

Tuition lost on the techno-dependent

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ABSTRACT

[...] our manners haven't caught up with our machinery. [...] the myth of multitasking hasn't been exploded as thoroughly as it needs to be.

FULL TEXT

HAVING BANNED laptops from my college classroom, I was feeling a little like a technology crab, an aging nostalgist for longhand note-taking, long-playing records, and slow-dialing phones. I stopped feeling bad about it, though, after I dropped by the class of a colleague who allows laptops.

It was in a theater-style lecture hall, with rows of desks rising away from the podium. From where I stood in the back, I had a good, down-slope view of the screens of students' laptops. One guy seemed to be taking notes on the lecture until a message popped up. He typed a response, sent it, read the response to his response, typed again. Then he took out his phone and, sheltered by his open laptop, began texting.

Another student craned forward for a better view of the sports highlights on the screen of a student in the row ahead, which caught the attention of a third student a couple of rows back of them, who then tried to go to the same site on his own laptop. I could see others shopping, watching videos, reading the news. Many appeared to be taking class-related notes at least some of the time, but I didn't see any who stuck to note-taking all the time. And when they were actually taking notes, they didn't seem to be actively listening to the argument of the lecture with concentrated intellect so much as transcribing the professor's words in a sort of secretarial fugue state.

I don't deny that the laptop and its cousins have a lot to contribute in the classroom. I accept many of the arguments in favor: greatly expanded access to texts and supporting materials, ease of communication, and so on. You don't need to convince me that, in principle, it's a potentially important innovation. But it takes time to adjust to technological change, and we're not even close to adjusted yet.

First, our manners haven't caught up with our machinery. I'm reminded of that every time I see the tableau of two people at a table in a restaurant, one staring vacantly into space while the other talks into or stares at a cellphone. People with otherwise decent manners, people who in a face-to-face situation would never turn away from you in mid-sentence to take a gander at some porn, will do it without thinking twice if a battery-powered machine signals to demand their attention. And it's not like I'm laying this all on college students. In some ways, the middle-aged are more defenseless. If I had my email up on the computer built into the podium in the room where I teach, I'd probably sneak a look at it from time to time while I was lecturing.

Second, the myth of multitasking hasn't been exploded as thoroughly as it needs to be. Someday soon, if all goes well, to be caught multitasking in public will be as embarrassing as to be caught littering or sticking your hand

down your pants to relieve an itch. But we're not there yet, even though study after study shows that what feels like getting lots of different stuff done at the same time is usually little more than giving in to distraction that leads to incompetence. I don't know that it's absolutely impossible for a human being to pay attention to an electronic screen and another human (or, say, traffic) at the same time, and perhaps in time we may learn to do it properly, but right now it's beyond us: you have to pick one or the other because you can't do both.

You have to pick, and it's not an abstract choice. College costs a lot. I teach at BC, where a year's tuition, fees, room, and board currently add up to \$52,624. What are the students paying for? What can't they get online for free? In my end of the academy, the humanities, it comes down to one thing, in essence: the other people in the room, teachers, and fellow students. We can debate whether that's worth the price tag, and we can debate the relative value of lectures and seminars (I think the best mix in the humanities is some of the former and a lot of the latter), but you're paying for the exclusive company of fellow thinkers who made it through the screening processes of admissions and faculty hiring. That's it. You can get everything else online, and you can of course do the reading on your own.

Your money buys you the opportunity to pay attention to the other people on campus and to have them pay attention to you - close, sustained, active, fully engaged attention, undistracted by beeps, chimes, tweets, klaxons, ring tones, ads, explosions, continuous news feeds, or other mind-jamming noise. You qualify for admission, you pay your money, and you get four years - maybe the last four years you'll ever get - to really attend to the ideas of other human beings, thousands of years' worth of them, including the authors of the texts on the syllabus and the people in the room with you.

You can spend the rest of your life surfing the web, emailing, texting. You've got one shot at college. So, at least until the novelty wears off (probably not in my lifetime), that means no laptops in my classroom.

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rotella.ART

Illustration

Caption: istockphoto

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