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The Distracted Classroom: Do Tech Fasts Work?

By James M. Lang | JUNE 05, 2017



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Two years ago I helped lead a student immersion trip to Ecuador. Along with a dozen or so students, I spent a week learning about the challenges faced by people living in deep poverty just outside the city of Guayaquil. To give our full attention to the experience, we dropped our cell phones into plastic bags upon arrival, and locked them away for the duration of our stay.

In the evenings, after dinner and board games, the students would talk about their desire to maintain better control over their love affair with technology once they had their phones back. I felt a similar impulse, although my pre-existing relationship with my phone was probably less

intense than theirs.

A few weeks after we had returned home, I walked by a student from the trip. She looked up from her phone just in time to catch my eye, and we had a brief but rueful exchange about the fact that our old technological habits had returned so quickly.

The power of those habits — and their capacity to create unwanted distraction in the classroom for both faculty and students — has been the broad focus of this series. Its specific focus has been the findings of a 2016 book by Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World*. In my first column, I explained how the authors view digital distraction as a clash between our goal-setting abilities and our cognitive-control capacities. Part 2 presented their arguments on how new technologies are intensifying that conflict. I want to turn now to their proposed solutions — this month in a general way and next month in the context of the college classroom.

The one solution the book explicitly recommends *against* is technology fasts or detoxes, in which we attempt to cut the (wireless) cord completely and go for extended periods without access to our favorite devices.

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: Is It Getting Worse?
- The Distracted Classroom



As those of us on the Ecuador trip learned in spite of our resolve, detoxing from technology works about as effectively as crash diets of any kind — i.e., not very well. This spring my wife and I gave up meat for 40 days in observance of Lent; on Easter morning we both ate at least a pound of bacon, and boy was it delicious. Likewise with technology fasts.

"While taking a break [from technology] is certainly a good thing and can act to improve our metacognition about the influence of high-tech on our minds," write Gazzaley and Rosen, "there is no evidence that extended tech detoxes actually work."

But just because fasts and detoxes are ineffective — and impractical in today's world — doesn't mean we should go to the other extreme and make no effort at all to manage our use of technology more deliberately. *The Distracted Classroom* does not treat technology itself as "the problem" — since, after all, technology has many benefits for us as both humans and learners. Instead the book's focus is on the problems we face when we have set ourselves a goal (finish writing this essay, read this report, play with my child) and our readily available technologies play upon our cognitive-control limitations to distract us from that goal. Some people aren't worried about that. Commenters in my previous columns have argued that our plastic brains are evolving as we speak, and, soon enough, will adapt to new technologies without any harmful long-term effects.

Not so fast, argue Gazzaley and Rosen — literally. "Meaningful and sustainable changes" to the brain, they write, don't happen easily or quickly. "Our brains ... have mechanisms for maintaining homeostasis," they argue, "a state of stability that is critical for our survival; can you imagine how deleterious it would be if our brains changed dramatically in response to even casual influences?"

Instead of technology fasts, the authors recommend two types of solutions, neither of which involves chucking your phones or heading into the woods for an extended tech-free foray.

Brain-boosting strategies. Gazzaley and Rosen explore a handful of activities that have been proposed to strengthen our abilities to push away distractions and improve our working memories — things like exercise, meditation, and brain-training games. If part of the problem of distraction stems from the limitations of our brain, activities to improve brain power could help us reduce the impact of distraction in our lives.

In their book, they rank each activity along a scale with three points on it: (1) "prescriptive," by which they mean that the activity has solid scientific grounding through multiple randomized controlled trials; (2) "signal," which refers to strategies that have some scientific support but have not been fully supported by controlled trials yet; and (3) "reasonable hypotheses," which are just what they sound like.

