

The Age of Distraction: Getting Students to Put Away Their Phones and Focus on Learning

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In a September 2012 post I briefly highlighted a number of studies documenting that most students don't multi-task well. When they're texting, looking at Facebook, or cruising on the Internet **and** listening to a lecture or discussion **and** trying to take notes, they aren't dealing with the content as well as they would be if they just focused on listening and note taking. And the evidence of that keeps accumulating, like the Kuznekoff and Titsworth study referenced here and described in detail in the January issue of *The Teaching Professor*. Using an intriguing study design, here's what they found: ". . . students who use their mobile phones during class lectures tend to write down less information, recall less information, and perform worse on a multiple-choice test than those students who abstain from using their mobile phones during class." (p. 251).

The evidence that classroom use of technology for personal reasons distracts students is sizeable. The question is, how can teachers get students to put away their phones and focus on learning? Even with a policy and overt attempts to enforce it (confiscating the devices, interrupting class to accost the offenders, etc.), without constant surveillance from various points in the classroom, it is very, very difficult to ensure that students are not using their devices. If the class is large, it is all but impossible. And that kind of vigilant enforcement is not without costs. If the teacher must be constantly monitoring who's doing what in the classroom, that distracts the teacher just as effectively as the technology distracts the students.

Students and their devices have become virtually inseparable. They (and some of the rest of us) are using them constantly and find it difficult to disconnect for any amount of time. Couple that problem with the fact that most students are pretty strongly convinced they can text or be online, and do other things (like drive, carry on conversations, eat, and take notes in class) without the technology affecting their performance of that second activity.

So, I'm wondering if the place to begin isn't by confronting students with the evidence. Kuznekoff and Titsworth suggest including highlights of their research or that of others on the course syllabus or, I would add, to the course website. Their article references a number of studies if you think a longer list might be more persuasive. If your style is a bit more in-your-face, you could come to class with a copy of several of these studies and when you see behaviors that look suspicious, stop class and talk briefly but specifically about the research. Students who text should do so knowing that the behavior has consequences—points, grades, and most important of all, learning are at stake.

But given a lot of the students I know, I can well imagine them hearing the evidence and still being quite convinced that even though other students can't text and take good notes, they can. How do we convince those students?

I'm a firm believer that showing is way more effective than telling. So I'm wondering if you could give a presentation in class and five minutes before the class ends distribute or post a list of the five or six essential points made. Students could check their notes, or you could have students trade notes so that someone else is doing the checking, and see how many of those points they had. Now some students may miss a few of the points because they aren't all that good at taking notes, but were some of the students who missed most (all) of the points also texting or surfing during class? Encourage them to ask themselves the question and to look honestly at the evidence revealed by their notes. No, you aren't going to be providing one of these lists at the end of every class, but you may consider doing it sometime during the next couple of weeks as the new semester begins. And if students are really interested in knowing how texting affects what they're getting out of class, they should try listening and taking notes without doing anything else.

Reference: Kuznekoff, J. H. and Titsworth, S. (2013). The impact of mobile phone usage on student learning. *Communication Education*, 62 (3), 233-252.

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