



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2019 Volume I: Digital Lives

---

## **The iGen: Freeing Their Voice in Cyberspace and the Theater Space**

Curriculum Unit 19.01.08  
by Christi Pidskalny Sargent

### **Introduction and Unit Goals**

---

The teenagers in my classroom today, dubbed iGen by Jean Twenge, are remarkably different from previous generations.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, this is a generation that does not know a world without smartphones and social media. This unit seeks to investigate the possible impact social media has on identity formation and its effects on self-esteem, risk-taking, and relationship building. Twenge argues that “understanding iGen means understanding the future for us all.”<sup>2</sup> This argument serves as the foundation for this unit. In understanding the relationship that the iGen has with social media and the effects that it potentially has on feelings of self-worth, perhaps teachers can find more effective ways to engage with their students in the classroom. I plan to use my research on the iGen to create a unit that guides my students on a journey of self-reflection that asks them to consider how feelings of unworthiness block the full use of their voices and creativity in the theatre space.

Improvisational exercises are a popular way for students to build skills in theatre. Through improvisation, students practice taking risks and trusting their creative instincts. For improvisational games to be a success, all students must be willing to participate. Students must trust that their peers will not judge their performances. All of this requires a level of vulnerability.

My role in this process is crucial. It is my job to create and maintain a safe space for exploration. Over the past few years, I have found this increasingly difficult to control. My students doubt themselves more and more. My conjecture is that habitual use of social media is lowering the self-esteem of my students through relentless comparisons to others. Feelings of self-doubt build emotional blocks within my students that inhibit the free flow of creative expression through the voice and body.

This unit asks my students to explore their relationships with social media and question how it may impact their ability to tap into the creative impulses that help them to develop as theatre artists.

By the end of this unit, my hope is that students will:

- understand that the way they approach the world is different from previous generations and what that means for them<sup>3</sup>

- examine how they spend their time online
- develop healthier relationships with the digital world and
- create autobiographical theatre pieces that express the interconnection between their lives online and in reality.

## Rationale

---

I have been a theater teacher at Cooperative Arts and Humanities Magnet High School for twelve years now-- which, when you consider how long most teachers remain in the field, does not seem like a lot of time. However, the rapidly moving world of technology makes twelve years feel like a lifetime. When I first began, many of my freshmen did not have cellphones. Facebook had only existed for approximately two years. Social Media had not infiltrated my students' lives.

When I compare my current group of freshmen to the first class of freshmen I have ever taught, there are stark differences in their attitudes towards theater. My freshmen class of 2006 was eager and willing to play by taking part in a wide variety of theater games. My freshmen class of 2018 is reserved and holds back. They appear to be scared to participate or find theater games "boring". Theater games are an integral part of learning the art. Through games and exercises students learn to loosen up and trust their instincts--to make acting choices without thinking. I believe these qualities are what help to develop believable, authentic characters for the stage. So, what has happened? Why do my current students refuse to participate in my theater classes?

While it is quite difficult to isolate one cause to this problem, there is one glaring difference between my classes in 2006 versus the classes I have today: the Smartphone. In a 2018 Pew Research Center survey on social media and technology, they found that 95% of teens aged 13-17 reported that they had access to a Smartphone.<sup>4</sup>

The phone is simply the instrument; how teenagers engage with the instrument is most concerning. 45% of teenagers reported being online constantly and 44% of teenagers reported being online several times a day. The three most popular online platforms are YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. The survey also asked teenagers to consider the effect that social media has on them. 45% of teenagers surveyed reported that interaction with social media sites had neither a positive or negative impact. They conclude that there is not a clear consensus on the effect of these sites. Contrary to these findings, a study conducted with 268 college-aged individuals looked at the inclination of negatively comparing oneself to others.<sup>5</sup> The results of this study found that chronic Facebook users are more likely to experience depressive symptoms as a result of these negative comparisons.

Jean M. Twenge, author of *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, conducted an analysis of generational research in order to shed a light on the generation of kids who have grown up with a Smartphone in their hands. She posits that if you want to lead a happier life, you should put down the screen and step away from social media.<sup>6</sup> While I agree with her, I think this is easier said than done. The students in my class do not know a life without a cell phone. Almost all their social lives are conducted online. Before they can be convinced to put the phones down, they need the space to explore their dual lives. I believe the theatre

classroom is an optimal space to conduct this exploration.

Theatre and Social Media are both avenues for storytelling. Both spaces have an audience to receive the story and a process for developing the story that you want to tell, and both ask the creator to use their voice to tell the story. However, the iGen use their voices in very different ways than previous generations and this may make it easier for them to tell their stories on social media. In cyberspace, they can carefully craft their stories and display their pictures. They can type, backspace, edit, delete, filter, and repost. They don't have to stand in front of their critics. Their phones mediate the call and response. While theatre is rehearsed, revised, and planned, it is also spontaneous. It asks its practitioners to think on their feet, work in deeply personal ways with others, and respond to a different live audience every performance.

