

ABOVE THE FRAY

Why I Kicked Technology Out of My Classroom

And joined a number of my colleagues in doing so



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Jonathan Haidt speaks onstage during "How The Great Rewiring Of Childhood Caused An International Mental Health Crisis, And How We Can Reverse It" at the Project Healthy Minds World Mental Health Day Festival at Spring Studios on October 10, 2025 in New York City. (Photo by Rob Kim/Getty Images for Project Healthy Minds)

When I last taught my first-year seminar (on the theory and practice of conservatism), the first day of class unfolded as follows:

After introductions and some discussion of the themes of the course, I opened up

Canvas (a web-based learning-management system) from a computer in the classroom that projected its desktop onto a screen at the front of the room. From there I showed the students where they could find every single reading we would study throughout the semester, each of them freely available as a PDF. I explained that students were expected to bring laptops or tablets to class, so they could refer to these readings (and any notes they had taken on them) during our discussions. I also explained how they would turn in two short (750-1,000-word) essay assignments that required them to engage critically with the course readings.

I taught the first session of this same class last Wednesday afternoon, and it unfolded very differently:

I only opened up Canvas in the last ten minutes of class, to show the students where they could find an electronic version of syllabus, and where their grades would be posted later in the semester. Before that, I had walked the class through a hard copy of the syllabus, which informed them that all of the course readings could be found in a coursepack they would need to purchase from a copy center on campus. The students are expected to bring the coursepack with them to class every day, along with any paper on which they have taken notes. They are expected to put all electronic devices (phones, laptops, tablets) away, with all alerts silenced, at the start of every class session. As for assignments, they will no longer write and turn in essays. Instead, I will administer several in-class reading quizzes throughout the term. These will involve some writing, while the in-class midterm and final exams will each include sections in which the students will be required to write about aspects of the class at various lengths.

I'm not alone in making these kinds of changes. My wife, who has taught at Penn for 20 years, began tech-free teaching a couple of years ago. And at a pair of curriculum meetings on campus in recent months, faculty who teach in a wide range of departments within the School of Arts and Sciences spoke of making similar moves. So I'm not a trend-setter; I'm a trend-follower. Though I don't typically follow the herd of independent minds unless I have independently decided they are right. Sharing how and why I came to think that in this case they were indeed correct to make such changes may prove illuminating to some, or maybe many, of my subscribers—if only because it will lay down a marker with regard to where we are and may be heading as a

culture.

Driven to Distraction



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