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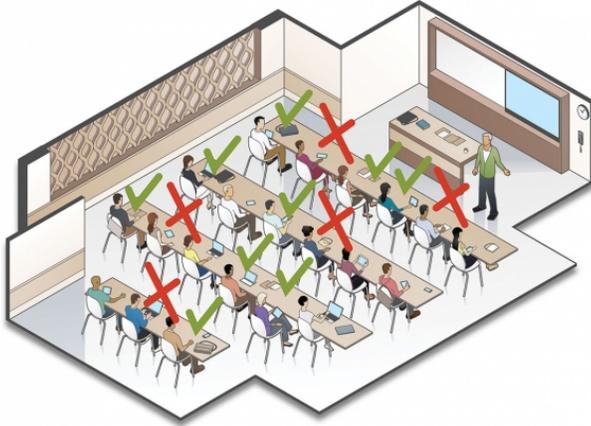
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The Distracted Classroom: Transparency, Autonomy, and Pedagogy



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By James M. Lang | JULY 30, 2017

Last spring semester, I began experimenting with polling as a way to improve student participation in my classroom. Persuaded by the work of Eric Mazur and others, I started polling my students — using multiple-choice or short-answer questions — to collect a quick overview of their opinions on whatever we were discussing.

I signed up for a free polling service, which meant my students did not need any special devices. They could vote from their laptops or phones. The system I used made it very easy to insert questions right into my presentation software, and then

track, analyze, and discuss the responses in real time.

Many faculty members who poll their students use multiple-choice questions. In my "British Literature Survey" course, I tended to use short-answer questions. For example, we began our discussion of Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" — in which two sisters are tempted to eat fruit peddled by sinister goblin men — with students' one-word responses to a very simple question: "What does the goblin fruit symbolize?" Later, when we were discussing George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant," I had them explain in five words or less why Orwell shoots the elephant.

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: Do Tech Fasts Work?
- The Distracted Classroom: Is It Getting Worse?
- The Distracted Classroom



Polling students prior to a discussion proved very effective in democratizing class participation. Instead of the same three or four students dominating the debate, lots of them raised their hand in order to explain their poll answer. When discussion flagged, I would point to a response on the screen — one that maybe the rest of the students had overlooked — and invite the respondent to explain his or her reasoning. The nature of the poll questions required them to keep their initial answers brief, but the in-class discussion encouraged an expansion of their thinking.

In my course evaluations, more than one student noted the positive effect of polling on class discussions. "The polls work really well as a type of cold call to get participation from those who may not voluntarily offer their ideas up for discussion," one wrote. "By everyone answering a common question it creates unity where people can build off each other and offer any additional support."

Midway through the semester, in my role as director of my college's teaching center, I hosted a faculty discussion of Jay R. Howard's excellent book *Discussion in the College Classroom*, which recommends that we build structural methods of participation into our courses, rather than just relying on the vocal students to carry the conversation.

I put that into practice during our campus discussion by asking my colleagues to respond to poll questions so they could see how both the idea and the technology worked. Their response to polling (which some were already using), and to its potential uses in their classrooms, was overwhelmingly positive. But at the end of the evening, a scientist approached me. "When I got out my phone to do the poll," he said, "I had a message from one of my daughters about needing a ride home later. I got distracted in responding to her, and then missed out on the poll."

Ah, yes, the downside. His comment illustrated one of the most difficult challenges we face in our teaching today: how to ensure that we are helping students take advantage of the powers of technology without losing them to the pleasures of distraction.

The first three columns in "The Distracted Classroom" series have explored the fundamental problem of digital distraction in our lives today, the way recent technologies have exacerbated that problem, and the possible solutions. All of those columns drew on the research presented by Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen in their excellent book, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World*.

For this final column in the series, I want to focus on what all of this means for a brick-and-mortar college or university classroom. That's where traditional approaches to teaching and learning — lectures, discussions, group work — have become increasingly intertwined with technologies of all kinds.

The three pathways proposed below represent sound solutions to any teaching problem but have been tailored here to deal with the challenge of digital distractions in class. All three ideas draw from the more general literature on teaching and learning in higher education, as well as from some more specific research on technology and classroom distraction.

Transparency. How well could you answer the following question from a student on the subject of phones, laptops, or other potential distractions in your classroom: "What's the policy and why do we have it?"