The stark difference between these two spaces is that the Smartphone replaces person to person interactions. When we are conversing in person, we do not have the luxury of carefully crafted edits; we use our voices instinctively to convey our meanings. I can only assume that this is terrifying for young people. What if they say the wrong thing or can't find the right words? For my students, is texting a natural voice?

Through this unit, I want my students to develop an awareness of their relationship with social media and the possible impacts it has on their ability to participate in class. By shedding light on this subject, perhaps my students will then be able to break down the walls that they have built that keep them from participating in games and exercises. I want to show them where their two worlds, Cyberspace and the theatre space, come together and split apart, in order to discover how their constant interactions with the digital world impact their natural voice. How are they spending their time online and how much time is spent engaging with social media? Who are they following on social media and how do these people make them feel about themselves? How do they choose to present themselves on social media? And, finally, could all of this impact their willingness to play and step outside of their comfort zone in the world of art?

## Teaching Philosophy

---

As an educator, I am a realistic optimist. I wholeheartedly believe that every student in my classroom has the potential to grow. However, I am also aware that every one of my students comes to my classroom with a different set of given circumstances--circumstances that they do not have the luxury of choosing. Race, economic status, available resources, and educational history come together to determine the starting line for each student in my classroom.

Education is proposed as the "great equalizer of the conditions of humankind."<sup>7</sup> In many ways, I believe this to be true. Unfortunately, resources are rarely divided equitably among school districts. And, inevitably, the poorer districts tend to suffer in this regard. This leaves teachers and students struggling to meet goals.

I want to make it clear that I understand that my students deserve equal access to the same resources as their contemporaries in the wealthier districts and I realize that in order to close educational gaps money is necessary. However, when an educator takes the time to get to know their students, to see their strengths and weaknesses, they can create curriculum, design lesson plans, and choose content that each student can see themselves reflected in. I believe that this is one small step to take that could fill some of the gaps that our students see due to a lack of funding.

School funding is outside of my control. What is inside of my control is how I choose to design my lessons, the relationships that I build with my students, and the opportunities that I can provide. In order to create authentic lessons that my students can latch onto, I must take the time to reflect on my practice and on their identities. I take advantage of the information gleaned from these reflections to (hopefully) create exciting and authentic content for my students.

Ultimately, this is my philosophy on teaching. Listen to your students and respond to their needs in the best way that you can.

## Girls: Social Media's Greatest Consumer

---

One of the main resources for this unit is a book called *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers* by Nancy Jo Sales. In this text, Sales interviews teenage girls from thirteen to nineteen years old on their habits, thoughts, and feelings around social media. One of the greatest takeaways from this book has had a profound effect on how I think about my students: "For the first time, most American girls are engaged in the same activity most of the time. And this seismic shift in how girls spend their time is having a profound effect on the way they think and act, as well as how they make friends, the way they date, and their introduction to the world of sex."<sup>8</sup> I had never considered this before--typically I think about what makes my students unique and how I can differentiate my lessons to meet their individualized needs. However, this is a glaring similarity between the students in my classroom, one that could serve as an advantage when designing lessons.

At Cooperative Arts and Humanities Magnet High School (Co-op) students can choose a major from five art disciplines: Theatre, Dance, Music, Visual Art, or Creative Writing. 630 students were enrolled at Co-op during the 2018-19 school year. 430 of these students identify as female. A significant marker of this generation of individuals is that practically every teenager has access to a smartphone. What this means is that almost all American girls are connected through the digital world.<sup>9</sup> They all have this common experience. However, we do not see this reflected in the world of popular television, movies, or theatre. If you walk into a public space, it's not easy to find someone not on a device. People, especially adolescents, are finding it increasingly difficult to exist without looking at a smartphone. Why isn't this reflected in popular media? It's almost as if we are too embarrassed to admit that this is the way we spend most of our social time.

I think we are missing an opportunity to reflect on this new digital age. Jean Twenge has been studying the effects of screen time on teens and young adults. Through her research she has found a correlation between the usage of social media and depressive symptoms. Specifically, she has found that rates of depressive symptoms and loneliness are higher among girls than boys.<sup>10</sup> While it is not possible to identify social media as the culprit; it is a gateway to endless images and captions for girls to obsess over. Considering I work predominantly with girls, I feel it is valuable to consider these effects and how I can use my theatre classroom as an avenue for students to explore their relationship with social media and to share with an audience how it may be impacting their feelings of self-worth.

## Who are the iGen?

---

Born between 1995-2012, iGen'ers experience the world in an entirely different way from their predecessors. They are "the most ethnically diverse generation in American history," root for equality of all people regardless of race, religion, gender, and sexuality, and will live most of their lives through social networking sites.<sup>11</sup> The pains of adolescence still exist, and for this generation they are recorded for eternity on sites like Instagram and SnapChat.

