



## **Digital Lives and the Impact of Technology: Utopia or Dystopia?**

Curriculum Unit 19.01.03  
by Eden C. Stein

### **Rationale**

---

Suddenly, we live in a world where the majority of teens and adults walk around with powerful computers that have the capacity to communicate instantaneously with anyone virtually anywhere in the world. Those of us who have lived the transition of communication from handwritten letters, which could take a week to arrive, to text messaging; of research using hardbound copies of Encyclopedia Britannica and visits to the library, to instantaneous Google search; of composition from writing by hand or typing with carbon papers, to Google Drive; and of entertainment by watching television shows at prescribed times, to streaming any show or episode at will, are motivated to ask: What are the effects of these profound changes in digital technology on the development of human beings and society? How are young people being impacted by growing up in a digital world, and what does the future hold for them? And, as many who have come before us have asked during times of profound technological change: Does technology improve our lives? What are the costs of this new and overwhelming technology to our individual lives and our society?

### **Objective and Unit Overview with Essential Questions**

---

At the beginning of the digital boom there were utopian hopes that digital technology would be the great equalizer with idealistic hopes for society. However, that quickly evolved into apocalyptic predictions and realistic concerns which have continued to plague teachers and parents. This unit will attempt to have 8th grade students examine the effects that these handheld computers, also known as smart phones, are having on their lives. Overall, the unit will facilitate a critical evaluation of the effect of preoccupation with digital media, and encourage the students to creatively explore and question what the future may hold for them.

The unit will progress through five parts. Part I will introduce the topic of utopia via studying the early use of the term and researching historical utopian communities as well as Luddites. The guiding questions for Part I are: What is a utopia? How can technology change society? How is the concept of private property related to utopias? Part II will facilitate self-reflection and writing about students' own digital use. The essential question is: How is digital technology impacting my life?

The third and fourth parts of the unit bring a literary analysis of both nonfiction and fictional texts into the discussion. Part III will introduce middle school students to theories about the physiological and psychological effects of the amount of time many teens spend on their phones, as well as watching larger screens and playing video games. This nonfiction information will be presented as content for them to develop and practice literacy skills. The essential questions are: How are digital technologies impacting young people in our world? Does digital technology facilitate private property in a positive way, or impact private property in a negative way? Part IV will explore literary analysis of dystopian literature. The essential questions are: How is technology being exploited in this literary dystopia? Is digital technology facilitating the sharing of property more equally? Part V is an opportunity for students to turn their minds and keyboards to imagining what the future holds in store. The essential question is: How do I envision the role of digital technology in a future society?

While the unit is designed to be taught in a small K-8 school, with academically and ethnically diverse students who are reading considerably above grade level, it could easily be adapted to a variety of grade level and school settings.

## Part I What is a Utopia?

---

The class will begin by studying the concept of utopia and historical utopian communities. While many students might be familiar with the term “Dystopian Literature,” as it is one of their favorite genres, most probably don’t even really know where the term came from or what a utopia is supposed to be. The opening lesson for this part of the unit will be brainstorming and defining the term utopia and discussing its origins. The whole class could read an excerpt from Thomas More’s *Utopia*,<sup>1</sup> such as Book 2 Section 3, “Of Their Trades and Manner of Life.” The class will list the elements of a Utopian society envisioned by More, including occupations and how leisure time is spent, and evaluate whether they feel each attribute is conducive to a Utopian society. The same could be done with the lyrics to “Imagine” by John Lennon.<sup>2</sup> Then students will then engage in group research projects where they study historical American utopian societies including the Hutterites, Amish, Shakers, or Tennessee Farm Community.<sup>3</sup>

### Historical Utopian Communities

The Hutterites are a Christian anabaptist sect similar to the Mennonites that originated with the migration of the followers of Jacob Hutter during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Anabaptists are Christians who maintain that baptism, or accepting Jesus Christ as one’s savior, should wait till maturity when each individual can make the informed choice for one’s self. The Hutterites are pacifists and believe in communal property. They have strong religious beliefs and hold daily prayer services and longer services for festivals and rites of passage. Their salvation comes from correct living and doing good for the community. Primarily, Hutterites earn a living and provide for themselves via agriculture and currently number about 45,000 in the United States<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly, Hutterites are not against technology and at least one Hutterite community even allows its members to have iPhones.<sup>5</sup>

The Amish group originated in the late 17th century with Jakob Ammann whose followers split from the Mennonites. Like the Hutterites, they are anabaptists. Governed by the *ordnung*, or guidelines for daily life,

they must conform to their group and lead a simple life with a minimum of technology in order to receive salvation. Initially almost all Amish were farmers though they have also branched into cottage industries. Young people are given a special period, *rumspringa*, to experience the outside world before they commit themselves to their community. Currently there are approximately 251,000 Amish people in the United States and Canada, the majority of whom live in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

