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Study documents how much students text during class

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on October 21, 2013 - 3:32am

If you are leading a class and imagine that students seem more distracted than ever by their digital devices, it's not your imagination. And they aren't just checking their e-mail a single time.

A new study has found that more than 90 percent of students admit to using their devices for non-class activities during class times. Less than 8 percent said that they never do so.

The study is based on a survey of 777 students at six colleges and universities. Barney McCoy, associate professor of broadcasting at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, conducted the study and *The Journal of Media Education* [1] has just published the results. Most of the students were undergraduates, and graduate students were less likely to use their devices for non-class purposes. Undergraduates reporting using their devices for non-class purposes 11 times a day, on average, compared to 4 times a day for graduate students.

Here is the study's breakdown on the proportion of students admitting to different levels of in-class device use:

Frequency of Student Device Use in Class for Non-Class Purposes, Per Day

Never	8%
1-3 times	35%
4-10 times	27%
11-30 times	16%
More than 30 times	15%

Asked why they were using their devices in class, the top answer was texting (86 percent), followed by checking the time (79 percent). e-mail (68 percent), social networking (66 percent), web surfing (38 percent) and games (8 percent).

While students admitted to being somewhat distracted by their own devices and those of others, they reported advantages to using the devices in class. The top advantages they cited were staying connected (70 percent), avoiding boredom (55 percent) and doing related classwork (49 percent).

Texting in class is a source of constant frustration to professors, but about 30 percent of students reported that their instructors did not have a policy on the subject. (Of course there is a chance some of those students didn't read the syllabus.)

Given how attached students are to their devices, it is perhaps not surprising that only 9 percent favor a ban on having them in classrooms. However, 54 percent said that they thought it reasonable to have a policy. They just don't want those policies too strictly enforced. More than 65 percent said that they believed first offenses should be dealt with only with warnings.

McCoy writes in the paper that the widespread use of digital devices in class makes it important for academics to get a better understanding of just how and why students feel the need to be online for non-academic reasons. "When college students multi-task with digital devices in classrooms, research indicates it may hamper their ability to pay attention," he writes. "This behavior, research suggests, has become more habitual, automatic and distracting."

Teaching and Learning [2]

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