Twenge identifies ten trends that shape the iGen'ers--of those ten, this unit will focus on three: the internet, the decline of in-person social interaction, and the rise in mental health issues. iGen high school seniors spend approximately six hours a day on "new media," defined as texting, social networking, and gaming.<sup>12</sup> Most of their social lives occur online. In the book *American Girls* by Nancy Jo Sales, teens describe going on their phone to check SnapChat and losing track of time, spending at least an hour on the site.<sup>13</sup> Gone are the days of house parties, unless they are using the social media app "House Party" which lets users create private rooms for friends to video chat by splitting the screen to accommodate everyone's feeds. However, it's not just partying that is on the decline; in general, teens are spending less in-person time together.<sup>14</sup> "All we talk about all day is what's happening on our phones, but we never talk about how weird that is," explained a thirteen-year-old in the book *American Girls*.<sup>15</sup> Critical social skills, conflict resolution and navigating conversations, are practiced through time spent in-person with friends, much of which is being missed by the iGen'ers.<sup>16</sup>

Even more concerning is the correlation between time spent online and unhappiness, loneliness, and its effects on mental health in general. Through her research, Twenge found that:

- Eighth graders who spent 6 or more hours a day online are 47% more likely to say that they are unhappy and those who spend more time with their friends are 20% less likely to be unhappy.
- Teens who visit social media sites daily or nearly every day are 11% more likely to be lonely.
- Teens who spend more time on-screens are more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression, such as hopelessness and loss of interest in life.<sup>17</sup>

Twenge suggests that social networking sites boost social comparison, with users feeling like they are inadequate compared to their peers.<sup>18</sup> Teens are failing to realize that their peers are only posting the best parts of their days. People do not generally share their failings with the world. Self-presentation and the careful curation of social networking sites leads people to believe that everyone else is having a better time, is more successful, and is more beautiful.

### **Self-Presentation and "Being Aesthetic"**

The social lives of teens occur predominantly online.<sup>19</sup> They are gauging their popularity through how many "likes" they get or "followers" they receive. In order to maintain a high social status, teens spend a lot of their time curating their Instagram feeds to make sure they are "aesthetic." According to Victoria, a thirteen-year-old interviewed for the book *American Girls*, "It's so much pressure to make your Instagram aesthetic. You can't do anything wrong. And if you do, people could laugh at you, like, Oh, look at her Instagram, it's so not aesthetic-it's so basic"<sup>20</sup> It is because of this pressure that self-presentation is of utmost importance to social media users. To avoid ridicule, people want to present themselves online in the best way possible.<sup>21</sup>

So, how does one maintain the “aesthetic”? Follow these simple steps:

1. Find an artistic location with good lighting. For example, the woods.<sup>22</sup>
2. Take hundreds of selfies.<sup>23</sup>
3. Find the best one and then alter the image using Photoshop to make yourself look as much like your favorite celebrity as possible--for example, Kylie Jenner.
4. Apply an Instagram filter that complements the “aesthetic” theme that you have relentlessly developed for your feed.
5. Plan when to post your picture in order to “hit prime time for getting likes.”<sup>24</sup>

Kim Kardashian is a professional at developing an “aesthetic” to increase her popularity through collecting “likes”. Using filters and photoshopping, Kim creates a glorified version of her realistic self.<sup>25</sup> And she does this so successfully that she is now idolized by hundreds of millions of followers. Followers that compare themselves to her idealized self-presentation.

It appears to be a ruthless cycle. Teens perfectly curate their virtual identities for public consumption. And then they turn around and spend hours comparing their realistic selves to other people’s perfectly curated virtual identities. Teens are aware that this is what is happening. Riley, quoted in the book *American Girls*, comments, “It’s funny that it is called a ‘selfie’ because half the time it doesn’t even look like you. So, you are getting people to comment on this picture of you and it isn’t even real.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Social Comparison Theory and Social Media’s Effects**

In 1954, psychologist Leon Festinger introduced the theory of social comparison. This theory posits that individuals are driven to evaluate themselves through comparisons to others.<sup>27</sup> These comparisons are a part of identity formation. Festinger argues that individuals use these comparisons to figure out where they fit in the world, and to determine their beliefs and values.<sup>28</sup>

There are three types of comparisons: downward,<sup>29</sup> upward, and lateral.<sup>30</sup> Lateral comparison is used for self-evaluation. Individuals employ this type of comparison to validate their thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and choices.<sup>31</sup> Upward comparison is when individuals compare themselves to someone who is thought to be better-off. Festinger suggests that this type of comparison is used to help an individual find motivation. However, this is a generalization. Depending on the person making the comparison, an upward comparison can leave the individual feeling inferior.<sup>32</sup> Downward comparison is when individuals examine someone who is thought to be worse-off. An individual may employ this tactic of comparison when they want to feel better about the situation that they are in.

A study examining the types of comparison being made while on Facebook found that of 150 students surveyed, 88% made social comparisons while on Facebook and 98% of these comparisons were upward comparisons.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, this study used a survey to examine rates of self-esteem after using Facebook. They found that spending one hour a day on Facebook resulted in a decrease of self-esteem. Thus, there is a possible correlation between upward social comparisons on social networking sites and lowered self-esteem.

