

Active Learning in the Age of Classroom Cellphones

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At a recent academic conference, I attended a plenary session on active learning. While spouting the virtues of student engagement, the presenter seemed to be admonishing cellphone use in class, labeling it as a sign of distracted and bored learners.

I was feeling uncomfortable in the second row from the front because I was using my phone to take pictures, live-tweet the lecture and engage with other conference attendees on social media. I wondered, "Is he talking about me?" However, not only was I paying attention, but I was also completely engaged in and interacting with his content in a self-directed way. If that's not active learning, I don't know what is.

In my own classes, I do not have a cellphone policy, and I generally encourage free use of devices of any kind. However, many of my colleagues do not feel the same way and, in fact, discourage the use of phones in class. They view them as a distraction rather than a supplement. It confuses me that these faculty members want their students to be independent learners who engage with their content, yet they don't want them to use devices (i.e., research tools) during class. When do they expect students to engage with the content and research independently? After class when they don't have valuable access to the instructor?

Although cognitive science shows that we cannot pay attention to two things at once, with practice we can get better at multitasking. It's like when you first start driving a car. The radio is off, and your attention is completely focused on the task of driving. After several months, driving becomes cognitively automatized, and you find it easier to sing along to the radio or hold a conversation with your passenger.

While walking around Manhattan with my mother last spring, I navigated the streets using my phone. She also had a phone that she uses to send emails, text and post on Facebook, so I expected her to navigate the city alongside me, providing twice the data about directions and places to visit. But even after I taught her how to use Google Maps on her phone to search for restaurants, read reviews and find directions, she wasn't able to use it on the street like I do.

In fact, when she attempted to use it in public, she became frustrated and overwhelmed. In hindsight, I realize that it may be that she hadn't yet had the training to develop the cognitive processing speed necessary to perform the tasks in rapid succession, but neither of us thought of it in those terms at the time. We did, however, realize that we each had different expectations of what was appropriate in terms of our interaction with and use of technology.

We sat down and had a talk about our different expectations. I shared my expectation that everyone who has a smartphone should use it to access available data such as maps, online articles and customer reviews to engage with the environment. When we are all doing this, we have even more data from which to make decisions, which will make our shared experience richer and more efficient.

My mother's expectations were different. She didn't want to undermine my authority by co-researching and navigating. I wondered if this was cultural. In my social group, we all have access to the same information, so why would I think she was undermining me? But my mother -- who lives in a different part of the country and whose regional culture is different from the one I've chosen in terms of geography, industry, politics and religion -- expects that there will be one primary researcher, navigator and leader.

Perhaps that's what is really going on with faculty members' diverging stances on cellphone use -- academe is made up of cultures of people who hold different paradigms related to authority. I'll be honest, the first time I truly flipped the classroom and used a student-centered approach, it was terrifying. When everyone in the room informed the decisions, the power shifted. But I quickly realized that I was still in control, and in fact more so. I changed from talking to a large group of students to talking to each student individually. To think of it as a network, I increased the number of nodes, and it made me feel more connected and effective than ever before.

As a thought experiment, let's explore the idea that faculty members' personal values may be reflected in the structure of their classes. In his blog post "[Understanding Trump](#)," George Lakoff defined a difference in "moral hierarchy" that is held by "conservatives." He says that people who fall into this category view social structure as a hierarchy similar to a family structure, with the head of household being at the top. This structure of order filters down with the next highest-ranking person being in charge. If this is the way that some faculty members view social operations, then it would be impossible for them to establish and enforce a truly student-centered classroom where everyone equally informs the lesson. Similarly, we may create a perfectly student-centered classroom, but our students' values may not allow them to perform as autonomously as we would like them to.

Regardless of which camp we fall into, this idea reminds us to invite tolerance and realize that our colleagues might not view active learning the same way that we do. Rather than prescribing how we think others should learn or engage with a class, let's think instead in descriptive terms and accept how others currently are learning and engaging.

I would love to see a world in which everyone feels comfortable with shared access to information. As an educator, I want to see learners grow by researching, navigating, publishing and engaging with content in every way possible. We may not all get the luxury of interacting in the way we expect to, but expression and listening are the first steps toward learning, and that is a value that unites everyone in higher education and defines it as a culture unto itself.