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The Distracted Classroom

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ADVICE

The Distracted Classroom

By James M. Lang | MARCH 13, 2017



Keith Negley for The Chronicle

One day near the end of the spring semester last year, I was standing at the front of the room in my British literature survey course, as students completed a writing exercise. One of the best students in the class, "Kate," finished early and sat back to await our discussion.

This talented senior represented something of a puzzle to me. On the one hand, she wrote well, contributed to discussions, sat in the front row every class period, and was always pleasant. On the other hand, she sometimes seemed distracted in class, as if she were secretly on her phone or using social media on a laptop. But no laptop or phone was ever in sight. I chalked up her occasional inattention to senioritis.

Once the class discussion began that day, I had drifted toward the row of desks where Kate sat when something on the floor caught my eye — it was a flash of light, as if from a cellphone. Kate was staring down at it as well, in one of her distracted states. I realized that she was gazing inside her purse, where her phone had been carefully positioned to allow her to see any texts that arrived during class. She couldn't respond to them, but she could read them. New ones lit up her black screen, and she just had to turn her head ever so

slightly to keep up with her group chats throughout the class session.

I was so taken aback by this discovery that I had to pause and compose myself in order to keep the discussion on track. I didn't say anything to Kate then or later. She was a second-semester senior, and it was the last week of class. The prospect of haranguing one of my favorite students about phone use in class during her last week of college just depressed me.

But the experience brought into clear focus the deep nature of the problem of distraction in college classrooms in the 21st century.

Like every faculty member these days — and like most high-school and even middle-school teachers — I am in a constant battle with cellphones and laptops for the attention of my students in the classroom.

I know from both personal experience and scads of published research that when students have phones or laptops out in class — and are texting, surfing the web, or posting on social media — they are only half-present (if that). I try to make my classes as interactive as possible, with students engaged in discussions, group work, or other tasks. So a roomful of half-present students seriously detracts from what we can accomplish on any given day.

The answer is not banning all devices from the classroom. As I have argued before, such a ban can single out students with accommodations who need those devices to participate in class. And given the direction of the world and the omnipresence of technology in our lives, a ban seems to me a quixotic gesture at best.

For a long time now, I have felt stuck at an impasse on the challenge of how to handle these digital distractions. But a new book on the more general nature of distraction and attention has helped me see some pathways forward. *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (MIT, 2016) represents a collaboration between neuroscientist Adam Gazzaley and psychologist Larry D. Rosen, and it should be required reading for every teacher today — and probably all humans. In a series of columns, I plan to explore their ideas and how their research can help us reshape our teaching practices.

Almost every book or article I read about this issue begins with a run-down of all of the ways in which distraction can interfere with learning. But *The Distracted Mind* provides a broader context: Distraction occurs, the authors argue, when we are pursuing a goal that really matters and something blocks our efforts to achieve it.

After all, we don't consider ourselves distracted when we are scrolling through Facebook on a Friday night with nothing else to do — we are only distracted when we are scrolling through Facebook while trying to grade papers.

Distraction from any particular goal — putting aside the digital angle for the moment — can come from multiple sources, Gazzaley and Rosen write. Those sources can be generated externally (the bird at my window feeder, a child clamoring for my attention, a colleague knocking on my office door) or internally (making a cup of tea, switching from one task to another, or, yes, checking Facebook).

The Distracted Classroom

Every day in class, faculty members wage a constant battle with cellphones and laptops for the attention of students. In this series, James M. Lang explores the impasse over how to cope with those unwanted digital distractions.

- The Distracted Classroom: Transparency, Autonomy, and Pedagogy
- The Distracted Classroom: Do Tech Fasts Work?
- The Distracted Classroom: Is It Getting Worse?



They argue that distraction actually arises from a conflict between two fundamental features of our brain: our ability to create and plan high-level goals versus our ability to control our minds and our environment as we take steps to complete those goals.

"The reason why goal interference in particular is so prominent in our lives," they write in *The Distracted Mind*, "is the inherent complexity of our goals and the limitations we have in fulfilling them. Our ability to establish high-level goals is arguably the pinnacle of human brain evolution. Complex, interwoven, time-delayed, and often shared goals are what allow us humans to exert an unprecedented influence over how we interact with the world around us, navigating its multifaceted environments based on our decisions rather than reflexive responses to our surroundings."

But our admirable goal-setting ability runs up against the fundamental limitations of our "cognitive control abilities." Those abilities "have not evolved to the same degree as the executive functions required for goal setting," Gazzaley and Rosen write. "Our cognitive control is really quite limited: We have a restricted ability to distribute, divide, and sustain attention; actively hold detailed information in mind; and concurrently manage or even rapidly switch between competing goals."

Put simply, they say, distraction can be visualized as "a mighty force" (i.e., our goals) colliding "head on with a powerful barrier, represented by the limitations to our cognitive control."

Drawing on research from Gazzaley's neuroscience lab at the University of California at San Francisco, *The Distracted Mind* presents some intriguing findings on those cognitive-control limitations. They diminish our ability to direct and sustain our attention, to remember things, and to switch back and forth between tasks. An especially fascinating thread in the book considers how those limitations shift over the course of our lifetimes: The challenges to our attention and working memory are different for children and adults, and become more intense in certain key areas for older adults.

For example, our ability to stay focused on a task depends upon two separate neural processes: (1) directing our attention to goal-related activities, and (2) blocking out irrelevant distractions. Experiments from Gazzaley's lab have documented that, while older adults can fully retain their ability to focus their attention, their capacity to block out irrelevant distractions diminishes with age. That's one reason why older adults may have more trouble concentrating on a conversation in a crowded restaurant than younger people.

The conflict between our complex goals and our cognitive-control limitations occupies the first part of *The Distracted Mind* and sets the stage for the second part — which I will take up in next column in this series — about how our digital devices are reshaping our experiences with attention and distraction.

But even before we get there, I hope readers can begin to see how *The Distracted Mind* has the potential to shift the nature of our conversation about digital distractions in the classroom.

When I walked out of class after discovering Kate's surreptitious phone scanning, the questions I asked myself were about her, or about my ability to control her behavior: Why can't she focus in class? How can I keep students away from their distracting devices in class?

But when I reconsidered the experience through the lens provided by Gazzaley and Rosen, a new set of questions began to emerge: What goal had I established for Kate's learning that day? How had I created an environment that supported her ability to achieve that goal? And perhaps most important — assuming that the class had a learning goal that mattered for her — did she know about it?

The more powerful the goals we establish for ourselves, and the more we feel ownership over those goals, the more we are able to pursue them in the face of both internal and external distractions.

We all know this from experience. Most of us can shut out distractions when we are pursuing something that really matters to us. So if we want to deal with distractions in teaching, an obvious place to turn would be toward our goals for the classroom: Who creates them? How much do they matter? And how well do students understand them?

Of course, even if I had established a clear goal for Kate's learning that day, and helped her understand and take ownership of it, she would still face challenges to her achieving it from the fundamental limitations of her cognitive control — the same limitations that plague us all, and have done so for all of human history.

But that phone in her purse, as *The Distracted Mind* explains — and as I will consider in more detail in the columns to come — exacerbates the nature of those challenges. Even while it presents Kate with a host of new ways to enhance and support her learning (I'll consider some of those, too, in this series), it also offers her increasingly slick road ramps to distraction. For faculty members, it sets up increasingly more complex barriers to the student learning we hope to foster in our courses.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. His latest book, Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning, was published in the spring of 2016. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.

This article is part of:
The Distracted Classroom

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