While the Hutterite and Amish are conservative patriarchal societies with women's roles limited to domesticity, the Shakers were founded during the 18th century by a woman, Ann Lee, who split off from the Quakers in England and later emigrated to New York.<sup>6</sup> There they gained many followers and developed their own simple yet radical lifestyle. In addition to shaking, or dancing during worship, they believed in pacifism, communal ownership of property, the equality of the sexes, and celibacy. They are also known for their distinctive American style of furniture. "Based on a belief that decoration was offensive to God, they developed a unique style of furniture for their own use that reflected both utilitarian perfection with visual simplicity and beauty."<sup>7</sup> At present, there is one very small active Shaker community left in Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

The Farm in Tennessee was founded in 1971 by a group of 350 hippies who moved from San Francisco following their leader Stephen Gaskin. They believe in nonviolence and good works. Today, they consider themselves a model ecological community and have "become well known for many things, from natural childbirth and midwifery to healthy diet and vegetarian cuisine, creative arts and alternative technologies to its partnerships and assistance to native cultures."<sup>8</sup> The population of The Farm peaked with 1200 members but now numbers only about 200 permanent residents. Originally all property was communal but at present property is privately owned. They run numerous businesses and charitable programs including a nationally known training program for spiritual midwifery.

Students will choose one of these groups to research and create a brief audio-visual presentation for the class. In the presentation, students will identify the cultural group and its origins, locations, and beliefs, family life, and any additional information that sets the group apart from the larger society. They will synthesize the information by identifying a minimum of two benefits (utopian effects) and disadvantages (dystopian effects) members of the society have compared to nonmembers. The class will then compare and contrast the societies to analyze the common attributes of utopias. Finally, students will connect to the material by responding to a journal prompt about which of these communities they might consider becoming a member of, explained with specific details and reasons.

### **Anti-Technology: The Luddites of Yesterday and Today**

At this point in the unit it will make sense to note the destabilizing impact of new technologies, and how this occurred with the coming of the Industrial Revolution (which students should be familiar with) as well as the digital technological revolution we are experiencing now. Suzanne Collins' dystopian novel *The Hunger Games*<sup>9</sup> can be used to illustrate how technology can change a society and impact the economy, by discussing how the wealth and resources of the districts were being used to support the central government at the expense of the workers, and how technology was being used to control the population and reinforce the dominance of the ruling class.

Returning to history, there will also be a whole class reading on the Luddites in conjunction with a current article on the effects of new technology on the job market for these students' own generation.<sup>10</sup> During the late 18th century, thousands of textile workers in England feared the impact of new technological innovations

on their jobs and livelihoods. These displaced skilled artisans smashed machinery in a vain hope to stop the process of industrialization, though ultimately the industrial jobs created resulted in a higher standard of living for many. In 1793 William Godwin noted that though technological innovation produces temporary distress, it is in the interest of the many; he also points out that utopian visions as early as the Spartans of ancient Greece relegated manual labor to slaves, while we relegate it to technology.<sup>11</sup> In our own time, new robots are replacing not only factory workers and personal servants but also administrative positions such as secretaries and operators. More concerning is that this new wave of technology is not creating enough jobs for the displaced workers. The largest increase in the job market will be for the coding, design, and building of robots and artificial intelligence devices. The reading will be used to motivate a discussion on the costs and benefits of technology that will be ongoing throughout the remainder of the unit.

While it may seem obvious that digital technology has and will further reduce the need for menial human labor, overall there may be a class differential. In the popular young adult dystopian novel *The Thousandth Floor*, distinct high and low social classes have varying levels of automation. When an upper class boy asks his new lower class girlfriend who works at a snack bar “why her job even existed, why they didn’t just have bots at each monorail stop like they did at upper-floor lift stations. ‘Because I’m cheaper than a bot,’ she’d told him, which was true.”<sup>12</sup> This is already true in some places in the world where it is cheaper to hire a human to pull you around the street in a rickshaw than to take a taxi. Conversely, in the *New York Times* article “Human Contact is Now a Luxury Good,”<sup>13</sup> we read about digitized public school education for children and personal care attendants for the elderly as cost saving means for society to provide for the needs of lower income members of the community, while those in higher income brackets prefer to minimize the role of both robotics and digital technology in their own families.

As a culmination to this section of the unit the class will have a discussion and create an anchor chart which encompasses their understanding of the characteristics of a Utopian society. An attempt will be made to address the essential question, What qualifies as a Utopian society? Is putting the community’s needs ahead of individual needs a necessary characteristic of a utopia? Is monitoring and gatekeeping technology an important aspect of utopias, and if so, why?

We will also take a brief look at the early mission statements of some of the Silicon Valley tech conglomerates, noting how they appear utopian. For example, in 1998 Google’s mission was stated to “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”<sup>14</sup> This makes it seem like Google’s primary purpose is to make the world a better place for everyone, and ignores the profit motive and immense forces of data collection and analysis, and advertising, and their impact on searches for information. Facebook, as recently as 2017, stated its goal was to give people “the power to build community and bring the world closer together” yet in reality their information processing that controls which posts individuals see increase conformity. In recent years employees at Google and other companies have protested when they assisted in censorship and discriminatory policies.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the class can view the cover of *Time* magazine from January 1, 2007<sup>16</sup> when they named “you” as the most powerful person of the year, with a picture of a computer on the cover, claiming that each of us controls the information age. The class can and discuss whether this prediction has come true: Are we more powerful because of digital technology? Do we control our own digital lives?

