

With Tech Tools, How Should Teachers Tackle Multitasking In Class?

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Important research compiled on the effects of students multitasking while learning shows that they are losing depth of learning, getting mentally fatigued, and are weakening their ability to transfer what they have learned to other subjects and situations.

Educators as well as students have noticed how schoolwork suffers when attention is split between homework and a buzzing smartphone. Many students, like Alex Sifuentes, who admit to multitasking while studying, know the consequences well. “When I was grounded for a couple of months and didn’t have my phone, I got done extra early with homework,” Sifuentes wrote in response to Annie Murphy Paul’s article, [“How Does Multitasking Change the Way Kids Learn?”](#)

Parents also see a big difference in their kids’ studying habits. Jenifer Gossman reported that her 17-year-old daughter asked her brother to hide her phone so she could study for several important exams. After hours of studying, Gossman’s daughter reappeared, amazed at how productive she’d been without her phone by her side.

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But for many, the solution isn't simply to do away with the gadgets — mostly because they're the same tools that actually help do the work, and it can be confusing for young adults to distinguish the difference between work and everything else.

“We have a new problem forthcoming and that is our devices that once were just an entertainment tool are also becoming our educational and work tools,” wrote commenter Des. “And with this all combined into one, it's hard to put one away without the other being easy to access. With these things being integrated, we also start to lose sight of what is actually work and what is entertainment.”

While some teachers want to remove all digital distractions from the classroom, others say Generation M's biggest challenges — like giving schoolwork undivided attention — require learning a new set of behaviors that need to be taught and modeled. Besides, tasks like online research, communicating with teachers and other students, and sharing ideas and divvying up work online are mandatory parts of doing school work. So the question for educators is: what to do about it?

WHEN DOES IT WORK?

At the totally wired, textbook-free New Tech Institute in Evansville, Indiana, high school students are online for all their assignments, working on Dell laptops in 90-minute subject blocks. Principal Michael Allen admits that keeping students simultaneously connected and focused for that length of time has been a big challenge. “It is very hard to manage teenagers with technology for 90 minutes of academic purpose,” he said.

But Allen emphasizes that, when dealing with new and emerging technologies, there will undoubtedly be new and emerging behaviors that will need guidance — a responsibility he believes falls somewhat on schools. Much like Howard Rheingold's call to name [attention](#) as a vital digital skill in his book *NetSmart*, Allen thinks it's important not only to teach kids how to use technology, it's important to show them how to be aware of what they're doing while using it, too.

Allen recently challenged some of his educators to sit with students and teach them how to watch a video math tutorial, piece by piece: “How do you structure watching a tutorial? How many times do you hit pause? How many times do you watch something before you get all the way through it? How do you put yourself in an environment where you can remain focused?” He hopes that teacher guidance can help shape the new behaviors required of students in the digital age, and that includes avoiding being distracted by texts and Facebook feeds.

“Look, it's not going away. It exists, it's permeated every other aspect of their life,” Allen said about teens and tech distractions. “The article is timely and correct in so many ways: multitasking is one of the things that needs to be tackled about tech.”

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Thirty-year veteran educator Elizabeth Smith, who teaches AP English at Hume-Fogg High School in Nashville, says that over the last decade, teens' work has changed. “The things that I notice the most are the reduced transfer of knowledge discussed by Poldrack in the article, and the more shallow learning that Meyer mentions,” she said. Smith had a no-tech rule in her class until a few years ago, when school policy moved from prohibiting phones to allowing them in passing periods and in class, with teacher approval. “Of course, this is a constant problem, since they now have them legally at school — their use filters into the classroom.”

In order to maintain student focus, especially during open-book tests, during which many students have the book stored on their iPhone, Smith takes extra precautions. “This is a much bigger issue than ever this year. I have to go around and disable wi-fi (which most of them use) on reading devices,” she said.

But as for the effects of multitasking on her students, as Smith sees it, the problem might be more complex than just teen brains being re-wired by technology interruptions. She also believes that many students aren’t being challenged and engaged enough to stimulate their brains in class. The result is kids who are looking for a welcome, exciting distraction. “I have recently discussed this with my colleagues, and we believe that this is a result of rote learning with much less focus on critical thinking,” she said. “Maybe it is a combination. Perhaps if we were given more leeway at all levels (which I have in my AP class) to teach important concepts in-depth, students would find the learning we are doing more intriguing and would be less likely to head to Facebook for a distraction.”

How will students stay focused? Where will teachers draw the line? For Elizabeth Smith, it’s a no-brainer; even though she can’t enforce it at home, she still has a strict no-tech policy during class. “I prefer talking to my students when they are actually in the room,” she said. “I want my students to boldly take risks. They cannot do this if their ideas come anonymously across an electronic device.”

But even then, students sometimes get distracted. “Students sometimes Tweet things I say in class,” she said, “which, so far, has only been in good humor.”

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