Another study in 2012 concluded that people who used Facebook the longest were more likely to believe that others were happier than they were. This same study found that when people had more face-to-face interactions with their friends, being able to see the whole person as opposed to a carefully curated online

persona, they were less likely to believe that others were living better lives.<sup>34</sup>

The iGen is at “the forefront of the worst mental health crisis in decades, with rates of teen depression and suicide skyrocketing since 2011.”<sup>35</sup> While it is not possible to pinpoint one direct cause for the rise in mental health issues, there is a correlation to screen time. Increased screen time is linked to more unhappiness and depressive symptoms. Furthermore, it is also linked to less in-person interactions, which in turn is linked to unhappiness and depressive symptoms.<sup>36</sup>

## Worlds Collide: Cyberspace and Theatre Space

---

What keeps teens coming back to their phones are the very things that happen in theatre. For example, what makes the “liking” feature on Instagram so compelling is an aspect of human nature: humans are hardwired to respond to reinforcements.<sup>37</sup> The “likes” we accumulate on a posted selfie keep us wanting to post more selfies. This reinforcement makes us feel better about ourselves. We like to be recognized for the things that we do, or in this case, post online. These same reinforcements happen in theatre. After each performance, actors get applause. It is this recognition that keeps us coming back to the stage.

However, in order to get the applause, we must feel brave and secure enough in our identities to deeply delve into the process of theatre. If my students are stuck in the relentless cycle of posting idealized images and comparing themselves to others idealized images, it is likely that their self-esteem will plummet. Hypothetical walls are built that seal off their vulnerability, inhibiting themselves from being able to take risks in improvisation theatre exercises that build skills. In order to break these walls down, students must come face to face with how they were built in the first place.

Theatre is storytelling. And I think if teachers took a moment to listen to their students, they may discover that they are itching to tell the story about the role that social media plays in their lives. Victoria, Riley, and Sophia from the book *American Girls* pointed me to this hypothesis. Victoria shares, “I am so excited to be talking about this, because we never talk about social media, we just live on it.”<sup>38</sup> The girls then go on to explain that it feels as if they live in two different worlds, that all they do all day is talk about what has happened on their phones “but we never talk about how weird that is.”<sup>39</sup>

If theatre holds a mirror up to society, then why aren’t we seeing more theatre created around the significance of social media for this generation? How can we take advantage of our students’ longing to discuss the strangeness of their dual lives? This is the opportunity that theatre can seize upon. By giving my students the space to explore their lives on social media through theatre exercises, perhaps they can develop an awareness of their virtual lives. And through this awareness, maybe they can identify the parts of their virtual lives that make them feel worthy or unworthy? Brave or fearful? Willing to take risks or holding back?

Kristin Linklater, one of the best-known teachers of voice production for actors, captures some of my own feelings about education, “Not a teaching day goes by without receiving some small or large revelation about the complexity, resilience, and mystery of the human experience and its reflection in the voice.”<sup>40</sup> She discovered through her teaching that our individual human experiences impact our ability to fully use our voices. Smartphones, social media, and the digital world is a human experience touching each of my students’



lives--one that shapes the way they think, act, and interact with the world around them. Athena in the book *iGen* supports this, explaining that she believes that cellphones have affected their speech: "Sometimes it makes us, like, aliens. We don't know how to talk to people anymore."<sup>41</sup> I believe that the communal and reflective nature of the art of theatre is a place where my students can:

- unpack their relationships with social media,
- discuss the differences between their voices in the digital world and the natural world, and
- devise a piece of theatre that illuminates the smartphone as an extension of the human body and what that means for us all in this new world.

## **Linklater Technique and Creative Blocks**

For centuries storytelling has been used to pass down lessons, family lore, and important moments in history, and to highlight the injustices of the world. This is the heart of theatre. It holds a mirror up to nature. The hope is that audiences leave the theater questioning their role in the world. Theatre artists play an important role in making this happen. Transforming the voice and body to create characters that are authentic and emotionally full is the key to illuminating stories for the stage.

Lee Strasberg's Method Technique and the Stanislavski System are two of the most popular training systems for actors. While these techniques help actors tune into the emotional world of a character, they are missing a practice in external skills. For this unit, we will look to Kristin Linklater's vocal technique. Her technique seeks to create a bridge between "the creative, imaginative inner life and the skillful outer communicative one."<sup>42</sup>

Most people are equipped with the capability to use their voice to express emotions and thoughts. Linklater argues that there are emotional and psychological blocks that limit the full range of voice. These blocks appear as a result of simply living and they are formed unconsciously. I liken this to the given circumstances of birth. People do not get to choose how they are born; however, these uncontrollable factors affect a person psychologically through outside influences. These blocks are formed through mental and emotional habits unconsciously created as a coping mechanism to function in society. For example, if a female child is told repeatedly to act and talk "like a girl", they could unconsciously create a habit to tamp down feelings of anger or loud excitement in order to appear controlled and "ladylike". Linklater suggests that these habits create tension, and this tension interferes with a person's ability to fully use their voice. The person is unable to connect to the "the primitive sources of laughter, sorrow, anger, and joy."<sup>43</sup> The question that this unit will explore further is whether people create emotional blocks to deal with feelings of inadequacy garnered from comparing oneself to the idealized lives of others displayed through social media postings.