## Part II Self Reflection on Digital Use

---

Students will begin the process of self-reflection with a paper and pencil self-assessment of how much time they are spending on digital media, including all screen time and what it is used for. Then those who have cell phones will be encouraged to download a free app such as Moment that actually tracks how often they are checking their phones and what apps they are using. They can compare their own estimates with the actual time recording by a more objective measure. Furthermore, they will be encouraged to track what they are using the technology for in a log with categories such as schoolwork, games, social media, etc. Subsequently, in a journal entry they will be asked to speculate regarding positive and negative effects their own digital use may be having on their lives. They can respond to the question, what would you be doing with your time if you did not have a smartphone?

## Part III - Pros and Cons of our Digital Lives

---

The third section of the unit will examine the current state of society's use of digital technology, with a focus on teenagers, looking at some of the positive but mostly negative effects that have been documented. Here, students will address the question, how is digital technology moving us toward Utopian Lives? How might it be moving us in an opposite direction? For each of the sections below, nonfiction articles at the appropriate reading level and cited in the Student Resources section below, will be used for the students to glean the important information.

### Consequences of Excessive Digital Media Use

#### Neuroplasticity

How developing youth spend their time impacts brain development. Neuroscientists have known for a while that experience and activities influence the release of specific neurotransmitters, thus strengthening particular synaptic connections in the brain cortex while weakening others. The brains of children are especially plastic, explaining why the younger an individual is when they experience a brain injury the greater potential for recovery they have, as new synaptic connections readily form to take over the functions of damaged ones. This phenomenon of plasticity also explains the ease with which young children can learn the complex nuances of various languages as compared with adults. Thus, it should not be surprising that children's brains would develop differently as a consequence of the time they spend focused on small and large screens.<sup>17</sup> For example, neural pathways that favor skills necessary to master handheld digital devices, such as the frequent shifting of attention, will strengthen at the expense of those pathways necessary for the sustained focused attention necessary for reading a long text or listening to a prolonged lecture. In recent years, more educated parents, including those who have developed the technology themselves, have limited or even eliminated their own children's screen time. There is a new movement, "Wait Until 8<sup>th</sup>," which encourages parents to sign a pledge to wait until 8th grade to give their children smartphones.<sup>18</sup>

#### Multi-tasking and shifting attention

The last few generations brought up on videos have become accustomed to a high level of stimulation with rapidly changing sights and sounds, and have trouble focusing their attention under more mundane conditions such as a lecture from a teacher in front of a classroom. According to Microsoft Canada the human attention span dropped from twelve seconds in 2000 to eight seconds in 2013.<sup>19</sup> Catherine Price points out in her book *How to Break Up with your Phone*<sup>20</sup> that paying attention and filtering out distractions is hard enough work when the distractions are external, like noise when you are trying to read a paper book, but much more complicated when the very page we are reading on a computer or smartphone contains links designed to distract us. She also notes that without practice we lose the ability to focus our attention for sustained periods.

A major factor present in regard to the time spent on smartphones pertains to the frequent switching between apps, thus requiring only brief periods of attention, rather than the sustained attention necessary to read a longer text such as a magazine article. Now the brain is also habituating to frequently shifting attention, which we commonly refer to as multitasking. However, some researchers have questioned whether doing more than one thing at a time well is even possible. We may hypothesize that the frequent shifting of attention from one app to another, the checking of emails, texting with several people, watching a few minutes of a video, all within a few minutes may be causing a new generation to grow up in which attention deficit disorder becomes the norm rather than the exception for the teenage brain.<sup>21</sup> This “continuous partial attention” places the brain in a heightened state of alertness and stress, which may result in individuals not taking the time or even having the ability to contemplate or make thoughtful decisions.<sup>22</sup>

### **Behavioral Addiction**

Neuroscientists have discovered that humans become addicted very easily to various substances and also behaviors which raise the dopamine levels in their brains. Most people realize that opiates, gambling, and even sex and food can cause addictive behavior such as ignoring work and other responsibilities in favor of getting this dopamine rush. Now people are starting to realize that a video game played on an app on one’s smartphone, or pictures or texts sent by one’s peers, may have the same potential to become addictive through raising dopamine levels.<sup>23</sup> Companies like Neurons Inc, which measure the electrical activity of the brain while using apps, are hired by social media developers like Facebook to determine which features produce the most dopamine.<sup>24</sup> Behavioral cues trigger dopamine spikes which relieve psychological distress,<sup>25</sup> and our phones with their apps have been engineered to produce these dopamine spikes, which are highly addictive and take over free will to choose how to spend one’s time in favor of the strong desire for relief from psychic pain or angst. Furthermore, the apps are masterminded to provide variable schedules of reinforcement which are the most powerful mechanisms of reinforcement for learning. In a variable schedule of reinforcement the user does not know when they might receive the coveted prize, which may be a “like” on an Instagram post, something that has the added effect of being a social reinforcer which is highly salient to teens.

