

Reclaiming Our Students' Attention in the Age of Distraction: A Discussion

Abstract

*This proposal details a discussion session on reclaiming our students' attention. It aims to stimulate an ongoing conversation on working with digital natives in the classroom. In order to set up this proposed discussion, I first provide the results of a "phone break-up" activity that I performed with my students which was inspired by Catherine Price's (2018) *How to Break Up with Your Phone*. This topic is personal for me because as an educator who prides myself on my ability to engage a classroom, I'm finding that task more difficult with each successive year.*

Keywords: Attention Spans, Engagement, Technology Addiction

Introduction

This proposal is for a discussion session on reclaiming our students' attention in the classroom. It's not designed to present a flashy exercise such as "using Dolly Parton to teach Expectancy Theory." Rather, its aim is to stimulate an ongoing conversation on working with digital natives in the classroom. This topic is personal for me because as an educator who prides myself on my ability to engage a classroom, I'm finding that task more difficult with each successive year. While the generation gap is certainly a factor (e.g. they get less and less of my pop culture references), students' overall diminished social skills due to growing up with a smartphone cannot be dismissed. Thus, in order to set up the proposed discussion, I will first provide a brief anecdote.

Backstory

In 2012, my classroom environment changed. I have vivid memories of being able to facilitate classroom discussions that went bell-to-bell in classes ranging from 55 to 150 minutes. Then one semester in 2012, as if a light switch was flipped to the off position, it all changed. The students were still the same nice respectful people, but the conversation eerily stopped. As I look back, my running theory is 2012 was the first time I recalled that most of my students had smartphones. Though the iPhone was released in 2007, it took several years for everyone in my classroom to have one (or a similar device). Once my students started coming to class distracted, I've never been able to rediscover the magic of those pre-smartphone classes.

I've learned to adapt to this new reality, albeit in a somewhat forced manner. My classrooms shifted from facilitated discussions to in-class activities, where students take classroom time to prepare responses (to prompts that I used to be able to solicit from direct questions to the class). I've also taken time to develop my performance and entertainment skills.

It's common to see word puzzles, magic tricks, and corny jokes in my classroom as ice breakers, along with Kahoot and other flashy software for informal assessments. Yet with such adjustments comes some concern. How much more sensational will I have to get to keep my students' attention? Much like how addictive behaviors become dangerous because of the necessity of ever-increasing stimuli to achieve a basic dopamine release, I fear that I cannot keep upping my game to appease an ever-distracted audience that needs me to compete with TikTok for their attention.

The Phone Breakup Activity

An instinctive solution to address phone addiction is to use discipline to keep the devices out of the classroom. It's sensible to have syllabus policies that punish the appearance of the phones in class. While such practices make sense, they are no more effective than starvation diets for long-term weight loss. Heavy-handed discipline is a temporary fix for three hours of students' weeks, but it does not address how our students deal with technology designed to be addictive.

Thus, in the spirit of Popeye (that's all I can stand, I can't stand no more), I chose to run a self-development/reflective exercise with my students based off of Catherine Price's (2018) book, *How to Break Up with Your Phone*. I've also been recently approved to teach a freshman seminar on this topic for Fall 2023. The premise of the break-up exercise was to provide students with 30 days of small activities designed to assist them in forming new relationships with their devices and having them journal about their experiences.

The specifics of the exercise and sample journal responses are attached as an appendix to this proposal. Of note is that the activity is not "lock up your phone for a month" nor does it push students into a forced monastic lifestyle. The activity does ask participants to go dark for a

short period of time, but the bulk of the 30 days involve becoming more aware of the mindless time spent on one's phone and intentionally placing friction in key areas. For example, one task is to simply report the quantity of daily screen time noted on the phone's monitoring app.

Another is to go for a walk without your phone. A more technical task has participants organize their apps into separate screens (e.g. essential apps, tools that are used infrequently, and ones that are basically junk food). Taken together, the activity has students indirectly perform a cost-benefit analysis for their personal technology that results in them being more mindful about when and when not to use such digital devices.

