

# Learning to live together: Can technology help?



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**Professor Asha Kanwar**

President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Co-written with Dr. K. Balasubramanian, Vice President, COL  
and Alexis Carr, Research Coordinator, COL

Greetings to you from Canada. Being able to join you virtually is a good example of how technology can make it possible for us to speak across continents and oceans. I am very grateful to Epimenides Haidemenakis for the invitation. My topic today is ‘Learning to Live Together: can technology help?’ which has been prepared jointly with my colleagues Bala and Alexis.

Let me first introduce you to the Commonwealth of Learning. COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government with our headquarters in Vancouver, Canada and a regional office in New Delhi, India.

What does COL do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to quality education and training. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development.

This map shows the 52 Member States of the Commonwealth that are spread right across the globe from the Caribbean to Africa, Asia and the Pacific, which is where we work.

In this presentation I will first look at the context followed by a brief overview of the importance of social capital and empathy in learning to live together. This will be followed by the role of technology—does it help or hinder efforts to live together? I will then share with you the findings of a case study of a COL project done specially for this presentation. Finally, I will make three recommendations on what we can do to promote learning that helps us to live together as global citizens at peace with ourselves and with our environment.

But first the context.

Jacques Delors, highlighted the importance of living together in a 1996 report ‘Learning: The Treasure Within’. The four pillars of learning for the 21st century highlighted in the Delors report are learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. According to Delors, learning to live together means “developing an understanding of others ...and, on this basis, creating a new spirit ... guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of the risks and challenges of the future” (1996). Does learning lead to the virtues of responsibility, acceptance and solidarity that Delors believes are so central to living together in peace and prosperity?

We have access to more information now than we have had at any other point in human history, yet we still see increasing conflict and a widening gulf of inequality. If learning leads to peace and unity, why is there so much discord in a world that is so connected and has such phenomenal access to information?

According to a World Economic Forum report many of the top ten skills required to succeed today, such as managing people, coordinating with others and emotional intelligence relate to empathy and interpersonal skills. Are we preparing our future generations for these skills?

As human beings we have a unique ability to organise ourselves into communities, and this ability has allowed us to survive and thrive, becoming the most dominant species on the planet. As Yuval Harari, tells us in his book *Sapiens*, some 70,000 years ago homo sapiens developed the ability to cooperate with one another on a large scale, organising ourselves into groups ranging from nations to companies to teams (2014). In order to build and sustain these groups, socialisation processes are essential and enable us to live together.

Our pre-historic ancestors relied mainly on informal socialisation processes, which began in infancy and continued throughout their lives. The family, religious institutions, and community members played a major role in these informal socialisation processes.

While this kind of informal socialisation continued for thousands of years, the formal education system more recently emerged as the central agent of socialisation. Saldana (2013) argues that in the modern day “the school system has become the glue that holds society together” (229) playing a pivotal role in shaping minds, values, attitudes and relationships, and thus our ability to live together.

A relatively new factor influencing both formal and informal socialisation is information and communication technologies. Geography and distance are no longer a limitation and most of us belong to multiple communities beyond our borders. Like face-to-face interactions, technology-mediated interactions facilitate a kind of virtual ‘living together’ even when separated by space and time. The Internet is a very powerful tool for socialisation. Unlike previous communication technologies, such as the telephone or radio, the internet enables communication between large numbers of people, both synchronously and asynchronously. With the rise of social media, social networking sites and messaging apps, online communities are connecting people that otherwise would not have a chance to interact. But have these connections and interactions led to better conditions for living together?

Two important concepts in understanding how we can learn to live together are empathy and social capital.

Through both formal and informal socialisation processes we can build social capital, consisting of networks based on trust and reciprocity, which help us to live together. However, social capital can be both positive and negative. For example, strong social capital exists in terrorist groups, drug cartels and mafias as well, yet this kind of social capital is actually harmful to the community and goes against public interest. When we refer to social capital as a measure of the ability to ‘live together’ we must distinguish this specifically as positive social capital, or social capital which leads to positive impacts on the community as a whole.

Let me share one example of positive social capital that leads to peace and prosperity in communities. One of COL’s non-formal learning programmes, Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F), uses technology to build the capacity of farmers, and links this capacity building process with social and financial capital.

This project is being implemented in 11 countries mostly in Asia and Africa and has lifted thousands of people out of poverty. Social capital within the community is critical to the success of this project. In one country, where there was no trust within the targeted communities, the project failed.

These women in India are part of COL's L3F project, under which they have learnt agriculture and enterprise development skills using basic mobile phones. They use mobile phones to receive information on farming practices and finance and to share this information with others in their extended network. COL studies have shown that these L3F learners have developed strong social capital.

Most participants are illiterate but have established companies in agriculture and livestock in which they are shareholders and have generated enough assets within a space of three years to pay back their loans and support themselves and their families. How can we build social capital?

By developing our skills for empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share in the feelings of another person—who may or may not be similar to you. Empathy allows us to build and strengthen our social relationships. Both empathy and social capital are at the core of learning to live together, but the relationship between these concepts, or how they can be integrated into learning has not been adequately explored.

Because of its important role in building social relationships and communities, it is important to understand the distinction between bystander empathy and empathy for action. Bystander empathy is when an individual is able to feel for another, but does not act. Action-oriented empathy is a feeling that translates into action.

In the area of education, Molka-Danielsen, Carter, and Creelman (2009) identify empathy as an important skill in engaging students in a learning experience. Educators and employers alike are beginning to demand that young people should be taught empathy. Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ* (1996) highlighted the role of empathy in educating young people. A major critique of the formal education system is that it actually quashes the natural empathetic tendencies of learners by fostering competition rather than collaboration.