The brains of adolescents are especially vulnerable to rewarding information because the prefrontal cortex is not fully mature and does not inhibit the emotional limbic system. These behaviorally addicted teens can show symptoms of addiction such as anxiety or panic when they lose access to their phones, even for a short time, and are unable to stop using them on their own even when they want to. Around the world, treatment centers are opening for adults and even teens who are so addicted to digital media that it is interfering with school, jobs and normal lives. The popularity of how-to books such as *How to Break Up with Your Phone* speaks to the amount of people realizing their lives are becoming unmanageable because of the miraculous

digital device in their pockets.

### **Psychosocial Effects**

In addition to the physiological effects on the developing brain, there are obviously psychosocial effects of so much screen time on the maturing adolescent. Jean M. Twenge has presented voluminous research on the generation she has labeled iGen.<sup>26</sup> Members of this Generation born between 1995-2012 have lived their entire adolescence on social networking sites. It is clear by examining the data she presents that these youth spend more time at home, and have significantly less face-to-face interactions with their peers than previous generations. Perhaps not surprisingly, more of them feel socially isolated and left out, and in extreme cases may develop severe anxiety around social situations or become clinically depressed. It seems obvious that more screen time leads to less in-person social interaction, which in turn leads to more loneliness.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, screen time interferes with sleep as well as exercise, which also contributes to depression. Teens have even been noted to text in their sleep when they have their phones in or near their beds, just as people talk or walk in their sleep, and lack of sleep can negatively impact cognitive functions as well and emotional balance.<sup>28</sup>

Cyberbullying has also become a huge concern for parents and educators, who cannot monitor what they cannot see. In some highly publicized cases, it has become apparent that cyberbullying, which teens can engage with in the comfort of their own home and is notoriously difficult for adults to monitor and control, can result in suicide. In addition to cyberbullying, there can be milder negative effects of constantly looking at social media posts showing “perfect” lives.<sup>29</sup> Suicide rates have gone up over the past five years after a two decade decline, which correlates with increased cell phone and social media use among teens.

### **Positive Effects of Texting and Social Media**

Despite the voluminous amount of new information that is becoming apparent about overuse of digital media and, in particular, cell phones, there are some studies by mental health experts who cite positive effects. For teens with mental or physical health issues, texting and online support groups can provide a vital link with others. Some psychologists have noted that texting can improve intergenerational relationships, help people cope with trauma, and improve communication with health experts.<sup>30</sup> Texting can also be used for research purposes and even interaction with educational institutions such as museums. Recently, a holocaust educational group used a fictional Instagram account to educate teens about the holocaust. Obviously, there is a huge benefit in the access to facts and information quickly, though most educators know how important it is to curate where the information is coming from.

### ***Positive Effects of Digital Technology on Learning***

Many educators have noted the positive effects of digital technology in education.<sup>31</sup> Computers are unparalleled in their usefulness for research, not only in access to multiple encyclopedias but also to primary sources, the original of which are housed all over the world. Digital texts such as videos, audiobooks, and podcasts can be more engaging and motivating for students with learning disabilities as well as reluctant readers and learners. Furthermore, digital technology allows students a wide range of choice in how to present information, such as through slides and videos, as well as the opportunity to collaborate with other students in real time, which children and teens find very engaging.

## Positive Effects of Digital Technology on Safety

Much research has documented that though members of *IGen* may be more isolated they are also safer in a variety of ways.<sup>32</sup> Most obviously, the bare fact of having one's phone with them at all times allows one to reach out for help as well as to be located by parents. According to the data examined by Twenge, teens are now more concerned and mindful about safety, learn to drive at later ages, and get in fewer car accidents when they drive. The data on drinking and drugging among teenagers shows declining use. Even incidents of sexual assault are declining, perhaps because more teens stay home now than go out to parties where there are drugs and alcohol. Overall, fewer teens are engaging in risk taking behavior than previous generations.

## Part IV Dystopian Literature

---

At this point in the unit it will be a refreshing break to delve into some short fiction and literary analysis. As many students will have read some dystopian fiction already, we will again begin by brainstorming the attributes of dystopian literature with an emphasis on the following attributes: the government is typically an oligarchy, people are fearful, knowledge from the past is banned, conformity is valued to the point where nonconformity is criminal, and the government projects a utopian image.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, a list of topics covered by dystopian literature including surveillance, the elimination of disease and suffering, perils of misinformation, disintegration of individuality,<sup>34</sup> and especially, fears about and dangers of new technology. As a whole class we will read and analyze "The Veldt"<sup>35</sup> by Ray Bradbury, emphasizing the role of technology and evaluating how realistic it is compared to today's society and what message the author is trying to convey. Again, we will focus on the role of technology in this dystopia. Students will then select an additional short story or novel of choice to conduct an independent literary analysis of. As the students analyze dystopian literature, they will answer the essential questions: How does the society created by this author meet the criteria we have established for a utopia? What are the negative aspects of the society which are caused by the use or overuse of digital social media?