My suspicion: Most of us have answered the first part of that question many times in some form or another — on the syllabus or on the first day of the semester. But a smaller subset have answered the "why."

If we want to make a dent in the problem of digital distractions in class, we must begin by clarifying the policies we have created and the reasons behind them. Those reasons might look different from teacher to teacher.

If we are using class time primarily to present new information or ideas to students, then perhaps the best we can do is make the case that distraction hurts their learning, and let them decide for themselves. We could also note that one student surreptitiously watching YouTube videos on a laptop doesn't distract just that student but also the others sitting nearby, so they need to make a choice: Either stay home and watch videos or come to class and focus.

If, on the other hand, we teach by discussion, and put students in a circle so they can help each other better understand complex topics, then distraction becomes a much-greater barrier to listening, understanding, and respect. At some point, we've all tried to have a conversation with people who can't stay off their phones (Hello, my teenage daughters!), and know how frustrating and disrespectful that can feel. Perhaps students in discussion courses need to hear the message: Everyone's views deserve to be heard, understood, and considered with our full attention.

Whatever reasons we might offer for classroom rules on cellphones and laptops, we should first make those reasons clear to ourselves, and then be willing to spend time and effort explaining them to our students.

Autonomy. The literature on helping students take a deep approach toward their learning — as opposed to a more surface or strategic orientation — suggests they learn best when they feel a sense of autonomy in class. Another approach to the problem of digital distraction, then, would be to invite students into the process of setting the policies that will operate in the classroom.

Cathy Davidson has argued very effectively for what she calls a "class constitution" — an agreement that the class has reached together about certain aspects of how the course will operate. It might encompass many topics but could especially focus on policies regarding technology and classroom distractions.

After all, students have been living with distracting devices for their whole lives. They know very well how social media can interfere with their learning, and have likely been introduced by other teachers to some of the research. Some interesting answers might emerge if you posed the following questions to the class: "What will interfere with your learning and the learning of your peers in this class? And what can we do to help each other?"

Asking does not commit you to anything, of course. As I have argued before (and I'm not alone in this), I don't believe the answer involves simplistic solutions like technology bans. An increasing number of students use technology to help them with various forms of neurodiversity. But even that can become part of the conversation in your classroom: "Given that some of your peers might find their laptops or other devices necessary for their best learning, how can we all help each other stay focused and successful in the classroom?"

Opening the floor to such questions can transform the classroom from a dictatorship to a genuine learning community, one in which we all feel the obligation to learn and to do it together.

Pedagogy. A few years ago I had the opportunity to observe the teaching of a colleague in business studies who had structured his course around a fascinating, innovative project. He had partnered with members of a religious community in another country to identify people who needed help starting a small business, and his class was creating a micro-lending program for them. The students researched such programs, raised money, developed policies, and created marketing and promotional materials.

Sitting in, I watched as a short period of traditional instruction was followed by students getting into their groups and moving the project forward. The class became almost like a working office, with students doing research, creating web pages, writing documents. The energy in the room was high, and my colleague circled around from group to group, providing help and pushing students who needed it.

Throughout the class, I saw students sneaking glances at their phones — and in some cases doing so very openly. But they tended to be very quick checks during transition periods in their group work. I did not see anyone get lost for an extended period. The students were almost always pulled away from their phones by the work that had to get done.

Afterward I realized: Distraction wasn't much of a problem in that case because my colleague had transformed his class into an active laboratory of learning. Students had a complex task to complete together, and limited time in which to do it. They also had a powerful motivation for their work: They were helping people lift themselves out of poverty.

We can't all start micro-lending programs with our students. But we can take a lesson from my colleague and consider how we can transform the college classroom into a place where students are actively engaged in meaningful work, supporting one another as they tackle tasks that help them acquire the knowledge or develop the skills they need — with or without the help of technology.

When cellphones and laptops are distracting students from engaging, transformative work in class, they will regulate themselves far more effectively than we can.

We have probably moved past the point at which we can expect to achieve a completely distraction-free classroom. If we want to keep our students focused on learning, we have to invite them into the process of helping themselves, and we have to continue to reflect upon how the classroom experience can inspire students to pursue meaningful goals in the face of our many tempting distractions.

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 @LangOnCourse.

This article is part of:
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