The Proposed Roundtable

Admittedly, I do not have all the answers to the conundrum alluded to in this proposal, and I even struggle with the same phone addictive behaviors as my students. Thus, the aim of this session is not to provide solutions. It is to begin a conversation with other likeminded academics.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

The cited foundation for this topic really varies based on how the problem is identified. For example, the notion of wanting to have a social environment in the classroom is rooted in the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000), which models the interaction between cognitive, teaching, and social presence as guiding classroom actions. At more of an observational ground-level, the effect of screens on our lives has received mainstream attention with the Social Dilemma docu-drama (Orlowski, 2020) and through recent best sellers such as Cal Newport's (2019) *Digital Minimalism* and Nicholas Carr's (2010) *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. Additionally, the notion of both IOS and Android having apps and functions (e.g. Screen Time, Do Not Disturb, and Focus) designed to get people to use

devices in a more purposeful manner signals a market for solutions to assist an overstimulated civilization.

Session Description

Ideally, I'd like to run this roundtable in the manner that I used to run my classes pre-smartphone. I'd lay out the premise of this proposal (e.g. students are distracted, my phone break up activity with my students, etc.) and see where the conversation goes. As such a notion may be off-putting to reviewers and a poor sell to conference attendees, a possible structure for the roundtable would be the following prompts:

- (1) Present my observations of student apathy (5 minutes).
- (2) Present the results of my phone break up assignment with students (5 minutes).
- (3) Prompt 1: Are my observations unique, or have you experienced anything similar (15 minutes)?
 - a. Aim: Build an emotional connection and buy-in to this issue.
- (4) Prompt 2: How would you define the problem that we are discussing (15 minutes)?
 - a. Aim: This is not a discipline issue. It's cultural and sociological.
- (5) Prompt 3: What is one action we can all take to address the issues we have identified in this discussion (15 minutes)?
 - a. Aim: Explore possible collaborative projects.
- (6) Wrap Up (5 minutes)

Concluding Notes

I'm proposing this as a 60-minute roundtable, but I am willing to adjust to a 45-minute session or even a virtual session if you feel the topic fits better in a different format.

References

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Appendix A: Phone Break-Up Activities

Day 1

Make sure you have a tracking app

Reflection question(s):

- How much time do you THINK you spend on your phone each day?

Day 2

Assess your current relationship

Reflection question(s):

- What do you love about your phone?
- What don't you love about your phone?
- What changes do you notice in yourself when you spend lots of time on your phone?
- What would you like your relationship with your phone to look like?

Day 3

Mindfulness

Pay attention to (some or all of these situations):

- Situations when you always seem to use your phone
- How your posture changes when you use your phone
- Your emotional state right before you reach for your phone
- Your emotional state right after you use your phone
- How your phone grabs your attention
- How you feel when you don't have your phone
- How other people use their phones and how that makes you feel
- Your happiest moment of the day – was your phone involved?

Day 4

Take stock and take action!

Reflection question(s):

- Analyze the data on your tracking app. What does it signal about your phone usage?
- Give yourself a mental roadblock. When you reach for your phone ask yourself these questions:
 - What for?
 - Why now?
 - What else?

Day 5

Delete social media apps from your phone (for now).

Day 6

Brainstorming Activity

Jot down whatever comes to your mind for (some or all of these situations):

- I've always loved to:
- I've always wanted to:
- What I was a kid, I was fascinated by:
- If I had more time, I would like to:
- I tend to "lose myself" in these activities:
- People I would like to spend more time with include:

Day 7

Go outside and take a walk – without your phone.

Day 8

Disable all NOTIFICATIONS

(note: phone calls and texts are not counted as notifications)

Day 9

Tidy Up Your Apps

Which apps:

- Steal your attention?
- Improve your daily life?

Day 9

Your New Layout

Menu: Essential Apps

Home Screen: Tools

Second Screen: Junk food and email

Third screen: Utilities, undeletables, clutter

USE FOLDERS!

Day 10

Do not charge your phone in the room where you sleep*

Day 11

Set up “positive triggers.”

Day 12

Go outside and take a walk* – without your phone.

