Shell Education

50 STRATEGIES for Learning without Screens

Tom Rademacher



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Tom Rademacher, M.Ed.

To my students, because some piece of every one of you taught me to teach.

—TR

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rademacher, Tom, 1981- author.
Title: 50 strategies for learning without screens / Tom Rademacher.
Other titles: Fifty strategies for learning without screens
Description: Huntington Beach, CA : Shell Educational Publishing, Inc, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024005254 (print) | LCCN 2024005255 (ebook) | ISBN 9798765965733 (paperback) | ISBN 9798765965740 (ebook) | ISBN 9798765965757 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Learning strategies. | Effective teaching. | Individualized instruction. | BISAC: EDUCATION / Teaching / Methods & Strategies | EDUCATION / General
Classification: LCC LB1066 .R34 2024 (print) | LCC LB1066 (ebook) | DDC 371.102--dc23/eng/20240403
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024005254
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024005255

Shell Education
A division of Teacher Created Materials
5482 Argosy Avenue
Huntington Beach, CA 92649
www.tcmpub.com/shell-education
ISBN 979-8-7659-6575-7

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Welcome

I love screens. If I used every computer, phone, TV, and tablet in my home, I could set up a wall of screens playing fifteen different Marvel movies at once. And if I set them up in release order, I would only get to *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 2*. Maybe I need more screens.

In other words: I'm not an antiscreen evangelist. This book is not an argument to remove all computers or destroy all smartphones (although there are days when I wish the internet had an off button). I know that for many students and teachers, technology gives access to ideas, opportunities, and connections that would otherwise be inaccessible—and would have been unimaginable thirty years ago.

Rather, I'm sharing strategies for teaching and learning without screens so you can help the kids in front of you live, work, and thrive in a tech-rich world. To do this, students need skills that are best taught without screens. They need to learn what they can do, what they can notice, and what they can wonder about so they can use screens in creative, productive, and participatory ways, rather than simply as consumers of media.

Screens make it easy to *watch* instead of *make*; to outsource questions instead of wondering about them. In the use of any educational technology, the most important element is the brain of the person using it. Who's in charge—the brain or the tech? Is the brain curious, creative, critical, collaborative, and compassionate? If yes, then the tech is a tool for doing something better and more beautifully than the tech could do on its own. Is the brain passive, simply being told or entertained? If so, then the tech is keeping the student quiet, but not helping them learn.

When I reflect on the days, lessons, and moments in my sixteen years of teaching that were most impactful, most memorable, or most important, I notice that screens were hardly ever involved. I've collected my own favorite screen-free teaching strategies here, as well as some from trusted colleagues from across the country. I hope these fifty strategies will engage your students, inspire critical and creative thinking, and help your students tackle complex ideas in ways that are meaningful, joyful, enjoyable, engaging, and challenging. You can adapt these strategies across subjects, abilities, and grade levels.

I can't imagine what our world will look like when today's students are grown, watching *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 12: Naptime after a Big Dinner* projected from a microchip in their wallet to a receiver tucked into their ocular nerves. Okay, I guess I *can* imagine it, though I'm no doubt getting it all wrong. I'm confident, though, that the world *will* get increasingly digital. A student's ability to navigate that digital world will be the key predictor of their success. This is exactly why educators need to get the screens off students' desks and out of their hands as often as possible.



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Going Old School to Be Future Ready

Wherever students end up, and whatever they end up doing, their abilities to think critically and creatively, to work with a wide range of people, and to adapt to changing circumstances will be crucial. Experts in the fields of education and economics agree that this group of skills—whether we call them "twenty-first-century skills," "soft skills," "applied digital skills," or "what good teaching has sought to do since forever"—is essential (Appleby 2017; World Economic Forum 2023; OECD 2019; Partnership for 21st Century Learning 2015). Young people will need more human than digital skills to navigate their future.



If you're looking for more details about these skills and why they're important, I recommend reading three foundational documents, described in the following list and in the tables on the next page.

- One of my favorite reports on digital media and learning was led by Henry Jenkins when he was working as the director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This report discusses the tools young people need to shift from cultural bystanders to cultural participants. He calls those tools "**new media literacies**" (Jenkins 2009). Jenkins says that in spaces asking users to simply consume, it's important and powerful to do more: to create and participate. He also notes ethical concerns about who is taught to participate. For example, if some students use their school devices to learn coding or film production and editing while other students use their devices mainly as digital worksheet machines, there's an equity problem to solve that goes beyond access to technology. Some students are being denied opportunities to create.
- The most widely referenced document on **twenty-first-century learning** skills was first released in 2006 by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning, which brought together education and business leaders to discuss the essential skills of a future workforce (Partnership for 21st Century Learning 2015). Honestly, the term *twenty-first-century skills* has always seemed a little silly to me because most of these skills have always been and will always be important. But while I don't love the name, I do endorse the skills this document lists.
- A third framework is more concise and has a name I really like. The Deeper Learning framework offers a set of competencies that "students must master in order to develop a keen understanding of academic content and apply their knowledge to problems in the classroom and on the job" (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation 2013). I like the **deeper learning competencies** because they apply across grade levels and disciplines, and I think they put into context a lot of the work that teachers know to be important.

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