


# One Way to Fight Digital Distraction

 [chronicle.com/article/One-Way-to-Fight-Digital/243097](http://chronicle.com/article/One-Way-to-Fight-Digital/243097)

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Welcome to Teaching, a weekly newsletter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. This week, Beckie considers professors' efforts to inspire contemplation among digitally-distracted students and flags a new initiative to encourage science professors to embrace active learning. You'll also find suggested reading material and a tip from a reader.

## Fighting Digital Distraction

For the past several years, Patricia Owen-Smith has begun each class period with about five minutes of silence. Deep learning, said Owen-Smith, a professor of psychology and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Emory University, requires silence and space.

Silence, however, can feel unnatural for students, Owen-Smith said. One even remarked that she had never really experienced it before those few minutes at the start of class. After all, students — like many of us — are usually glued to their devices. “It’s like pulling teeth,” Owen-Smith said, “to get them to give up their iPhones.” (For the most part, Owen-Smith bans cellphones and laptops in her classroom.)

Early in the semester, there’s a lot of fidgeting during those first five minutes, and students seem unsure of where to look or what to do with their hands. But over time, Owen-Smith has found, students “begin to sink into it.” By the time midterm course evaluations come around, she said, no one has anything negative to say about the habit.

Beginning in silence, she observes, sets the tone for the way the whole class period unfolds.

Owen-Smith, who has written a [book](#) on contemplative practices in higher education, is not the first professor to raise alarms about [digital distraction](#), or to seek an antidote. In 2013, our colleague Marc Parry wrote [this fascinating story](#) about the efforts of David M. Levy, a professor in the Information School at the University of Washington, to help students in his “Information and Contemplation” course manage their digital habits. Like Owen-Smith, Levy



began his class quietly, inviting students to meditate. He also had them use a software program to record and observe their multitasking habits. Watching footage of herself jumping from one activity to another, one student observed to Marc: “I don't know how I get anything done.”

This past fall, I wrote about a [course](#) in which students give up speaking and electronics, among other things, for an entire month. That course, “Living Deliberately: Monks, Saints, and the Contemplative Life,” wasn't developed to get students off of their smartphones — it grew instead from a question posed to the professor, Justin McDaniel, by a student in an introductory Buddhism class: Why would anyone want to live as a monk?

Still, McDaniel, a religious-studies professor at the University of Pennsylvania, can point to the benefits students reap from following ascetic practices. In addition to allowing for contemplation, the restrictions help students concentrate and form deeper connections with others, he said.

How do you combat digital distraction in your class? Does it work? Have you ever asked students to practice silence, and if so, what happened? Tell me about your experience at [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com) and it may appear in a future newsletter.

PS: If you're really interested in this topic, you may want to check out a list of readings from Levy's course, included at the end of [Marc's piece](#).

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### **Encouraging Active Learning in STEM**

The Council of Independent Colleges [announced](#) this week the creation of a new program meant to encourage science professors at member institutions to adopt and spread active-learning techniques. The program, “The CIC Seminars on Science Pedagogy,” is funded with a \$300,000 grant from the [W.M. Keck Foundation](#) and based on the work of the physicist [Carl E. Wieman](#).

“In this model,” the council's materials say, “faculty members serve more as coaches than lecturers while students are challenged by increasingly complex problems; prompt and extensive feedback allows students to emulate how scientists think and then to discover new knowledge.”

The council will hold two seminars, in the summers of 2019 and 2020. For each, it will choose nine member colleges to bring teams of four faculty members representing up to two disciplines from among biology, chemistry, and physics. At least two of the professors from each team are to teach introductory courses the following year using what they learned in the program, and at least one participating department is to use the methods in all of its introductory courses the year after that.

Applications are due May 16, and more information is available [here](#).

**\*\*A paid message from: Auburn University - Office of International Programs:** Join Auburn University's International Perspectives on University Teaching and Learning Symposium in Orlando May 30-June 1. [Register and submit an essay for possible publication.](#)\*\*

## ICYMI

- While both Carol Dweck's work on mind-set and Angela Duckworth's on grit are important, "they are neither infallible nor the sole answer to questions about student success," [writes](#) Joshua R. Eyler on his blog. Instead, he argues, educators should take a broader view of resiliency.
- Lindsay Dodgson [throws cold water](#) on the idea of learning styles in *Business Insider Australia*, citing research on students who studied the way their learning styles suggest but saw no improvement in their performance.
- Can artificial intelligence make teaching more personal? That's the question [posed by one](#) of several articles on teaching and learning in *The Digital Campus*, a new special report from *The Chronicle*.

## Getting Students' Attention With a Quote

[Recently](#), we asked if a course you took in college has stuck with you, perhaps affecting the way you teach today.

Phil Simon, a lecturer in Arizona State University's business school, has adopted a technique used by his statistics professor at Carnegie Mellon University. The professor, Simon wrote, began each class period with an obscure quote whose meaning was then woven into the lecture. "I do the same thing today," Simon wrote. "I believe that it helps keep my students engaged and makes the class more fun."

For instance, Simon kicks off a class period on data visualization in his analytics course with a quote attributed to Napoleon, "Un bon croquis vaut mieux qu'un long discours," which loosely translates to "A good sketch is better than a long speech."

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at [dan.berrett@chronicle.com](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com), [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com), or [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com). If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Beckie

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