



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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COLLEGE CLASSROOMS TODAY: WHAT IS A PROFESSOR TO DO?

We are dealing with a new generation of traditional-age (18-24 years) students—Millennials, NetGen, Generation Y, and Echo Boomers. Many are children of baby boomers who started their families late in life. They represent an even larger demographic than the baby boomers of the late 1960s.

These young students bring a technological savvy to the classroom. They are more socially connected, via technology such as cell phones and laptops, than any previous generation. Sometimes their social connectedness creates distractions in the classroom.

Cell Phones in Class

A number of disturbing issues emerge from students' use of cell phones. One way to calm ourselves down about the cell phone issue is to recognize that many of today's students—particularly the Millennials—are attached to their cell phones at an incredible level. As a Baby Boomer myself, I still marvel at the idea that we can carry around a wireless phone. But for many of our younger students, cell phones are such a part of their lives that it seems as if they are part of their anatomy. One colleague referred to the cell phone as an umbilical cord. Another shared that her 10-year-old son was insisting he "needed" a cell phone. When she asked him why, he replied, "What if I need to get in touch with you?" I laughed at her response to her son: "Why would you worry? You're always under adult supervision."

Many of my colleagues have become a bit "crazy" over the cell phone issue. One way to ease the upset is to frame cell phone behavior as a nuisance—perhaps the way we viewed students who chewed gum in class decades ago.

Unfortunately, there are other cell phone issues apart from students using the phone as a phone. Cell phones are used as cameras, as well as vehicles for text messaging; checking voice mails and e-mails; storing, viewing, and sending photographs; connecting to the Internet; and playing games.

It is important that we develop some understanding of the cell phone phenomenon in order to address the problem of students using the phone *during* class. I have a simple solution that mitigates, if not eliminates, students' use of cell phones in class—a behavioral guidelines statement about class decorum:

Please turn off all cell phones and beepers prior to class unless you have informed me that, for example, you are an EMT or a firefighter, the parent of a young child for whom you must be available, or you are waiting for a personal emergency call. If you are expecting a call, please keep your phone on the vibrate mode, and step outside to take the call. Otherwise, please put your cell phones away at the start of class.

Usually this policy does the trick. If students abuse the policy, I speak to them privately after class.

Laptops in Class

It is frustrating when you discover that students who are "working" on their laptops in class are not working at all. We thought that portable notebook computers would revolutionize notetaking in class, increasing the amount of information students could record and allowing them to make revisions and embellish notes after class. Some students are doing just that. But more than a few are using their laptops to check their e-mail, send Instant Messages, and play games!

Is this yet another example of technology gone awry in the service of education? What can we do to prevent the misuse of laptops in class?

- Ban them altogether—although this is a bit harsh since some students are using them legitimately.
- Share clear expectations about how laptops are to be used in class.
- Include behavioral guidelines about the consequences of misuse of laptops in class (e.g., loss of points toward grades).
- Walk around the room frequently, and look at what students are doing on their laptops. Walking around the room is a good teaching strategy, anyway, as it helps keep students engaged.



Signs of Student Disengagement

These behaviors could all be signs of a student's disengagement.

- Wearing headphones in class to listen to music
- Passing notes or playing games
- Reading newspapers or magazines, or doing other non-related schoolwork
- Doodling in a notebook, doing crossword puzzles

It is tempting to ignore students who sleep or who do work clearly not related to your class. In the past, whenever I had a student fall asleep in class—and there have been more than a few in my 35 years of college teaching—I used to feel responsible. I believed that I put the student to sleep by conducting a boring class. I also felt embarrassed that other students had noticed the sleeper and seen that I had not responded.

I stopped ignoring sleepers—and so should you. Chances are their fatigue has nothing to do with you and your teaching performance. Talk to the student privately. I have discovered students carrying incredible work loads, many times coming to class straight from working a shift, without sleeping. Talking to students about their schedules and commitments—sometimes their over-commitments—often can be helpful. They may be able to identify ways to come to class less exhausted.

On occasion, I have discovered that a sleepy student was on medication for a serious physical problem. In these cases, fatigue has been a side effect of the medication. We often are prone to suspect the worst—of our students and our teaching. If we seek out the real reasons for a student sleeping in class—instead of falling into the trap of “taking it personally”—we can deal with the issue more effectively.

Students who do other course work in your class are a different matter. Clearly, they are disengaged. You need to stop this behavior because it is not in the student's best interest to “miss” your class and the other students need to know that the behavior is unacceptable. There are several ways to deal with the student who does unrelated work in your class (or who reads the newspaper or a magazine—yes, it does happen!).

- Try direct eye contact as you move in the student's direction.
- Ask a neighboring student to answer a question.
- Ask the student who is disengaged to answer a question. (Note that there are potential disadvantages of this approach since it contradicts creating a safe classroom atmosphere.)
- Ask all students to write a response to a question you pose.
- Break the class into pairs or groups, and require them to complete a task.
- Speak to the student after class.

The key is to do *something* in these situations! It may be easier (in the short term) to ignore a student's troublesome behavior, but in the end you will do a disservice to the student and the class by failing to act.

Conclusion

The take-home message regarding student behaviors that disrupt our classes and disturb us is that we are in charge of not letting it get in the way. Student engagement, as survey results confirm, is the key to academic success; an engaged student is far less likely to be disruptive.

Are we able to respect our students for who they are in the world, understand the many forces that shape their behavior, and go from there? Part of our role is to help students assimilate into the academic culture. Given many students' lack of preparedness to do college-level work and lack of understanding of what they need to do to be successful, teaching our students goes well beyond teaching our disciplines.

Professors who are motivated to reach *all* students, even the ones who “misbehave” in class, need to set clear guidelines about academic and behavioral expectations and then help student achieve success. Teaching has always been an under-appreciated art and service—now more than ever, it is not for the faint-hearted.

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