## Part V Imagining our Futures: Utopia or Dystopia?

---

The pinnacle of the unit will be a chance for students to imagine their own future world with a creative piece of short fiction utilizing all the information and texts they have been exposed to. In this service, students will be encouraged to review and reflect on the charts we have created outlining the attributes of utopias and dystopian societies they have read about, as well as the reflective writing they have done. They will spend some time pre-writing, including maps and drawings if they prefer, leading up to the actual drafting of a short story that they will then get to conference and revise. Students will really enjoy this process and benefit from the opportunity to allow their imaginations to run wild in order to solve some of the problems we have learned about, anticipate, and foreshadow in our study of digital lives and social media. Their creative short fiction piece should reflect at least some of the criteria for a utopia or dystopia which we have outlined in our study.



## Classroom Activities

---

Several lesson plans have already been described in detail above. Here is an overall guide to the content, strategies and activities of the unit.

Part & Guiding Questions	Content	Strategies and Activities
I What is a Utopia? What are the characteristics of a utopia? How can technology change society? How is the concept of private property related to utopias? Is putting the community's needs ahead of individual needs a necessary characteristic of a utopia? Is controlling technology an important aspect of utopias, and if so, why? Are we more powerful because of digital technology? Do we control our own digital lives?	Excerpt from More's Utopia "Imagine" by John Lennon Websites on the Hutterites, Amish, Shakers and Tennessee Farm "Opposing Innovation." CommonLit	Guided Reading Response to text - make a chart Collaborative research Collaborative small group multimedia presentations Class discussion
II Self Reflection on Digital Use How is digital technology impacting my life?	Apps for smartphones Paper and pencil survey HBUY 3-5	Reflective writing

Excerpts from Price's *How to Break Up with Your Phone (HBUYP)*

**Neuroplasticity**

*HBUYP* Chapter 6 "Your Phone in Changing Your Brain" 50-53

**Multi-tasking and shifting attention**

*HBUYP* Chapter 5 "The Truth about Multitasking 47-49

*HBUYP* Chapter 7 "Your Phone is Killing Your Attention Span" 54-58

**Behavioral Addiction**

"Are You Hooked on Your Phone?" Junior Scholastic Magazine.

"Watch Out: Cell Phones Can Be Addictive." CommonLit.

*HPUYP* Chapter 1 "Our Phones are Designed to Addict Us" 20-23

*HPUYP* Chapter 2 "Putting the Dope in Dopamine" 24-27

*HPUYP* Chapter 3 "The Tricks of the Trade" 28-38

**Psychosocial Effects**

*HPUYP* Chapter 4 "Why Social Media Sucks" 39-46

Chapter 8 "Stress, Sleep and Satisfaction" 64-68

"Don't Remember Sending That Text? Maybe You Were Sleep Texting." Newsela.

"Teen Suicide Rates Rising, Study Says Social Media Use Could Be a Factor." Newsela.

**Positive Effects of Texting and Social Media**

"Texting Can Be a Positive and Powerful Force, Experts Say." Newsela.

Note taking  
Summarizing  
Small group presentations  
Small group and whole class discussions  
Written response to text  
Graphic organizers for connection and synthesis

Literary Analysis  
Graphic organizer for compare and contrast  
Graphic Organizer for evaluation on a Matrix  
Class discussion

III Pros and Cons of our Digital Lives

How are digital technologies impacting young people in our world?

How is digital technology moving us toward Utopian Lives?

How might it be moving us in an opposite direction?

Does digital technology facilitate private property in a positive way, or impact private property in a negative way?

IV Dystopian Literature

How is technology being exploited in this literary dystopia?

Is digital technology facilitating the sharing of property more equally?

How does the society created by this author meet the criteria we have established for a utopia?

What are the negative aspects of the society which are caused by the use or overuse of digital social media?

"The Veldt"

Choice dystopian stories and novels

## Lesson Plan One

---

### Objective

Students will learn to describe the origin and meaning of the term Utopia and list characteristics pertaining to occupations and clothing.

### Activities

1. Introduce students to some brief biographical information about Thomas More and his book.
2. Read the first paragraph of Book 2 Section 3, "Of Their Trades and Manner of Life" in *Utopia* by Thomas More together as a class. Make a list together of characteristics or elements of the society (e.g., everyone learns about agriculture, everyone has a useful occupation.)
3. In pairs the students will continue to read the text and also continue the list.
4. As a class go back and evaluate the various attributes and discuss whether students feel they are positive or negative.
5. Have students go through the same process with the song "Imagine" by John Lennon.
6. Homework - students will write in their journals regarding which version of a utopia they feel is more realistic for our world.

### Assessment

Students will be assessed based on their participation in class discussion, graphic organizers, and journal writing.

## Lesson Plan Two

---

### Objective

Students will research historical utopian communities and create a multimedia presentation for the class.

### Activities

1. Students will choose one of four research groups: the Hutterites, Amish, Shakers, or Tennessee Farm communities.
2. Students will be given a list of curated websites to begin their research process.
3. Required content for the presentation will be outlined as: background information, lifestyles, culture, defining traits and characteristics, ownership of property, attitudes of technology.
4. Synthesis questions will be provided such as, would this group be considered a utopia or a dystopia, and

would you ever consider becoming a member of this group?

