Chapter 6
Learning in the Face of Digital Distractions:
Empowering Students to Practice Self-Regulated Learning

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ABSTRACT

Digital distractions are an important and prevalent aspect of college students' lives. Using a self-regulated learning perspective, this chapter provides an in-depth understanding of students' digital distractions in academic settings and highlights how college instructors can empower their students to manage digital distractions and self-regulate their own learning. In particular, the chapter discusses both the causes and consequences of engaging in digital distractions with a focus on the impact of multitasking. In addition, the chapter argues that students' engagement in digital distractions is closely connected to their motivation and emotions. This chapter highlights how college students can regulate their digital distractions throughout the learning process during each phase of self-regulated learning. Finally, the chapter reviews the ways college instructors can support students' management of distractions through their instructional approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

Because of both the consistent presence and the importance of digital technology in students' lives, it is vital for both college students and their instructors to consider the role of digital technology in student learning. Digital technology can be a powerful tool for engagement and connection when used correctly, but also can be a source of temptation and distraction when used incorrectly. Prior research has suggested that distractions caused by digital technology (i.e., digital distractions) can negatively impact students' learning and performance on academic tasks (e.g., Barton et al., 2021; Bauer, 2018; Flanigan & Titsworth, 2020). This chapter adopts a self-regulated learning perspective to provide avenues for better understanding and intervening in college students' engagement in digital distractions.

Self-regulated learning can be defined as the active, effortful processes students can engage in as they complete academic tasks (Pintrich & Zusho, 2007; Zimmerman, 2000). Central to theories of self-regulated learning is the idea that students are able to regulate aspects of themselves (i.e., cognition, motivation, affect, behavior) and their environment (i.e., context) (Pintrich & Zusho, 2007). Self-regulated learning frameworks have been applied to both face-to-face and online college contexts to examine the strategies that students use to increase their learning and academic achievement (e.g., Azevedo & Cromley, 2004; Kim et al., 2020). Moreover, self-regulated learning frameworks can be used to understand students' distractibility and to identify ways that students can overcome distractions (Brady et al., 2021; Flanigan & Kim, 2021). This chapter contributes to this line of literature by providing an in-depth understanding of students' digital distractions in an academic setting and specifying the ways that college instructors can empower their students to manage digital distractions and self-regulate their own learning.

By employing a self-regulated learning perspective, this chapter specifically aims to explore students' digital distractions in five ways. First, the authors briefly review the prevalence of digital distractions. Second, the authors synthesize prior literature to highlight the potential detrimental impact of engaging in digital distractions while simultaneously working on academic tasks. Third, the authors describe the potential causes of engaging in digital distractions with a particular focus on students' emotions and motivation. Fourth, using self-regulated learning frameworks, the authors provide specific and practical strategies that students can use in different phases of their learning to manage their digital distractions. Finally, the authors suggest strategies that can be used by college instructors to support students' self-regulated learning within and beyond the classroom so that students can better learn in the face of distractions.

THE PREVALENCE OF DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS

Digital technology has become a consistent presence in college students' lives (Bauer, 2018). Specifically, digital technology is an essential part of students' academic courses (Kruger, 2015). For example, students may use their laptops during class to take notes. In addition, college students use digital technology to connect with one another (Kruger, 2015). While digital technology offers opportunities for learning and connection, it can also trigger students to participate in off-task behaviors in academic settings (Dontre, 2020). Students' off-task usage of digital technology such as tablets, cellphones, or laptops is commonly referred to as *digital distraction* (Flanigan & Kim, 2020; McCoy, 2020). Importantly, students' engagement in digital distractions is not necessarily always prompted by the digital device itself; rather, many factors (e.g., task factors, environmental factors, learner factors) may influence a students' engagement