turnitin and Proctorio are technological solutions to the problem of academic integrity, but they are attractive because they cost significantly less than investing in assessment redesign, small classes, and other insulating factors against plagiarism and cheating. Further, many of us feel the encroachment of these tools in our daily lives and sense a bleeding of boundaries between work and personal life, made more acute by the COVID-19 pandemic. While "detox" is a loaded term with a lot of very specific connotations, it is also exactly what many of us feel our relationship to technology is calling for in this moment.

A Note on Positionality

The TRU Digital Detox is created by the Learning Technology and Innovation team at TRU, which is housed within Open Learning. We provide a range of technological and pedagogical support for campus faculty who want to teach with technology – and also those who are forced to. This gives us a unique position with connections both to the expertise housed within the highly technologically skilled Open

Learning division, which develops distance-learning courses for TRU and is acutely aware of the pedagogical ramifications of a range of technologies, and to the campus-side faculty who (pre-pandemic) tended to be less interested in technology as a group. The essays that make up our Detox often deal with complex issues and openly take critical approaches to the implementation of educational technologies, including the educational technologies used at TRU. There are important systemic factors here that makes this possible. My role as Coordinator, Educational Technologies is a tenure-track faculty role, which means I have faculty protections like academic freedom and a strong union, and my work is not precarious (or no more precarious than anyone else's in this moment of return to austerity). Many people who work in educational technologies work in staff or administrative roles without these protections; this is similar to the divide seen in other non-instructional areas of the university, like libraries, which likewise shapes who is free to speak (Leebaw & Logsdon, 2020). I am also a cis-gendered, able-bodied, heterosexual white woman. These privileges shape and insulate my experiences, but they also give me a position where it is safer for me to speak out than it is for others. I take this responsibility very seriously and see the Detox as an opportunity to call for changes to systems and technologies that can reinforce marginalization; I also use the space to encourage other faculty, and especially tenured faculty, to use their power to act and speak in support and defence of others.

The Detox Ethos

The story of for-profit, and often predatory, players operating in the educational technology space in institutions that are not prepared to respond to them is not new (Watters, 2021; Weller, 2020). As technology has expanded into areas like artificial intelligence, facial recognition, algorithmic processing, and machine learning, scholars and critics have sounded the alarm about the inherent biases of these tools in ways that parallel existing societal marginalizations (Benjamin, 2019; Boyd et al., 2014; Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Thanks to the work of critical digital pedagogues, these critiques of the racist and ableist risks of these tools were also being aimed at educational adoption before the pandemic (Gilliard, 2017; Morris & Stommel, 2017), but the work became more urgent as we saw widespread adoption of tools to, for example, accomplish tasks like employing surveillance technology for the distance proctoring of exams (singh et al., 2021; Stinson, 2020; Swauger, 2020). Increasingly, students have taken to social media to report harm experienced because of these tools, with stories that range from discomfort at being watched to racialized and disabled students being refused access to their exams to, in extreme cases, students soiling themselves because the electronic proctor does not allow them a trip to the restroom (Cains & Silverman, 2021; Eaton & Turner, 2020; Logan, 2021; Silverman et al., 2021). Ethical questions like whether to mandate cameras on, how to use learning analytics and tracking, and others, laid bare how unprepared the sector was for the widespread adoption of these tools in a hurry (Caines, 2020; Gilmour, 2021).

The Digital Detox approaches teaching and learning technologies from an ethic of care and a harm reduction perspective. As indicated, this is not an abstinence Detox; we know that faculty, staff, and students need to find ways to live amicably and ethically with the technologies that have been selected for them. As a team supporting the Detox, we love learning technology and are committed to the role of these tools within the university. But, we want to see technological tools implemented with care and with a strong awareness of the privacy, ethics, and fiduciary impacts. This has become even more important through the pandemic teaching moment, as the tools have become inseparable from the teaching. There's a common saying in teaching and learning circles that we shouldn't allow technology to shape pedagogy, but that's really an impossible ask. From the earliest technological innovations, our teaching has been changed by technology. Consider the difference in approach when a classroom has a blackboard and chalk, or a whiteboard and markers, or consider how learning changed when paper and pencils became cheap to procure. The technology is always already changing the teaching, especially in this moment when – because institutions are pivoting back and forth to remote, and because ill faculty and students require compassion and accommodation and catching up – the technology feels impossible to resist or refuse, which is why it is so critical that we select our tools well and that we have a solid ethical practice to underpin those selections.

