



WINCHESTER
COLLEGE

Headmaster's End of Term Video Transcript - Short Half 2025

Last term, I spoke about how the enormous quantities of recreational time spent on devices is displacing reading in the lives of teenagers; and how the fragmentation of attention online is shredding their ability to focus.

This time I'll be looking more generally at our approach to technology, and next time I'll address the developing role of AI in education.

Encouraging pupils to think – our approach to devices

Computers have been in classrooms now for decades and we know there are things they can do well. We use them all the time in teaching. For example:

- For 3D mathematical modelling (volumes of revolution)
- Art History dons can throw up images of art onto the screen, alongside comparables or inspirations; or Classics or History dons can quickly refer the class to maps and artefacts and other snippets which make sense of what they're studying.
- Flashcard apps are widely used – from English to Modern Languages to Biology;
- Or they might use digital modelling of hydrology or climate simulations in Geography
- Or for flipped learning – where, for instance, pupils watch a video lesson in their own time, freeing up class time for the don to respond to individual problems and questions;
- ... and the list goes on. And I haven't touched on how the pupils themselves are using the technology at a very high level.

We love what technology enables in the classroom and for study. But these same technologies can also have counter-productive effects. The research is clear, for instance, that it is harder to learn when reading on screen; and when typing on a device. This is because of how our brains work rather than a feature of the device per se.

And the devices introduce practical problems:

- Even where the devices and infrastructure are operating flawlessly, and a don is well prepared, a lot can go wrong.
 - o 'Mine's not working', 'I forgot to charge it'.
 - o or they're on different versions of the software.
 - o Or they open it up and suddenly, 'It's doing an update, sir.'
- Pen and paper can be forgotten but problems with paper are much more quickly fixed.
- Does that mean you never use devices? No. But they do impose a cost on learning.

And the biggest cost on learning is **distraction**.

- The devices provide an easy way to do things you shouldn't: messaging, furtive watching of videos, online shopping and so on.
- There are technical tools to prevent this; and teachers should be actively monitoring device use; and we need to educate children about why this is a bad idea. But let's be honest: these things are time-consuming and will never be wholly effective.
- Even when teenagers WANT to study, they find it hard to stay on task on a laptop – as adults do. Who among us has not been in a meeting where half the room is doing emails instead of participating?
- One don who came to us from another very good school told me how refreshing it was 'to see pupils holding eye contact with their dons and engaging in debates up to books rather than staring at a screen!'
- Even productivity aids like pop-ups and notifications can be counter-productive, as they interrupt and distract – and we have a lot of evidence about how destructive that is to focus and learning.

So there's no simple answer as to whether technology improves learning. The question is rather: 'when do the positives outweigh the negatives?' Which is why we are judicious about the use of laptops, and we don't use them by default: there has to be a solid reason to use the digital device.

Setting aside the academic, what are the effects on wellbeing?

Wellbeing

With the average teenager spending 35 hours a week on their smartphones alone (so not counting time spent on other devices), the problems aren't hard to see. I'm not going to rehearse all the evidence and issues here – I've covered it before, and I think most parents are pretty convinced about the effects:

- the excessive exposure to harmful content;
- a huge drop in free time spent with their peers: with all the expected effects on social skills and isolation;
- less time spent outdoors, less reading, less sleep;
- deteriorating mental health;
- cyber bullying and abuse... and so on.

That's a worrying list but the impact varies greatly amongst young people, so we shouldn't catastrophise: most young people can spend an hour or so a day doing fairly pointless, even mindless, things without suffering ill effects. We used to complain about too much radio, then too much television, then too many video games... and sure, they could spend their time in a more edifying way.

But whilst short periods of time are not lethal, too much time can be seriously damaging. And it is undeniable that the addictiveness of devices now is in a different league. So leaving children to figure it out on their own is not an option.

So what do we do about it at Winchester?

We think the proper framework is to consider all devices, not just mobile phones. Just about anything you can do on a smartphone you can do on a laptop or tablet. Which – to answer a question put to me by some parents – is why we haven't simply prescribed brick phones for everybody. I'm open to that approach, but if you don't regulate access to laptops you're just transferring the activity to a different device.

- So we stipulate that pupils can only have a personal mobile and a school-prescribed laptop. Nothing more.
- In the first year: JP can only use their laptops in lessons, plus 15 minutes after breakfast for email admin. The rest of the time their devices are handed in – and that means paper-based homework, something which has greatly improved study habits and concentration. And if they use their evening study time well, the work is completely done and they can throw themselves into fun activities the rest of the week, without leaving a crisis of work left undone for later. We think that's appropriate for 13-year-olds and gets them off to a great start, both academically and socially.
- In the first two years, the boys can have their mobile phones between the end of the day's activities and the start of study – which, when you take out supper, means up to 90 minutes, with a small gap between the House announcements at the end of the day and bedtime. It's right that every child should be able to speak to their parents, or their siblings, or their friends outside of school.