5. Guidelines will be given for the presentations (text in bullet points and readable for the whole class, 10-20 slides, includes citations, visual images).
6. Students will be required to take notes on each presentation.
7. Following the presentations, the class will discuss the role of technology in each utopian community.

### **Assessment**

Students will be assessed based on their group research finished products and presentations, note taking, and participations in class discussions.

## **Lesson Plan Three**

---

### **Objective**

Students will study the research on positive and negative consequences of high digital use by teens in our current society.

### **Activities**

1. Students will be introduced to concepts of neuroplasticity, neurotransmitters, and addiction. (Note – it is helpful if students already have some background in brain functions).
2. Each student will choose an area of interest to focus on from the following: shifting attention and multi-tasking, behavioral addiction, psychosocial effects, positive consequences.
3. Students will be provided with some texts and encouraged to conduct individual research on their area.
4. The class will create a graphic organizer to tract the findings and fill it out as each student presents.
5. Prior to a whole class discussion, students will be asked to write a one-page essay regarding how the present digital technology may be moving us toward Utopian or dystopian lives.

### **Assessment**

Students will be assessed based on their individual research notes, contribution to class discussion, graphic organizer and writing.

## **Appendix: English Language Arts Common Core Standards<sup>36</sup> Implemented in this Unit**

---

### ***Reading Standards for Literature***

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.10*

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently. The texts used in this unit include those at a high school

level and beyond.

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1*

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. *Students will do this when responding to dystopian fiction.*

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2*

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text. *Students will do this when responding to dystopian fiction.*

**Reading Standards for Informational Text**

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.1*

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. *Students will be responding to nonfiction articles and excerpts.*

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.2*

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text. *Students summarize the text they have read and cite evidence to support the central idea.*

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.4*

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts. *All these skills will be necessary while reading the texts.*

**Writing Standards**

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3*

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences. *Students will be writing a piece of narrative fiction during the final section of this unit.*

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.4*

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. *The written responses and reflections in this unit provide plenty of opportunities for this standard.*

*CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.5*

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience

have been addressed. *Students will have an opportunity to peer conference their stories.*

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others. *Students will practice these skills while putting together their presentations on historical utopias.*

#### **Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration. *This standard applies to the short research on historical utopias.*

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.8

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation. *Same as above.*

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. *There are multiple opportunities at the end of each part of the unit.*

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> More, Thomas. *Utopia*.

<sup>2</sup> "John Lennon - Imagine."

<sup>3</sup> Holcombe, Stacy. *Culture Clashes: Utopia vs. Dystopia*.

<sup>4</sup> "Hutterites." Hutterites. <http://www.hutterites.org/>

<sup>5</sup> "Hutterites." Peaceful Societies. <https://cas.uab.edu/peacefulsocieties/societies/hutterites/>.

<sup>6</sup> Administrator, and Shaker History. "History of the Shakers." Shaker Heritage Society. <http://home.shakerheritage.org/history-shakers/>.

<sup>7</sup> "A Short History of The Shakers in America." A History of the Shakers in America - Shaker Works West Museum Quality Miniatures. <http://www.shakerworkswest.com/Hi>

<sup>8</sup> Thefarmcommunity.com. <http://thefarmcommunity.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*.

<sup>10</sup> "Opposing Innovation." CommonLit.

[https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/opposing-innovation?search\\_id=21967973](https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/opposing-innovation?search_id=21967973)

<sup>11</sup> Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, D. L. MacDonald, and Kathleen Scherf. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Version*.

<sup>12</sup> McGee, Katharine. *The Thousandth Floor*.

<sup>13</sup> Bowles, Nellie. "Human Contact Is Now a Luxury Good." *The New York Times*. March 23, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/sunday-review/human-contact-luxury-screens.html>

<sup>14</sup> Losse, Kate. "The False Promise of Silicon Valley's Quest to Save the World." *The New Republic*. February 07, 2019. <https://newrepublic.com/article/153034/false-promise-silicon-valleys-quest-save-world>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "You (Time Person of the Year)." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 27 May 2019,

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_\(Time\\_Person\\_of\\_the\\_Year\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_(Time_Person_of_the_Year)).

<sup>17</sup> Small, Gary W., and Gigi Vorgan. *IBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*.

<sup>18</sup> "Why Wait?" Wait Until 8th. <https://www.waituntil8th.org/why-wait>.

<sup>19</sup> Alter, Adam L. *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*.

<sup>20</sup> Price, Catherine. *How to Break up with Your Phone*.

<sup>21</sup> Small, Gary W., and Gigi Vorgan. *IBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*.

<sup>22</sup> Price, Catherine. *How to Break up with Your Phone*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>24</sup> "Are You Hooked on Your Phone?" *Junior Scholastic Magazine*.

<https://junior.scholastic.com/issues/2017-18/031218/are-you-hooked-on-your-phone.html#1160L>.