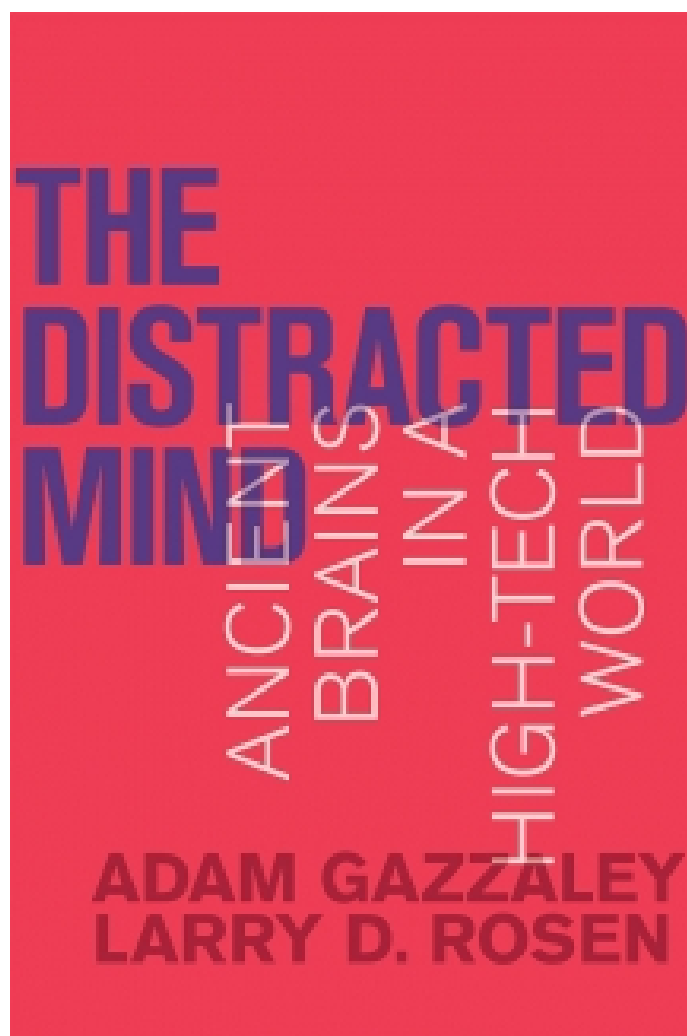
Although Gazzaley and Rosen find strong signals in several areas (such as meditation), only one strategy earns the label of prescriptive: physical exercise. They point to "positive meta-analyses of randomized controlled studies of individuals across the lifespan," and note that exercise's ability to boost our cognitive functions is "low cost and widely accessible," not to mention "associated with many other health benefits."

So there's one more reason to get off the couch.

However, the potential for a college instructor to use the power of physical activity to manage digital distractions in the classroom seems somewhat limited to me. (That may be a result of my limited imagination — I'll go for a run and decide afterward.) Fortunately the book offers a second set of suggestions.

Tech-management strategies. Gazzaley and Rosen note four areas in which people can take a deliberate approach to the management of digital distractions. The following strategies — rather than relying upon boosting brainpower — are ways to be as productive as possible while still taking advantage of all the wonders that technology has to offer.

- **Metacognition:** The first step to solving any problem involves understanding it more clearly. So the authors suggest an initial but essential step of gaining a clearer understanding of the reasons behind distraction, the power of technology to exacerbate it, and the potential solutions. I suggest you start by reading *The Distracted Mind*. But of course we need to understand how distraction affects us personally, not just brains in general. The book thus recommends a number of websites and apps that can help you better monitor your work habits and the role that distraction plays in your life.
- **Accessibility:** I suspect that, as you read this essay, you have multiple tabs open on your desktop or laptop, as well as a phone at hand that offers handy notifications of new messages on Twitter or Facebook, not to mention text messages or phone calls. One of the easiest ways to reduce the potential for distraction involves more deliberate



management of pinging, buzzing, twittering intrusions into your life. I have nothing on my laptop open to distract me from writing these words. When I am finished writing, I will reward myself with a few minutes of social-media time.

- **Boredom:** Our technological distractions promise us brief bursts of pleasure — something that becomes especially tempting when we are pursuing a difficult or repetitive task. Even such tasks can be made more interesting, though. Driving to work every day represents a boring task that may spur us to check our phones while behind the wheel; one easy and obvious solution would be to vary your route occasionally. For academic tasks that require serious concentration the strategy mentioned above may work best: Alternate intensive periods of focus with deliberately planned phases of reward time in which you indulge your desire for distraction. For academic tasks that require less concentration, though, the authors suggest we give ourselves a break: "Having a more enjoyable time multitasking ... may actually be what allows you to accomplish a set of low-priority tasks that really just need to get done."
- **Anxiety:** Here the authors combine the twin challenges of "fear of missing out" (or FOMO, as the kids call it) with the fear of missing some actual emergency. Although I spent the first dozen years of my eldest daughter's life without a cell phone, now I find myself anxious that I will miss an emergency call from my youngest children's school if I don't have my phone available to me at all times. The authors discuss the power of setting clear expectations about your accessibility to others — using apps or auto-response features or even good old-fashioned signs on the door.

You can find more detail on all four of those strategies in *The Distracted Mind*. Next month I'll try to translate Gazzaley and Rosen's ideas into techniques that college instructors might be able to use.

But for now I've earned myself a few minutes of Twitter time.

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.



The Professor Is In: 5 Steps to Productivity

By Karen Kelsky

Let go of the story that everything is a disaster and all hope is lost. Nobody actually knows.

This article is part of:

The Distracted Classroom