We have just seen the importance of empathy and social capital. What is the role of technology?

If we look at the global ICT statistics there has been a growth in the internet at 40 persons in a 100 with connectivity. But the real growth has been in mobile subscriptions where the figure is 103%.

Linked to the increase in mobile phones is the rapid rise of Messaging. WhatsApp and Messenger have billions of users. Global traffic due to messaging is larger today than in social media networks. The graph here shows that by the middle of last year, Apps that worked only with Messaging platforms had more users than Apps that worked with social media. With the rise of technology, there is an active debate over its impact—has it been negative or positive?

A 2005 study by Nie found that each hour an individual spends on the internet reduces their face-to-face interaction with family and friends by 23 minutes, and is also associated with lower mental health scores. Konrath, O'Brien and Hsing (2011) suggest that the "rising prominence of personal technology and media use in everyday life" is a major "contributor to declining empathy" claiming that as people become more immersed in online environments they disengage themselves from more meaningful social situations. In this sense the internet could actually inhibit us from learning to live together, and instead lead to a lack of empathy and isolation.

On the other hand, another study conducted by the University of Toronto examined the effect of free broadband internet provision on a neighbourhood near Toronto. The study showed that internet access

actually strengthens social bonds in communities. Residents with the free internet access had more informal contact with neighbours, knew more of their neighbours and visited their neighbours more frequently than the residents without broadband access. Users of Facebook Twitter and Flickr actively share personal information and knowledge, and engage with other members both within and outside of their geographic communities. In this study the internet users not only strengthened their relationships with people who they lived close to, but they were also able to connect to people outside of their core social groups.

What does our experience tell us? We conducted a case study with a partner in India especially for this presentation.

The Reddiarchathram Seed Growers Association (RSGA) has been increasingly utilising technology to build the capacity and social capital of their constituency.

One of the platforms they have been using is Facebook, with a ‘friend’ count that has grown to around 5,000 people. They use their Facebook page to share information on agricultural practices, posting step by step instructions and photos, and often linking users to YouTube videos of farmers demonstrating specific practices. COL conducted a survey amongst RSGA’s Facebook friends. 378 users responded to the questionnaire.

The main research questions were:

Is there a relationship between empathy, online social capital and face-to-face social capital?

Does empathy promote learning to live together?

The study yielded some interesting results. There is a significant correlation between both face-to-face and online social capital and empathy. This tells us there is some kind of relationship between these variables, but in order to determine how exactly these variables affect one another, further analysis was done.

We wanted to see which variables impact on face-to-face social capital.

The results suggest that more empathetic people have stronger face-to-face social capital, and that strong social capital online can also strengthen face-to-face social capital. Empathy is therefore an important skill to develop in helping people to live together, and developing strong relationships online can enhance our face-to-face interactions.

Although formal education involves a great deal of interaction, the results suggest that the kind of interactions experienced in a formal education setting do not actually lead to enhanced social capital. This could be because formal education tends to promote competition over collaboration.

The RSGA data reveals a relationship between online social capital, face-to-face social capital and empathy. This finding challenges the critiques of technology as replacing or taking away from face-to-face social engagement, and instead suggests that technology, when used appropriately, extends our engagements. Those who have the skills like empathy to build positive social relationships in their face-to-face communities may simply use technology to do the same, and extend their social networks. The key then is empathy, a skill that can be taught and acquired.

Clearly the way in which we use technology is important: computers can be used for isolating online activities, or for active social engagements. It is not the technology itself that helps or hinders social capital growth and empathy, but rather how it is used. When technology is used for empathy building,

connection, communication and collaboration it can actually lead to stronger social relationships, both in online communities and in face to face contexts.

The study also reveals that formal education does not appear to have a relationship to social capital. Introducing technology in the classroom is not enough to teach our future generations the skills required to live together unless our pedagogy is transformed to encourage collaboration, cooperation and partnership.

What then is the way forward? Let me propose three recommendations.

First, technology should be integrated into formal education to promote collaboration rather than competition. The newest generation of learners have embraced the social power of the internet and technologies, yet the formal education system has not done the same. A 2008 qualitative study by Tonnessen discovered that while ICT use in the classroom increased significantly, ICTs were not being adequately used as tools for social or collaborative learning. If technology is to help us learn to live together, the medium must also be the message: When we integrate technology, particularly the internet, into education, we must also embrace the values of openness, sharing and collaboration inherent in this medium.

One concrete example of technology being used for collaboration comes from North Carolina, where a middle school class used various platforms to work together with another class of students in Sweden on a science project. Because the pedagogy was based on collaboration, the technology was used to promote communication, engagement and teamwork rather than competition.

Second, developing skills for empathy should become integral to formal education. We must also place a greater focus on empathy for action, as opposed to bystander empathy.

There are concrete examples that we can learn from. The Danish school system has been teaching empathy in the classroom for years through images and role-playing and then analysing different responses. In the higher education sector in the US, literature is integrated into the medical curriculum to instil empathy among the young doctors. The 'Roots of Empathy' project in Canada has been shown to boost emotional intelligence and reduce aggression.

Third, teachers must become allies in promoting empathy, and should be given the training necessary to adequately integrate technology and empathy into the classroom.

The celebrated Finnish system of education promotes a culture of collaboration. In Shanghai, another successful system, teachers will only be promoted when they give evidence of collaboration.

Can technologies support collaboration? Even in Europe with its vast technology infrastructure, 40% of the teachers felt that they were not confident about using technologies for online collaboration. The importance of teacher training will be critical to our success.

As we have seen, harnessing technology to develop empathy and social capital will lead to a world that Jacques Delors imagined—a world where we learn to live together. Thank you.