<sup>25</sup> Alter, Adam L. *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*.

<sup>26</sup> Twenge, Jean M. *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 99.

<sup>28</sup> "Don't Remember Sending That Text? Maybe You Were Sleep Texting." Newsela.

<https://newsela.com/read/sleep-texting/id/47853/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Teen Suicide Rates Rising, Study Says Social Media Use Could Be a Factor." Newsela.  
<https://newsela.com/read/teen-suicide-social-media/id/37768/>.

<sup>30</sup> "Texting Can Be a Positive and Powerful Force, Experts Say." Newsela.  
<https://newsela.com/read/texting-can-be-positive/id/44958/>.

<sup>31</sup> Trust, Torrey. "Why Do We Need Technology in Education?" *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education* 34, no. 2 (03, 2018): 54-55. doi:10.1080/21532974.2018.144

<sup>32</sup> Twenge, Jean M. *IGen*.

<sup>33</sup> Holcombe, Stacy. *Culture Clashes: Utopia vs. Dystopia*.

<sup>34</sup> "Someone Might Be Watching - An Introduction to Dystopian Fiction."

<sup>35</sup> Bradbury, Ray, and Rob Court. *Ray Bradbury: Collected Short Stories*.

<sup>36</sup> "English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 8." English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 8 | Common Core State Standards Initiative.  
<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/8/>.

## Bibliography

---

### Student Resources

"Amish Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)." LancasterPA.com.  
<https://lancasterpa.com/amish/amish-frequently-asked-questions/>. This website is useful for researching the Amish vision of utopia.

Anderson, M. T. *Feed*. Walker Books, 2013. This popular young adult novel takes place in a world where people have continuously playing feeds fed into their brains by a computer chip.

"Are You Hooked on Your Phone?" Junior Scholastic Magazine.  
<https://junior.scholastic.com/issues/2017-18/031218/are-you-hooked-on-your-phone.html#1160L>. This is a leveled article appropriate for middle school use.

Blake, Jillian. *Antisocial*. Ember, an Imprint of Random House Children's Books, 2018. This teen novel takes place in a Prep School that has its own app, which it turns out recorded everyone's texts and search histories. A few students manage to hack into it, exposing private information which creates chaos out of everyone's social lives and results in the suicide of a popular athlete.



Bowles, Nellie. "Human Contact Is Now a Luxury Good." *The New York Times*. March 23, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/sunday-review/human-contact-luxury-screens.html>. This short article is useful for noting the class differential in the use of robotics.

Bradbury, Ray. *Timeless Stories for Today and Tomorrow*. Bantam Books, 1961. This anthology has other science fiction stories which may be of interest to some students.

Bradbury, Ray. *The Veldt: A Creative Classive*. Creative Education, 1987. This clairvoyant short story tells of an interactive virtual reality room which the children of the family become addicted to and results in the death of their parents.

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic, 2009. This classic dystopian novel is familiar to most students and can be a source for examples when discussing dystopian societies and literature.

"The Distracted Teenage Brain." CommonLit. <https://www.commonlit.org/texts/the-distracted-teenage-brain>. This article describes a research study showing how teenagers find situations that once provided rewards distracting even if the situations no longer provide the rewards.

"Don't Remember Sending That Text? Maybe You Were Sleep Texting." Newsela. <https://newsela.com/read/sleep-texting/id/47853/>. An interesting phenomenon presented in a format and level appropriate for middle school students.

"History of the Shakers." Shaker Heritage Society. <http://home.shakerheritage.org/history-shakers/>. A website useful for researching Shaker history.

Holcombe, Stacy. *Culture Clashes: Utopia vs.Dystopia*. Teachers Pay Teachers, 2017.This is an interesting analysis for teachers and students of dystopian literature.

"Hutterites." Hutterites. <http://www.hutterites.org/>. This website provides basic information on the Hutterites.

"Hutterites." Peaceful Societies. <https://cas.uab.edu/peacefulsocieties/societies/hutterites/>. These websites are useful for the students in researching Hutterite and Shaker history.

"John Lennon – Imagine." Genius. October 11, 1971. <https://genius.com/John-lennon-imagine-lyrics>. This song will provide an excellent brief way to discuss the concept of utopia.

Katsoulis, Gregory Scott. *All Rights Reserved*. Harlequin Books, 2017. In this dystopian novel people are made to pay for every word they use. The society is virtually run by advertising commercial products. The protagonist, Speth, rebels by refusing to talk when it is her turn to come of age.

Losse, Kate. "The False Promise of Silicon Valley's Quest to Save the World." *The New Republic*. February 07, 2019. <https://newrepublic.com/article/153034/false-promise-silicon-valleys-quest-save-world>. This article was used to research the early utopian vision of digital technology developers.

McGee, Katharine. *The Thousandth Floor*. Harper, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2016. This fascinating novel, which is the first in a series, takes place in a hierarchical society where the rich live in the upper levels of a tower which takes up most of Manhattan. The complex characters' lives are influenced by artificial intelligence in a multitude of ways, and there are some captivating details such as couches in a sky-lit room that change colors to match the sky, and a 'bubble lounge' where drink float around in bubbles that you can stick your straw into.