Day 13

Set Boundaries

- Create “no-phone zones”
- Give your phone a wake-up and curfew time.

Day 14

Stop Phubbing (and call out those who do it)

Day 15

Stop, Breathe, and Be for one minute (3X)

Day 16

Practice being bored for 15 minutes.

Day 17

Commit to exercising your attention span each day.

Day 18

Experiment with meditation

- > Calm
- > Headspace
- > YouTube
- >Or just repeat day 16.....

Day 19

Prepare for your trial separation!

[REALITY CHECK: Depending on what's going on, many of you cannot fully unplug. In that case, determine your absolute bare necessities.]

Day 20-21

Goal: Turn off your phone for 24 hours. The other 24 hours are yours to do whatever you like.

[REALITY CHECK: Depending on what's going on, many of you cannot fully unplug. In that case, determine your absolute bare necessities.]

Day 22

Brainstorming Activity

Jot down whatever comes to your mind for (some or all of these situations):

- > What did you observe about your behavior during the separation?
- > How do you now feel about your phone?
- > What was the hardest part of the separation?
- > What was the best part?
- > What surprised you?

Day 23

The Phone "Phast"

Leave your phone behind for 30-60 minutes at any point today.

Day 24

Go outside and take a walk – without your phone.

Day 25

Declutter your email inboxes

Day 26

Instead of checking something yourself, ask someone else to look it up for you.

Day 27

Plan a “digital Sabbath” some time during each of the next four weeks.

Day 28

Save this list for your reference:

Seven Phone Habits of Highly Effective People (C. Price)

1. I have healthy phone routines
2. I have manners, and I know how to use them
3. I'm not perfect
4. I phast from my phone
5. I have a life
6. I practice pausing
7. I exercise my attention

Day 29

Set a time each week to check in with your phone relationship.

Day 30

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU DID IT!

Write your breakup letter to your phone on the class blog and do something to celebrate your accomplishment. GO YOU!

Appendix B: Sample Journaling Responses

Day 1: I own an iPhone so I have screen time and on average I think I spend about 5 hours on my phone each day.

Day 2:

What do you love about your phone?

- I love that my phone keeps me connected to my family and friends. I also love that it gives me comfort when I am leaving work late at night and that if anything happened, I would be able to call for help.
- What don't you love about your phone?
 - I do not love the distraction my phone causes. Sometimes when I should be doing homework, I find myself looking at social media.
- What changes do you notice in yourself when you spend lots of time on your phone?
 - I feel more exhausted and feel guilty for spending too much time on my phone.
- What would you like your relationship with your phone to look like?
 - I would like to be able to use my phone to talk with people but not spend so much time on social media. I want to be able to leave my phone at home and not feel panicked without the phone

Day 9: Tidy Up Your Apps

I only have two screens of apps, the first with the settings and other default apps and the second with all the apps I use daily. I ended up putting all the games and shopping apps in a separate folder that I keep away from unless I am very bored. I named it "junk food." I really only use those apps if I am traveling and have lots of free time. The layout I have now is really beneficial for me. I see lots of friends who have pages and pages of apps which stresses me out. I also like to save storage by having as few apps as I can.

Day 22: What I observed about my behavior during the separation was that I was more aware of the beauty of life. I know that sounds cheesy but I went on a walk at a state park with my dad. Instead of taking pictures of everything I tried to truly appreciate it.

I was more aware of how many phone calls and text messages I get from work. Without my phone I do not think I could work. The hardest part of the separation was trying to not get on it when I was bored but instead I wrote a letter to my friend. The best part of the separation was how much more I paid attention to people, the outdoors, and my schoolwork. What surprised me was how productive I was at work, school, and home.

Day 30: Breakup letter

To my phone,

I am happy that I have fixed the toxic relationship we had. I leaned on you in my down times and used you as a pastime. I realize you are beneficial to me so I am not completely shutting you out of my life, but it is time to break up. I am growing and becoming a better person without you. I have made major adjustments in life that do not involve you and that is what I want for my future. I am proud of myself for controlling this bad habit and will continue making progress.