## **Teaching Objectives**

---

*Students will analyze their own social media accounts to determine which parts of their lives they choose to share and which they choose to omit in order to understand that they make choices in how they curate their digital lives.*

How do you choose what you share online? Which moments of your day do you Snap to your friends? And why do you choose to share what you share? Typically, social media users share the most positive parts of their



lives. Consider the selfie as an example. Some girls spend hours creating the perfect make-up look and then take hundreds of selfies before choosing the perfect one to edit using filters and then share on Instagram. What are the effects of cultivating a seemingly perfect version of ourselves for our virtual lives? How does this image conflict with our identities in reality?

*Students will consider how comparison between their own realities to another individual's curated life online could impact their feelings about themselves and the lives that they live.*

“What am I doing? What should I be doing? Is it enough?” were some of the questions a University of Missouri student asked herself when considering the lives of others on social media.<sup>44</sup> It is easy to feel inadequate when making comparisons between your offline self and a carefully curated online persona. Social networking sites manipulate the perceptions we have of others. Ultimately, we focus on our shortcomings in compared to the glorified versions of reality depicted in social media profiles.

*Students will apply their self-reflections on social media by writing monologues and dialogues that illustrate their identities in the virtual world and in reality.*

Once students have reflected on how their time is spent online, they will create a scene that imagines a world where their virtual selves meet their realistic selves. Our classroom space will become a gallery of favorite selfies. Students will choose their favorite selfie and it will be displayed next to their unfiltered headshot. They will then consider the story that is told through each photo, creating a character biography for each image. This assignment will conclude with each student writing a dialogue between these two characters. What do these two people need to say to one another? How do they make each other feel?

*Students will practice Kristin Linklater's vocal technique to unpack the emotional blocks that could be hindering their freedom of creative expression.*

Linklater speculates that all people have a voice that can express the full range of emotions and human experiences. Through life experiences and uncontrollable factors, however, tension is built in the body that interferes with one's ability to freely use their voice.<sup>45</sup> The Linklater Technique is a system of personal exploration, and a method of physical and vocal exercises designed to help students dismantle emotional blocks. In doing this, students can free their voice and use it to its fullest capacity.

*Students will create autobiographical pieces that illustrate their relationship with Social Media.*

Studies show that habitual interaction with social media leads to feelings of inadequacy, resulting in a display of depressive symptoms and a lowering of self-esteem.<sup>46</sup> Does the constant comparison of oneself to others and the pursuit of chasing “likes” on social media create emotional blocks that inhibit my students from participating fully in theatre classes? Are emotional blocks created in order to cope with feelings of inadequacy? Using an adaption of the Linklater exercise “The Riverstory”, students will explore their relationship with social media and its impact on their self-esteem in an attempt to break these emotional blocks and free themselves to connect more deeply in classroom exercises.

## Teaching Strategy: The Riverstory

---

The Riverstory, a devised theatrical piece, was developed by Kristin Linklater and Paula Langton. Devised theatre is a method of creating theatrical pieces using improvisation and ensemble work. An ensemble of actors draws from their own experiences to create a script, share their work with one another for feedback, and then revise their pieces to create a cohesive story. The Riverstory is a way for theatre artists to explore the various human experiences that have the potential to form creative blocks that inhibit the natural voice. Actors are asked to imagine that their life is a river that flows from one side of the stage to the other. Along this river are six stepping stones, each stone representing a significant moment of their life. Actors create a performance in six beats, connecting each beat using improvised movement and sound. The following criteria are used to create the piece:

1. Birth: Tell the audience how you feel about your own birth in a short phrase or share a significant detail about your birth. This beat should begin with your full name, birth date, and the place in which you are born
2. Dialogue: Consider a significant conversation you have had and retell it in six lines of dialogue. You will play both parts. If you did not get to say everything that you wanted to, you can conclude the dialogue by adding what you wish you had said or what you felt at the time of the conversation. Give the piece a title and tell the audience how old you were at the time of the conversation.
3. Monologue: Consider a significant moment in your life and relive it in the present. This is done in the form of the monologue. Give this piece a title and tell the audience how old you were at the time.
4. Song: Perform a song (or a verse of a song) that holds significant meaning for you. Give this piece a title and tell the audience how old you were at the time.
5. Six Words: Consider a significant moment or memory and summarize it in a list or phrase of six words. Give this piece a title and tell the audience how old you were at the time.
6. Present: Write a three to five-line poem to your voice. For example, this poem can be about how you feel about your voice currently or how you wish you felt about your voice. Create a title for this section and tell the audience your current age.
7. The six beat performance ends with the following sentence: "Here I am in this room, with all of you, and I feel..." Complete the sentence with whatever you are feeling in the moment.

For the purposes of this unit, I am using The Riverstory as a form for my students to explore their relationships with the digital world. In the lessons that follow, I describe how some of the pieces of The Riverstory will come together to tell this story.