"Meet Your Competition." *Junior Scholastic Magazine*.  
<https://junior.scholastic.com/pages/archives/articles/meet-your-competition.html#1190L>. This middle school level article provides statistics on jobs that are at risk of being replaced by technology and also information and what new jobs may be created.

More, Thomas. *Utopia: Thomas More*. Feather Trail Press, 2010. Only a small portion of this text is used in this unit as most of the reading would be too difficult for middle school students.

"One Group Says Apple's Devices May Be Hurting Kids in the Long Run." *Newsela*.  
<https://newsela.com/read/apple-phone-kids/id/39478/>. This text presents retired teachers and Apple board members who have written to Apple requesting more safeguards to prevent overuse by young users.

"Opposing Innovation." *CommonLit*.  
[https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/opposing-innovation?search\\_id=21967973](https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/opposing-innovation?search_id=21967973). A nonfiction article appropriate for middle school students on the Luddites.

Price, Catherine. *How to Break up with Your Phone*. Ten Speed Press, 2018. A self help book appropriate for both teens and adults trying to gain control of their social media use.

"Someone Might Be Watching - An Introduction to Dystopian Fiction." *CommonLit*.  
[https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/someone-might-be-watching-an-introduction-to-dystopian-fiction?search\\_id=22462588](https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/someone-might-be-watching-an-introduction-to-dystopian-fiction?search_id=22462588). This text succinctly points out the history of and common attributes of dystopian fiction.

Stone, Tamara Ireland. *Click'd*. Disney-Hyperion, 2017. This is a book for younger students about a 6th grader who goes to a special coding camp and designs a fun social media game. However, the game has a glitch where it copies and shares people's personal photos that gets the protagonist into trouble.

"Teen Suicide Rates Rising, Study Says Social Media Use Could Be a Factor." *Newsela*.  
<https://newsela.com/read/teen-suicide-social-media/id/37768/>. This is a good article to use when presenting the negative effects of digital social media on teens.

"Texting Can Be a Positive and Powerful Force, Experts Say." Newsela.  
<https://newsela.com/read/texting-can-be-positive/id/44958/>. A nonfiction article appropriate for 8th grade.

Thefarmcommunity.com. <http://thefarmcommunity.com/>. A website useful for students researching The Farm community in Tennessee.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Harrison Bergeron*. Mercury Press, 1961. In this classic, complex story everyone in society must be handicapped so they are equalized. The gifted main character rebels against this to express himself, sacrificing his life.

Walker, Karen Thompson. *The Age of Miracles*. Scribner UK, 2019. In this atypical dystopia earth's revolution around the sun has slowed and continued to slow, changing virtually everything about life as we know it and eventually bringing down digital technology. It does an excellent job of showing how teens cope with the slow apocalypse.

Wang, Corrie. *The Takedown*. Freeform Books, 2018. This book takes place among upper class teens at a private school in Brooklyn. A popular girl is the victim of cyberbullying with a photoshopped video and few believe her that the video of her having sex with a teacher is fake. The digital technology is only slightly more advanced than what we presently have.

"Watch Out: Cell Phones Can Be Addictive." CommonLit.  
<https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/watch-out-cell-phones-can-be-addictive>. An article appropriate for teens about behavioral addiction to cell phones.

"Why Wait?" Wait Until 8th. <https://www.waituntil8th.org/why-wait>. The website which explains the movement to wait until 8th grade to give children smart phones.

"You (Time Person of the Year)." Wikipedia. May 27, 2019.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_\(Time\\_Person\\_of\\_the\\_Year\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_(Time_Person_of_the_Year)). Article on the famous Time magazine cover depicting a computer screen.

## **Teacher Resources**

Alter, Adam L. *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. Penguin Books, 2018. This adult level text explains behavioral addiction and how it applies to technology.

"English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 8." English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 8 | Common Core State Standards Initiative.  
<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/8/>. This was used as the source for Common Core Literacy standards which are used in Connecticut.

Rosen, Larry D. *IDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. This book goes through the major psychiatric disorders showing how each may be caused in a particular manifestation through the overuse of technology.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, D. L. MacDonald, and Kathleen Scherf. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Version*. Broadview Press, 1994. This text was used as the source for Godwin's comments on technology; he was Mary Shelley's father.

Small, Gary W., and Gigi Vorgan. *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*. William Morrow, 2009. This husband and wife team discuss the physiological and psychosocial impact of constant digital device use by our youth.

Steiner-Adair, Catherine, and Teresa Barker. *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*. Harper, 2014.

Trust, Torrey. "Why Do We Need Technology in Education?" *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education* 34, no. 2 (03, 2018): 54-55. doi:10.1080/21532974.2018.1442073. This was used as a reference for the positive effects of digital technology.

Twenge, Jean M. *IGEN: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy-- and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What That Means for the Rest of Us)*. Atria Books, 2017. This book analyzes a wealth of data regarding children, adolescents, and adults and theorizes regarding causal relationships between digital use and behavior.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>