Does Implementing In-class Technology Breaks Help Alleviate Student Distraction with Non-academic Use of Personal Technology?

Mark Julien, Brock University
Craig Hyatt, Brock University

Teaching/Learning - Teaching strategies/methods (Other)  Friday, May 31, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  8:55 AM
Abstract 2019-160  Room: Napoleon A2

In today’s university lectures, laptop computers, tablets, and cellular phones are ubiquitous (Aagaard, 2015). While many lecturers encourage students to use their personal technologies as part of a pedagogical strategy to engage students during lectures, at other times when students are expected to be paying attention to lecture material, student use of these same technologies for non-academic use can be a distraction (Lawson & Henderson, 2015). Studies show a correlation between in-class student use of technology in non-academic ways (texting, checking social media, etc.) and lower grades (Gazzaley & Rosen, 2016; Lawson & Henderson, 2015). To combat students using personal electronic devices for non-academic matters, pundits suggest strategies like informing students of the correlation between distracting yourself with technology and lower grades, “naming and shaming” such students, insisting technology be shut-off at certain times, etc. (Aagaard, 2015; Gupta, & Irwin, 2016; Lawson & Henderson, 2015; Rosen et al., 2018). One suggested strategy is to introduce “technology breaks” into the lecture (Lawson & Henderson, 2015; Rosen et al., 2018). This strategy would see the instructor ask the students to not use personal technology until a pre-determined point in the lecture, at which time lecturing would cease while the students are encouraged to use their devices as they wished. After the short break, the lecture would resume, and students would be expected to disengage with their devices and reengage with the lesson. While technology breaks have been suggested to combat students distracting themselves and others with the non-academic use of technology, to date, we know of no studies that examine if technology breaks are effective, and researchers in this field have called for such studies (Kornhauser, Paul, & Siedlecki, 2016).

To test the effectiveness of technology breaks, a lecturer teaching two sections of the same management class in the Fall of 2018 adopted a quasi-experimental design. In one section of the three-hour class, he implemented a two-minute break one-third of the way through class, then again at the class’s two-thirds point. The other section had no technology breaks. The course material, delivery, and methods of evaluation were the same in both sections; every effort was made to ensure that the only difference between the classes was the presence or absence of technology breaks. At the mid-term point in the course, the average grades on both the mid-term test and the participation levels in each section were compared to see if the section without the break had a lower average grade. The results suggest there was no difference between the two sections on either the test or participation. Furthermore, students’ semester-end course evaluations in both sections will be compared. That same semester, a second instructor implemented technology breaks in two different sport management classes (both are 75-minute lectures) and will solicit technology break-specific semester-end feedback to learn if students thought the breaks were effective.