

Chapter 1

Understanding and Reacting to the Digital Distraction Phenomenon in College Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Student use of digital devices for non-class purposes has become ubiquitous in college classrooms across the globe—a phenomenon commonly referred to as digital distraction. The purpose of the chapter is to provide readers with an overview of the prevalence of student digital distraction in college classrooms, an understanding of the factors that contribute to student digital distraction, and a summary of the outcomes experienced by students who succumb to digital distraction during class. The reviewed research indicates that mobile phones and laptop computers are the devices used most for off-task purposes during class. Environmental and person-centered factors appear especially consequential for the motivational interference potential of mobile devices in college classrooms. Unfortunately, student digital distraction has deleterious effects on student learning and the quality of student-instructor rapport in college classrooms. The chapter concludes with descriptions of five strategies college instructors can use to curb student digital distraction in their classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

Undergraduates spend a considerable amount of time using mobile technology (e.g., smart phones, laptop computers, tablets) for leisure purposes outside of the classroom (Li et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2014). Unfortunately, leisure use of mobile devices does not immediately end when students enter college classrooms (e.g., Parry & le Roux, 2018; Ravizza et al., 2017; Wammes et al., 2019). Undergraduates across cultures and continents regularly use mobile devices during class for non-class purposes (Demirbilek & Talan, 2018; Jamet et al., 2020)—a phenomenon commonly referred to as digital distraction (e.g., Flanigan & Titsworth, 2020; McCoy, 2020). The purpose of the present chapter is to provide readers with an understanding of the expansiveness of the digital distraction phenomenon in college classrooms. Literature related to the frequency, causes, and consequences of student digital distraction will be reviewed and implications for instruction in college classrooms will be discussed.

PREVALENCE OF DIGITAL DISTRACTION

Student use of digital devices for off-task purposes is commonplace in college classrooms across the globe. Whether students are taking courses in the United States (Chen et al., 2020), China (Wu et al., 2018), South Africa (Parry & le Roux, 2018), France (Jamet et al., 2020), Canada (Wammes et al., 2019), Germany (Vorderer et al., 2016), Turkey (Demirbilek & Talan, 2018), South Korea (Kim et al., 2019) or elsewhere, they have admitted to or been observed regularly using digital devices for off-task purposes during class. Off-task device use occurs whether students are listening to lectures (Wammes et al., 2019) or working in small groups (Wood et al., 2018). Many students experience digital distraction on an ongoing basis throughout the semester, with only a slight drop-off in frequency occurring around the time of midterm exams (Kim et al., 2019). Although many devices can be used for off-task purposes (such as phones, tablets, laptops, smartwatches, and more), research indicates that two devices—mobile phones and laptop computers—are the devices most misused by undergraduates (Jamet et al., 2020; McCoy, 2016). The following two subsections summarize the prevalence of the misuse of mobile phones and laptop computers during typical class periods in undergraduate classrooms.

Mobile Phone Use

Mobile phones have emerged as the most abused digital device in college classrooms. Most studies show that anywhere from 70-to-90% of college students regularly misuse their mobile phones during a typical class period (e.g., Kornhauser et al., 2016; McCoy, 2020; Parry & le Roux, 2018). Off-task mobile phone usage occurs regularly throughout ongoing lectures—approximately once every five minutes for students who misuse their phones (Kim et al., 2019), resulting in students using their phones for about 25-to-30% of typical class periods (Kim et al., 2019; McCoy, 2020). However, it is worthwhile to note that researchers comparing undergraduates' self-reported device usage with tracked device usage have detected that many undergraduates underreport—either intentionally or unintentionally—the frequency of their off-task device usage during class (Kim et al., 2019), which implies that the actual amount of time spent using mobile phones during class might be higher than undergraduates admit to researchers.

Misuse of mobile phones during class typically involves a lot of texting. For instance, more than half of all college students surveyed report frequently texting (McCoy, 2020; Parry & le Roux, 2018), while

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