

Rethinking Students' Relationships to Technology

Is it finally time to reign in student dependence on tech?

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It remains a consistent challenge for educators today to get their students to focus and pay attention to what is being discussed in class. Specifically, we are competing with our students' digital gadgets every day when we walk into a classroom. I have found myself commiserating more than usual with my fellow colleagues about how to navigate cell phone use in the classroom within the context of higher education.

Many of my colleagues come from the perspective that their students are all adults, and thus it is up to their own discretion to monitor their cell phone use during the class. While I tend to subscribe to this in theory, it is very challenging during a lecture or class discussion to look out to your students and see that many of them are scrolling through their devices. Another perspective proposes that the norms of digital natives are different, and they don't see any conflict between sitting in class and ostensibly paying attention while also monitoring what is happening on their screens. If that is the case, is it our job as educators to get our students to recognize that their multitasking may be falling short of the standards of the classroom, and if so, should their academic performance be based in part on their ability to stay off of their devices during class? Moreover, is such monitoring realistic when most jobs today likely don't have strict cell phone policies, and thus, individuals need to develop their own ways of reigning in their compulsions to check their devices?

Perhaps it is not surprising that The New York Times has been on the forefront of running articles regarding the wide ranging implications of our increasingly digitized culture. An interesting trend they have identified is a growing divide between how digitally wired students are based on socio-economic status—richer parents are starting to identify the perils of screen time and taking measures to limit this in their children, while poorer ones are growing ever more reliant on technology. One researcher cautions about a “knowledge gap” around the dangers of technology. For example, technology “tools are too relied upon in schools for low-income children” (as reported by Bowles, 2018, B3). Moreover, these researchers are starting to identify greater technology addiction among middle and low-income families (Bowles, 2018).

Another colleague of mine shared with me an exercise he did with his students in class, asking them to put their phones away for 10 minutes during the session. He said that during that 10 minute period students reported being extremely anxious, and many of them were unable to restrain themselves from checking their phones during that window of time. And of course, students aren't alone with their tech dependence. One study calculated that the average amount of time it takes for workers to respond to their emails was *six seconds*. That's right, “70 percent of office emails are read within six seconds of arriving” (Barker, 2017, para. 2).

So the pull of our digital gadgets is a temptation for all of us. How can we help our students cultivate tech consumption in moderation if we ourselves are also struggling with it? I start by keeping my cell phone in my office, so that when I am in the classroom my attention is not divided. It is important to demonstrate the behaviors we are trying to promote in our students. Moreover, I think it would also help to acknowledge and have an open dialogue with our students regarding the challenges that come with navigating an increasingly

digital world. These gadgets are not designed for moderation. It is telling that many reports from Silicon Valley reveal that the makers behind these devices have strict no-technology rules within their own homes.

Perhaps the takeaway is that there are no easy answers. But it is past due for us to have candid conversations with our students about their intentions behind their use of their devices, and how they may be hindering their potential and/or performance in class. At the least, I plan to replicate the 10 minute tech-free exercise in class that my colleague tried out.

I will be sure to report how my students fare with the challenge.

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References

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