### Lesson 1: Your Phone's Birthday

---

This lesson begins with a self-assessment on current phone habits and concludes with students sharing the first beat of their Riverstory. This lesson should take one 90-minute class period.

Essential Questions:

- How do you feel about your phone?

- Is it valuable to reflect on your cellphone habits? Why or Why not?

Activity 1: Students will take the digital self-assessment on page three of Catherine Price's book *How to Break Up with Your Cellphone* and respond to the following questions from the same text:

- How many times a day do you pick up your phone?
- How much time do you spend on your phone?
- What do you love about your phone?
- What changes do you notice in yourself--positive or negative--when you spend a lot of time on your phone?

Students will discuss their responses in small groups and then share highlights from their discussions with the whole class.

Activity 2: This lesson is an adaption of step one from The Riverstory. Instead of writing about their births, students will write about the day that they received their first phone. Write a short theater piece that tells your audience about the day you received your first cellphone. What was the date or how old were you? Where were you? Write a short phrase or one sentence that describes the significance of this moment for you. Create a sound and a movement that tells this story.

## Lesson 2: Concentration and Distraction

---

For concentration to occur, our brain must complete two tasks: decide what to focus on and ignore distractions.<sup>47</sup> The prefrontal cortex controls executive thinking. For concentration, this part of the brain is activated to help us decide where our attention should be placed. However, if there is too much stimulus the prefrontal cortex will become tired and unable to figure out where the focus should be placed.<sup>48</sup> We may see this happen when our phones ding with notifications from various social media sources. These are the types of distractions that your brain is attempting to battle for successful concentration. The more that we practice ignoring distractions, the better we get at it.

By the end of this lesson, students will understand the value of concentration and practice the skills. Before they can practice the skill of concentration, they have to see how often their phones distract them. The lesson should span one 90-minute class period.

Essential Questions:

- How are our brains programmed for concentration?
- How did it feel when your phone went off in class?
- What do you think about when you see the collective number of notifications?
- Did you want to immediately reply to the notifications?
- How much time were you able to give to rehearsal?
- How did it feel to have your rehearsal interrupted?

Activity: During this activity, students will keep the volume up on their devices. The purpose is for everyone to hear the notifications that pop up on their phones while students are rehearsing and sharing the first part of

their Riverstory. For every notification received students will come up to the board and tally where that notification was received from. At the end of the period, I would like for us to look at the data collected and discuss how the interruptions interfered with our ability to delve into our acting work.

## Lesson 3: I am iGen

---

Students will consider what makes them the iGen by reviewing data and responding to quotations from fellow iGen'ers taken from the book *American Girls*. They will use this information to develop the next beat of their Riverstory. This lesson should take approximately two 90-minute class periods.

Essential Questions:

- Who are the iGen?
- Why is it important to understand the qualities of the generation you are born into?
- How does social media impact our identities in regards to self-esteem and confidence?
- How do the answers to these questions impact the way you engage in theatre exercises?

Activity 1: Students will interpret data from various charts from Jean Twenge's book *iGen* in order to create a character profile of a typical member of the iGen. The following charts will be used:

- Times per week teenagers go out without their parents
- Percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who drive
- Percentage of teenagers who go out on dates
- Percentage of teenagers who feel lonely
- Percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders with money from jobs or allowance
- Percentage of 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders whose parents always know where they are and whom they are with when they go out at night

Consider the story being told through the charts. What are you learning about your generation based on this data? What excites about what you have learned? Concerns you? How do you think this information shapes the way you think about yourself? Your relationship with your phone? Based on your interpretations create a character biography for an iGen.

Activity 2: Students will comment on various quotes from the book *American Girls* using the Chalk Talk strategy.

- "Everyone posted about me, You're a terrible person, stay away from my friends. People commented that they don't like me. It was completely humiliating."<sup>49</sup>
- "All girls think about is trying to look hot."<sup>50</sup>
- "As the girls began to talk about girls 'trying to look hot,' their words came tumbling out, as if they couldn't say them fast enough; they talked over one another, interrupting one another, their faces becoming urgent and intense."<sup>51</sup>
- "And because of social media you can edit yourself, like how you *want* to be, with Photoshop and apps," Maggie said. "Like I want to be like *her*, I'm gonna make myself look like *her*."<sup>52</sup>

- “I think the parents literally need to knock some sense into their kids and watch what their kids are doing,” Julie said, “ ‘cause I feel like a lot of kids are sneaking it behind their parents’ backs.” “They don’t want their parents to know what’s really going on,” said Cassy, “ ‘cause they’re afraid they’ll take away their phones.”<sup>53</sup>
- “But she’s my friend, so I’m going to stick by her. With social media it’s really hard to know who your true friends are, and this is how you know, how someone treats you when everyone hates you.”<sup>54</sup>
- “I’m so excited to be talking about this, because we never talk about social media, we just live on it,” Melinda said.<sup>55</sup>
- “Probably more stuff happens on my phone than in real life.”<sup>56</sup>
- “All we talk about all day is what’s happening on our phones, but we never talk about how weird that is,” Sophie said.<sup>57</sup>
- “It’s like a lot of pressure to be allowed to make your own decisions, you know? And we’re just kids, and we don’t always know what’s the right thing to do.”<sup>58</sup>

Activity 3: Adding to the Riverstory (Six Words): After interpreting the data charts and anecdotes, create a six-word phrase or list of words that tells the story of your generation. Give this piece a title and create a sound and movement that tells this story.

