Letter from the Editor-in-Chief:
Digital Distractions

Russell L. Herman
The University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC

On a trip for coffee, to get out of the office, I noticed that many of the students sitting in the student union were either sitting with laptops or on their smartphones. The only person not digitally connected was an older person sitting in a chair watching the passing students. As I went back to my office I saw that bikers and skateboarders were carrying their laptops or talking on their phones as they passed by me. Students are not the only ones digitally connected. Many faculty are plugged in as well, whether they are navigating the campus or are in meetings. We are clearly in a digital age and mobile devices can be distracting.

Many of our students are digital natives, a term referring to those raised in a digital world and introduced in Prensky (2001). This typically refers to those who had grown up since the mid to late 1990’s, when the Internet became accessible to a wide population. This includes both the Millennials and Generation Z populations.

It has been common to put people into different generations. Meyer (2016) lists one such grouping as shown in Table 1. Based on this table, most of our current students are Millennials, but Generation Z college students are about to enter our colleges and universities. We expect that they will be even more connected to their digital devices as they have most likely been fully plugged into social media and never very far from their devices even while in the classroom. At the same time, Millennials are returning as professors (Gardner, 2016).

Table 1. Common Generation Classification (Meyer, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Birth Years</th>
<th>Ages as of 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generation Z</td>
<td>2000s to today</td>
<td>0–16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennials</td>
<td>1980—2000s</td>
<td>16–36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>1960s—1980s</td>
<td>36–56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>1946—1964</td>
<td>52–70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Generation</td>
<td>1928—1945</td>
<td>71–88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greatest Generation</td>
<td>Before 1928</td>
<td>87+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Author's email: hermanr@uncw.edu

©2017 All rights reserved.
Recently, Chen, Seilhamer, Bennett, and Bauer (2015) described two surveys on student use of mobile technology at the University of Central Florida. In 2014 they found that 86% owned smartphones and 47% owned tablets (iPads or notebooks). Fifty percent of the students used their devices to do schoolwork, though many used them to take pictures. Only 30% of instructors incorporated the technology in their assignments and 55% banned or discouraged their use.

When it comes to the classroom behavior, it is easy for students to be distracted by their digital devices. McCoy (2013, 2016) had reported in two recent studies the extent of this distraction. As reported by Reed (2016), McCoy found in a national survey of 675 students in 26 states that “students check their phones and other digital devices 11 times a day on average while in class.” They spend a fifth of their time accessing their devices for activities not related to school work. These activities include texting, emailing, surfing the Internet, and accessing social media. In the 2013 study (McCoy, 2013) of 777 students at six universities in five states 30 percent of the students reported using devices more than ten times for non-class related activities, while in the 2015 study (McCoy, 2016) the figure was closer to 34 percent. The number of students reporting not using their devices was eight percent in 2013. That number dropped to three percent in the more recent study.

Why do students get so distracted? Mainly, they do so to “fight boredom” and then to stay digitally connected. A 2013 study by Experian Marketing Services showed that 18- to 24-year-olds send and receive an average of 3,853 text messages per month, thus supporting the need to feel connected and not miss an important text.

What is the effect of these digital distractions? It is often reported that millennials can multi-task better (Meyer, 2016). About thirty percent maintained that they can use devices without distracting from their learning and over eleven percent could not stop using the devices. But, in the 2015 study (McCoy, 2016), students note that there is a cost. 89 percent do not pay attention and 81 percent miss instruction. In spite of this, 90 percent do not think digital devices should be banned although a small majority thinks that there could be a policy limiting non-classroom use (Schaffhauser, 2016) and a majority thinks that instructors should deal with offending students. Chen et al. (2015) found similar findings with 47% of the students and 67% of instructors perceiving mobile technologies as a distraction in the classroom.

So, how does an instructor deal with digital distraction? A common method is to ban digital devices, or only restrict such activities to class-related activities. This can be specified in the syllabus and enforced by calling out students. However, this might not be the most appropriate way to deal with student distraction. Lang (2017) writes that having encountered digital distraction from observing one of his better students, he found some answers as to why people get distracted in the recent book, The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World (MIT, 2016) by neuroscientist Adam Gazzaley and psychologist Larry D. Rosen. In it they examine how one is distracted from preset goals. The ability to stay on task is governed by neural processes and the elements that tend to distract. Lang (2017) discusses how the lessons of this book can be translated into setting

©2017 All rights reserved.
goals in the classroom to help overcome distractions. On the other hand, the numerous comments to Lang’s post reveal some ways that faculty deal with digital distractions. These range from active learning activities to reduce boredom to strict bans on digital devices.

Womack and McNamara (2017) provide a literature review focused on in-class cell-phone behavior. They note that students benefit from being able to manage their coursework, organize assignments, and can find information quickly. However, they point to studies of multitasking (mostly texting and using Facebook) and its effects on exam performance or while completing assignments negatively affect academic performance. They also found from the literature that over half of cell phone usage was texting and the rest in mainly for checking social media.

Students rarely leave the class to communicate with friends and loved ones (Womack & McNamara, 2017). This has become a habit and is further motivated by boredom and the need to immediately deal with emergencies or work issues. Their review has found that students can become anxious when they cannot access their mobile devices (Womack & McNamara, 2017). This most like translates beyond student behaviors as the population as a whole has become digitally connected.

Womack and McNamara (2017) then discuss the literature concerning student and faculty perceptions on cell phone use. Students do not think such use hinders their performance. Their neighbors in the classroom also were not so much bothered by the texting, but studies found that phone sounds, like ringing, had some impact on students and faculty. Some strategies were listed to reduce cell phone use, including cell phone policies, class size, group activities, or incentives to putting away or silencing devices during class time.

The issues Womack and McNamara (2017) reported can just as well apply to any electronic devices. Fried (2008) discussed the impact of laptops on student learning, including some of the same issues of using laptops in the classroom and multitasking. In this study students were found to use their laptops for things other than notetaking. It was found that there was a negative correlation between measures of learning and laptop use. As with any technology (desktops in computer classrooms, laptops, smartphones, tablets), there has always been the suggestion that “students, faculty, and administrators need to find ways to promote appropriate use of” electronic devices in the classroom minimizing the negative impact on learning.

Students have always found ways to fight boredom or engaging in distraction. We may recall before the digital era that students passed notes in class. Some students sat in the back of the room and read newspapers or other books. Before the cell phone there were transistor radios (introduced October 1954, Alter, 2014) and the Walkman (1979). In 1973 Martin Cooper, an engineer at Motorola, made the first mobile phone call. So much has changed since then and we should expect the future to hold no less of a challenge to capturing students’ and some faculty members’ attention by distracting them from their devices.
References