The Detox also tries to respond to the moment. In the first year, we were exploring a sensibility of hope, but by the second year – smack in the middle of our first pandemic winter – we tried to reflect the sense of frustration and anxiety felt by many university employees. And now, in our third year, after two years of the pandemic and the kinds of individualization of systemic problems that has marked this period, we are offering a celebration of collective action and resistance. We want our content to be relevant to teaching faculty, academic staff, students, and interested community members, and to do this we work to stay on top of not only the scholarly research in the areas the Detox is focusing on in a given year, but also on news, social media, and popular conversations. And we focus on communities and issues that may not have a loud enough voice in campus discussions more broadly: Racialized, disabled, and queer students and faculty; precarious workers like sessional instructors; and first-generation and low-income students. What these disparate groups all have in common is that they are disproportionately likely to be harmed by digital technologies in the classroom, and so we begin our advocacy and hard reduction efforts there.

Impacts of The Digital Detox

Impacts of this kind of educative, awareness-raising work are difficult to assess, and we have not undertaken scholarly study of the Digital Detox. However, I do believe that we have seen an increased understanding on campus about the ethical issues at play when we consider working with educational technologies. Having begun these conversations before the pandemic also helped to lay the groundwork for important

decisions made during the emergency remote learning period, like the decision not to implement an e-proctoring tool for campus courses and instead relying on better assessment practices.

We have also maintained some communities of practice around Detox-related topics during the remainder of the year through lunchtime discussion series and book clubs. This has allowed us to return to the Detox as a series of "core texts" for our programming year, and the interests and preferences of participants in these programming efforts go on often to shape the next year's Detox themes and topics. Doing so enables us to maintain ethics as a central component of all the work we do.

We also hear frequently from members of the campus community about the impact of the Digital Detox on their teaching and learning practice, as well as their general thinking about technology and privacy in their own lives. More significantly for our interest in developing and maintaining campus community, readers often express gratitude for our willingness to tackle "hot" topics like academic integrity, workload and burnout, and other systemic or institutional concerns. Indeed, we often hear this feedback from staff and sessional faculty who don't feel empowered to speak publicly about these kinds of issues, but are pleased to see their perspectives reflected in the Digital Detox and treated respectfully.

On a personal level, writing the Digital Detox helped me to carve out time for writing and research during a busy period where I might not have been able to prioritize this work without a larger project, and this work has gone on to be reworked as conference presentations, book chapters, several keynote talks, and now a larger research project on ethics in edtech procurement. This is perhaps less a feature of the Detox itself than a reinforcement of the importance of writing and publishing in the open, but my Detox essays have helped me establish myself in the field of educational technologies very quickly. I began the first Detox only four months after transitioning into faculty support from my previous role as a community college instructor. In many ways, it has been my own way of introducing myself and my work to the people at TRU and across the sector.

The Detox Toolkit

Website Hosting and Facilitating Online Sessions

First, you need a place to host your writing. Here at TRU, we have an in-house installation of Wordpress called TRUbox. This self-hosted space allows us to have total control of our own content; it doesn't live on the formal university website and doesn't need to be vetted by marketing or communications experts before publishing (for better or for worse!). This allows the essays to be written "on the fly" and therefore to be more responsive to the ever-changing world of technology and to make reference to stories in the news. It also gives us more control over what plugins we use, most notably a tool

for collecting subscribers and notifying them of new posts called Subscribe2. Managing the mailing list, especially with over 200 subscribers a year, is a significant challenge, so identifying a good plugin to assist with collection and email alerts has been critical to managing our workflows.