## Lesson 4: "Being Aesthetic"

---

In this lesson, students will consider how they curate their social media accounts and what story these accounts tell of their life. This lesson will take two 90-minute class periods. Activity one occurring at the Yale Art Gallery and activities two and three occurring in one 90-minute class period in the classroom.

Essential Questions:

- What is self-presentation?
- What does it mean “to curate”?
- How do visual artists tell a story? How do visual artists manipulate a picture to tell a different story? How can we apply this to thinking about our social media accounts?
- How are you curating your Instagram feed?
- Which parts of yourself are you choosing to share?
- How authentic are your posts?
- How do you feel about yourself when you look at other people’s Instagram feeds?

Activity 1 (Curate and Storytelling): We will visit the Yale Art Gallery to look at and compare the painting *Elihu Yale at Cavendish* and Titus Kaphar’s piece *Enough about You*. Students will observe and critique each piece of art through small group discussions and then compare the two pieces to one another. How did Kaphar change the narrative of the original painting? How does the title of the piece help tell that story? How can we compare this to the ways in which we curate our own lives on Social Media?

Activity 2 (Gallery of Selfies): Students will choose their favorite selfie. This picture will be displayed next to their school photos or headshots. Students will look at these pictures in the same way that they viewed Kaphar’s work. How do you change your narrative with the selfies you post on social media?

Activity 3 Adding to the Riverstory (Monologue): Students will choose one of their two pictures posted in the Selfie Gallery. They will then write a monologue from one image to the other. For example, write a monologue from your filtered selfie to your school photo or vice versa. What would this person say to the other? How do they feel about one another? What questions do they have for the other image?

## Lesson 4: Texting as a Natural Voice

---

Students will consider the natural voice for their generation and where it resonates. This lesson seeks to have my students explore how smartphones may have impacted the way they use their voices. The purpose is for my students to consider if it is easier for them to improvise and communicate through texting rather than in person. The lesson concludes in a discussion on communication and the voice. It should take one 90-minute class period.

Essential Questions:

- What is the ideal for the natural voice? Is it instinctual? Mediated through technology?
- Is a mediated voice a chance for fuller expression?
- Can texting be a natural voice?
- How did you feel improvising a scene through text versus face-to-face?

Activity 1: Students will present improvised scenes in two ways: through text message and face-to-face. Using an educational discussion tool such as Backchannel Chat, create a virtual classroom for your students. This app allows teachers to see each message before it is posted. This gives the teacher the opportunity to determine if messages are appropriate for posting or not. Given that this lesson is asking students to improvise a scene, it is valuable to have this option. Teachers and students should also discuss guidelines for these scenes and create a contract that everyone agrees to follow.

Students will pair up and improvise two scenes together; once online, once face-to-face. After each pair presents, the class will engage in a critique and discussion of the work in order to unpack the differences between the two scenes and the pros and cons of performing in each way.

Activity 2-Adding to the Riverstory (Dialogue): Consider significant conversations you have had in your life. Where did these conversations occur? Through text messaging, a phone conversation, face-to-face? Retell this significant conversation in 6 lines of dialogue. For the performance of the Riverstory, the student will perform both parts of the conversation.

## Appendix-Implementing State Standards

---

TH:Cn11.2.HSII.a Formulate creative choices for a devised or scripted drama/theatre work based on theatre research about the selected topic.

Students will be reflecting on their relationships with their phones in order to create a piece of theatre that

expresses this relationship for an audience. The goal is for the audience to walk away with a better understanding of teenagers in a digital age. TH:Cr2.1.HSIII.a Develop and synthesize original ideas in a drama/theatre work utilizing critical analysis, historical and cultural context, research, and western or non-western theatre traditions.

Students will combine their creative choices based on their research into a cohesive piece of theatre. TH:Cr3.1.HSI.b Explore physical, vocal and physiological choices to develop a performance that is believable, authentic, and relevant to a drama/theatre work.

Students will utilize exercises from the Linklater Technique in order to develop a performance.

TH:Pr5.1.HSI.a Practice various acting techniques to expand skills in a rehearsal or drama/theatre performance.

Students will explore the Linklater Vocal technique along with research on their relationships with social media in order to explore the possible impact it has on the way they use their voices.

TH:Pr6.1.HSII.a Present a drama/theatre work using creative processes that shape the production for a specific audience.

Students will present their autobiographical pieces in front of an audience of peers and teachers.

TH:Re7.1.HSI.a Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.

Students will share their progress on their autobiographical pieces in class for feedback. This feedback will then be used for revisions on the piece.