- But it's rare for them to use all of that time, so general usage rates are low. And one useful aspect of having separate study and sleeping areas for boys in the first two years is that when they go to their bedrooms, their Surfaces stay in Mugging Hall and can't intrude into wider house life and social relationships.
- For all pupils, including VI Book, the campus is a phone-free zone throughout the school day - which means not just during timetabled lessons but also for the hours devoted to extra-curricular activities in the afternoon.
- And all pupils, including the Sixth Form, hand their phones in overnight.

Tightening the screws too much can be both burdensome to enforce and counter-productive, and we accept that our approach means the experience of our pupils – particularly boarders – is radically different from typical children their age. And that is made possible because they are all under the same rules, including out of hours – so no FOMO.

(And by the way, we always respond to individual needs. Some pupils have diagnosed conditions and need to type. Or others are unusually addicted to their devices and need additional boundaries. We deal with those case by case.)

In the last year, we've made several changes to our approach, we're always reviewing our practice, and we try to do so intentionally rather than reactively. But you can also help us and we do look for your support.

As Christmas approaches: we would encourage you not to buy smart watches, smart glasses, MacBooks, tablets and so on as they won't be permitted in school. And I'll be honest – it really doesn't help when parents send their children to school with second phones or additional devices contrary to our rules. Trust me: when they tell you 'everyone else has one...': Well, nice try but, in the nicest possible way, they're lying!

And to those of you who have not yet given your child a smartphone: well done! If you're a prospective parent who is still holding out: no, they will not be the only one with a brick phone when they come to Winchester. And you'll have the opportunity to meet each other before your child joins us, so I encourage you to share your views with other parents so you can reassure each other. Strength in numbers!

Evidence based learning and impact in practice: Technology at Winchester

Connected to this, you know we are committed to avoiding educational fads and focusing on evidence-based practice, so you may be interested to know of another research project underway in partnership with Oxford University. Our Dean Academic will be leading a project with Dr Jack Andrews to explore how technology use affects academic confidence

- Most research thus far has looked at the impact of mobile phone use on mental health, revealing mixed results.
- But few studies look at the impact of the use of laptops and tablets on learning and well-being.
- This joint study will examine:
 - How device use affects motivation and engagement;
 - How pupils use their devices for learning; And
 - How teachers use them for teaching.

Participation of pupils will be voluntary, with full consent procedures in place and findings will be published in peer-reviewed journals and thus shared with the wider education community, so that the benefits are shared and Winchester can take the lead in shaping best practice.

If you're looking for Christmas present ideas and ways to keep your children immersed in a book rather than on their device, here are some reading suggestions from us – books that your children might enjoy, and they might get even more out of if you read them alongside them.

1. For our younger years, we recommend Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader* and Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*
2. For Sixth Book: Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow* and Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

School Notices

Looking back over Short Half, this has been a term of building deep community:

- We welcomed our new JPs and Sixth Book joiners who hit the ground running and we can already see how much they are growing.
- We had the first of two Community Weekends, designed to help everyone feel part of the school and I love seeing them throw themselves into such a wide range of activities. Aside from the fun of a bonfire and fireworks, never have I come across a pupil body as invested in CalSoc reeling as they are at Winchester - a great sight to see!
- House competitions and activities are another way of having fun and building community – as anyone can attest who saw the two house plays (Phil's *The Wind in the Willows*) and Beloe's (*'Allo 'Allo*), or the joy and bonding generated by house art, house singing and DT's ingenuity challenge.

Thinking Differently

We pride ourselves on Original Thinking, so I commend to you:

- Sapientia magazine published this term - a great example of how our pupils have the time, expertise and freedom to learn with originality and rigour far beyond the curriculum.
- And if you missed Div for Parents - otherwise known as Studium – you really missed out. We had exceptional feedback from parents who emerged envious at the quality of teaching their children enjoy. Please do join us for the next one.

And Finally

- We have many lovely festivities in this final week, culminating with a very full day on Friday.
- I'm looking forward to seeing many of you on Friday, whether you're joining us for the talk by one of the world's top college counsellors, David Hawkins, who supports pupils to select and apply for some of the world's best-ranked universities;
- Or perhaps you'll join us for the Cathedral Carol Service or Illuminā –
- or all three.

Whether or not you can join us in person, I wish you and your families a very happy and peaceful break together over the Christmas period.

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