In addition to a space to host the essays, establishing capacity for "live" sessions – whether online or in person – is helpful. We talk a lot about the data security and pedagogical overreach of tools like Zoom and Teams in the Detox, so to maintain an ethical consistency we use a self-hosted videoconferencing option called BigBlueButton to host our live chats. The benefit to moving these discussions online is that it enables people from outside of our community to attend, which enriches the quality of the discussions and the range of perspectives available.

Because we are housed within our Open Learning division, developing and maintaining the site, as well as the annual refreshes, are helped substantially by the multimedia specialists at TRU. Thomas Sandhoff, Nicole Singular, Stephanie Gountas, and Jon Fulton contributed web, graphics, and video skills to the project over its various iterations, and the changing look-feel has a direct impact on the accessibility and ability of the site to engage users. Our site is easy to navigate and search, and the visuals that change from year-to-year help to orient users to the live site versus the archived versions. We also attend to accessibility in our site design, ensuring that users across the spectrum of ability and experience will find the Detox usable.

Workload and Writing

In planning for the Detox, it is important to carefully consider the workload implications. For example, what will your release schedule be; who will be responsible for research and writing; what other programming commitments are underway during this time; etc. I am the sole author of the Detox, and after the first two iterations, I have learned to pare back my other commitments as much as possible during the one month to six weeks that our Detox programming is active. It is a significant undertaking, and streamlining the processes (e.g., automating the registration system and the email notifications) has been a priority in trying to make the Detox sustainable. Every year, we learn a little bit more about how to support this work. In considering workload, however, it is important to consider the year's programming and goals: these essays should help to propel the programming for the rest of the year and should be a touchstone or a set of readings to refer back to. The Detox, at its core, should be akin to an authentic, sustainable assignment in its potential for reuse and growth.

The writing is the trickiest, and most time-consuming part, alongside the research. Having a thematic focus helps, just to narrow down the broad scope of possible topics. In choosing a theme, working within your existing areas of expertise will allow for more in-depth research and essays. However, approach and style matter,

too. For our TRU Digital Detox, we have adopted a casual style, with lots of (attempted) humour and pop-culture references. We want the experience of reading to be pleasurable.

Connecting Community

It's also critical to engage with your campus community. Our campus is the same as many, where reaching above the noise of email clutter can be difficult. We use faculty and staff listservs, direct outreach, and the support of the internal marketing and communication team to help reach campus faculty. Reaching students is a bit more complicated and is usually most successful when we have the pleasure of being invited into a class by the instructor to speak directly to students.

We have also found that demand for the Detox grows as the Detox progresses; we tend to start with 100 subscribers and double that number by the last essay. Patience is, therefore, a virtue! Thinking through how you will connect with your community is important, but so too is how broad you wish to expand your scope. The TRU Digital Detox has always been openly available online for anyone interested; in year two, we opened the live sessions to a broader audience by moving them online. The dual focus of campus community and larger sector can be complicated, but we are clear that the Detox is created first and foremost for our community at TRU, and that others are welcome to join in the conversation from those contexts. In the end, we draw about equal audience shares from within and without the TRU community, which is also nice for TRU's reputation as a leader in open education.

Conclusions

For our team, the benefits of producing the Digital Detox have been (1) a campus community with more awareness of and interest in ethical issues relating to technology, (2) a body of carefully researched work supporting our recommendations and practices, and (3) increased awareness of the activities of our critical digital pedagogy team across the sector. Some of the best outcomes have come from directly engaging with teaching faculty and talking about these issues with students and with opening our workshops up to a broader public to talk about how these issues are similar and different across campus communities and institutions. While capacity is an issue for creating this level of sustained, research-intensive, writing-intensive programming, the payoff can be significant for both the campus community and the individuals involved. In short, we believe in the value of this kind of faculty development effort, and strongly recommend this undertaking for any unit with an interest in critical digital pedagogies.

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