## **Annotated Bibliography and Teacher Resources**

---

Anderson, Monica & Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media, and Technology," Pew Research Center May 31, 2018 (Accessed on March 25, 2019) <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>). Pew Research article reviewing statistics on teens and social media.

Chou, Grace Hui-Tzu & Nicholas Edge, "They are Happier and Having Better Lives Than I Am: The Impact of Using Facebook on the Perceptions of Others' Lives," *Rapid Communications: Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15, no. 2 (2012). Study on the impacts of Facebook and comparison-making.

Feinstein, Brian A., Rachel Hershenberg, Vickie Bhatia, Jessica A. Latack, Nathalie Meuwly, & Joanne Davila, "Negative Social Comparison on Facebook and Depressive Symptoms: Rumination as a Mechanism," *Psychology of Popular Media* 2, no. 3, 161-170. Study on Facebook and rates of depression.

Festinger, Leon, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations* 7, (1954), 117-140. Describes Social Comparison Theory and its importance on identity formation.

Jan, Muqqaddas Sanobia Anwwer Soomro, & Nawaz Ahmad, "Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem,"



European Scientific Journal 13, no. 23 (2012). A study that examines how self-esteem is effected by social media.

Linklater, Kristin. *Freeing the Natural Voice: Imagery and Art in the Practice of Voice and Language*. Hollywood: Drama Publishing, 2006. This is a book on a vocal technique designed by Kristin Linklater.

Mann, Horace, "Annual Report of the Board of Education" Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1848. Speech by Horace Mann on education being the great equalizer.

Price, Catherine. *How to Break Up with Your Phone*. New York: Ten Speed Press, 2018. A self-help book designed to help individuals find moderation with their cell phone use.

Sales, Nancy Jo. *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*. New York: Vintage Books, 2016. This book is a conversation on the large role social media plays in the lives of teenage girls. It contains excerpts from a variety of interviews with teenage girls between the ages of thirteen and nineteen.

Stets, Jan E. & Burke, Peter J., "Social Comparison in Identity Theory." *In Communal Functions of Social Comparisons*, edited by Zlatan Krizan and Frederick Gibbons, 39-59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. This chapter discusses how social comparisons are linked to identity formation.

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*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2017. This book creates a picture of the iGen through statistical data. Very useful for teachers that are trying to understand this generational of individuals.

Wills, Thomas A., "Downward Comparison Principles in Social Psychology," *Psychological Bulletin* 90, no. 2 (1981), 245-271. Describes downward social comparisons and implications of making this type of comparison.

## Notes

---

1. Twenge, *iGen*, 3.
2. Twenge, *iGen*, 16.
3. Twenge, *iGen*, 4.
4. Anderson & Jiang, "Teens, Social Media, and Technology"
5. Feinstein, Hershenberg, Bhatia, Latack, Meuwly, & Davila, "Negative Social Comparison" 161-170.
6. Twenge, *iGen*, 78.
7. Mann, "Annual Report of the Board of Education"
8. Sales, *American Girls*, 10.
9. Sales, *American Girls*, 10.
10. Twenge, *iGen*, 102.
11. Twenge, *iGen*, 3, 10, 3, 5
12. Twenge, *iGen*, 3, 51
13. Sales, *American Girls*, 61.
14. Sales, *American Girls*, 71.
15. Sales, *American Girls*, 61.

16. Sales, *American Girls*, 72.
17. Twenge, *iGen*, 78, 80, 82.
18. Twenge, *iGen*, 101.
19. Twenge, *iGen*, 54.
20. Sales, *American Girls*, 64.
21. Chou & Edge, "They are Happier"
22. Sales, *American Girls*, 63.
23. Twenge, *iGen*, 106.
24. Sales, *American Girls*, 53, 63.
25. Sales, *American Girls*, 28.
26. Sales, *American Girls*, 62.
27. Festinger, "Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations*
28. Festinger, "Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations*
29. Wills, 1981
30. Festinger, "Social Comparison"
31. Stets & Burke, "Social Comparison in Identity Theory," 39.
32. Feinstein et al, "Negative Social Comparison," 167.
33. Jan, Anwwer Soomro, & Ahmad, "Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem," *European Scientific Journal*
34. Chou & Edge, "They are Happier," 119.
35. Twenge, *iGen*, 3.
36. Twenge, *iGen*, 112.
37. Price, *How to Break Up With Your Phone*, 30.
38. Sales, *American Girls*, 60.
39. Ibid
40. Linklater, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, 3.
41. Twenge, *iGen*, 91.
42. Linklater, *Natural Voice*, 1, 2.
43. Linklater, *Natural Voice*, 7, 19, 19, 19
44. Twenge, *iGen*, 101.
45. Linklater, *Natural Voice*
46. Twenge, *iGen*
47. Price, *How to Break Up*, 55.
48. Ibid
49. Sales, *American Girls*, 36.
50. Ibid, 47.
51. Ibid, 46-47.
52. Ibid, 53.
53. Ibid, 54.
54. Ibid, 55.
55. Ibid, 60.
56. Ibid, 60.
57. Ibid, 61.
58. Ibid, 75.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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