The Weekly Reader   Teaching and Learning Center (TLC)

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Guest Column: Unplugging the Classroom (David Schary, Dept. of Physical Education, sport, and Human Performance

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The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

UpComing Sessions

Banner Purchase Requisition Training 1/29

FERPA Training 1/29, 2/4

The 2nd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning, January 31, 2015.

Register at: http://www2.winthrop.edu/login/tlc/default.asp

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Guest Column: Unplugging the Classroom (David Schary, Dept. of Physical Education, Sport, and Human Performance)

This semester I am conducting my own experiment: I am creating a technology-free classroom. In all of my classes, students will power down their smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Each one of my syllabi now includes this statement:

Students are not allowed to use any electronic devices (e.g., computers, tablets, cell phones) during class, unless otherwise specified. This is not to punish you; it is to help you. Research has shown that students who do not use electronics take better quality notes and retain more information (Hembrooke & Gay, 2003; Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). This policy is waived for documented medical or personal needs.

I know it's crazy. I admit that the experiment makes me sound like a Luddite, opposed to technological change or advancement. But I assure you that I am not opposed to technology. I still use a cell phone, work countless hours on a computer, watch YouTube on my iPad, and find myself scanning the technology section of Google News. I am even presenting on how certain online applications can enhance group assignments on Saturday at the Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning (shameless plug).

So then how did I find myself banning the same technology that I use every day? Well, the answer is complicated, but I hope to convince you that it is not as ludicrous as it seems.

But first, my disclaimer: I know that there are a lot of benefits to using technology in the classroom. I have read the research and attended the seminars. Technology and education are inseparable, much like technology and the rest of our lives. The point of this article is not to argue against the benefits; instead, I want to challenge the assumption that technology is the only way to teach successfully.

With my disclaimer out of the way, I can tell you that I did not come to this conclusion overnight. The decision came after months of internal deliberation. Ironically, it came after agonizing over the best ways to integrate social media tools like Twitter into my course. The more I delved into the research, the more I found technology appealing but exhausting and often deceiving.

All the gadgets and applications promise to engage students, connecting course material to the vast resources available online. There is no doubt that students have more information available at their fingertips than I could ever include in a lecture or even an entire course. After all, we live in an instantaneous world--if you do not know it, just Google it.

But when it comes to information, it's not about availability, it's about absorption. I want my students to think slower, not faster. My end goal is

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to slow them down so they can absorb and retain the information. In my experience, slowing down is where a pen and paper excel.

Please do not take my word for it. As you can see in my syllabus statement above, I am basing my decision on research. I cite for my students two studies, separated by a decade, that find similar conclusions. Both studies found that students taking notes by hand retain more information than students taking notes with a laptop. I will not get into the details here, but I highly recommend reading both studies.

These two studies are not isolated; they are only a small sample of the research I read questioning (not dismissing) technology's role in enhancing information retention. Many researchers also are challenging technology because it is a distraction.

And it is not just students; I cannot stress enough how much we all are distracted by our gadgets (if you do not believe me, just look around the next time you are standing in line somewhere). Some argue these constant distractions have retrained our minds to have shorter

attention spans.

If that is not scary enough, we are bombarded with information that we rarely read anything in its entirety. Rather we scan, leading to shallow processing at best. Social media also provides us with instantaneous communication that retrains our minds to expect immediate, quick information.

Forcing my students to turn off their smart phones and take notes by hand will not solve the distraction problem (doodling is always an option). Pencils and notebooks will not make my students better by themselves, but I argue, neither will laptops nor iPads. However, I can guarantee that putting away the gadgets will make my students think differently. Hopefully it will get them to think slower and to become less reliant on Google and more reliant on their own brains.

As a side benefit, creating a technology-free zone will require each student to think about the role technology plays in her or his own life. How often are they required to do something that is as foreign to them as being without their phone for an hour? As faculty at liberal arts university, our duty, I

think, is to give our students such experiences.

I must admit that this challenge does not mean that students will never use a computer, phone, or tablet. In fact, I planned activities where we will have to use a computer. But it will be limited and focused.

To be fair, the banning of technology applies to me as well. I will also not be regularly using it in the classroom. That means teaching my class without PowerPoint or YouTube, but that's another discussion entirely . . .

I know removing technology from the classroom is going against the momentum; maybe I'm even fighting a losing battle. This might be the case, but I'm willing to try. Is anyone else willing to join?

--David Schary
PESH

Editor's Note:
Many thanks to David Schary for this guest column for *The Weekly Reader*!

Do you have an idea for a column on teaching and learning? If so, please contact me and we can discuss topics and space requirements.

--John Bird

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging, timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

The 2nd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to the presenters and attendees who have registered for our Second Annual Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015. The program looks incredible, and we look forward to a packed day of learning and engagement.

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology, and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop
See you there!

Thought For the Week

"Good friends, good books and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life"
. --Mark Twain