INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT VIA A TECH BAN IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Extensive debate exists on the efficacy of allowing students to use electronic devices in the classroom. While some studies have identified benefits for students (Hyden, 2005), other research points to disadvantages for learners who are allowed access to electronic devices. Notably, these devices can lead to distraction as students partake in web surfing, shopping, texting, and other activities (Barak, Lipson & Lerman, 2006). However, there are additional considerations that have led to experiments with banning these devices, as well as research pointing to increased engagement among students who are not permitted their use in the classroom.

As a result of such research, I empowered my faculty to impose a policy banning electronic devices in the classroom during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. The purpose of my presentation is to review the results of this pilot “ban” on electronic devices among my faculty, along with my own experience teaching a graduate course where I also implemented the ban.

What were the outcomes of this small scale experiment? How did the reality of a non-electronic classroom compare with the findings of recent studies? What was the reaction of students who make up two generations that are accustomed to working, learning and interacting on digital screens? How did the data (course evaluations, grades) and anecdotal evidence compare in courses where the faculty took up the challenge to ban electronic devices and those where they did not? (Imposing this ban was an entirely voluntary choice).

Traditionally, notetaking has been perceived as useful for storing content, whether from a class lecture or from reading and other activities where the “intake” of information is a desired outcome. However, notetaking is also correlated to what might be called the cognitive encoding of content, which is a crucial part of learning. Some experiments in notetaking on electronic devices suggest that using computers in the classroom, for example, may hamper cognitive encoding (Sana, Weston & Cepeda, 2013) even as it allows for increased storage of content.

My pilot ban of electronic devices in the classroom was conducted on a group of participants who represent a mixed diversity of demographic differences. On the one hand, such factors as age, educational background, and socio-economic status fit within a relatively narrow band due to the self-selecting nature of student cohorts in a highly exclusive and expensive university. On the other hand, participants represented a wide range of nationalities (over 60% were international visiting students) and academic disciplines. For a number of reasons that I will explain in my presentation, I chose to limit the ban to qualitative courses and armed my faculty with research from such disparate fields as neuroscience, adult learning and leadership, and communications, to enlist their students in this experiment.

Keywords: Technology ban, laptops, mobile phones, student engagement, millennial learners, gen Z.