

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Commentary

August 25, 2014

Today's Lesson: Life in the Classroom Before Cellphones

By Louise Katz

Although I had taught for more than 20 years, I didn't realize that I had forgotten what it was like to teach in a classroom without cellphones until I came up with a plan to relive those halcyon days. It was near the end of the semester, and I offered one point of extra credit per class period for my psychology students who turned off their cellphones before class and put them on the front desk.

I was sure that no students would part with their phones for such a meager offering. Wrong: Virtually all my students did. They even said they loved the idea, so the next semester I offered all my classes the same deal for the entire semester, and participation continued unabated. In fact, much to my surprise, after the first few days, when I walked into my classes all the cellphones were already on the table in the front of the room.

That first day I tried it, I felt like I had traveled back to a time when students' attention was focused in the classroom rather than on the phones under their desks. I began to notice the increased number of students paying attention to the lectures and taking notes, and looking around at other students who were participating in class discussions.

I slipped back into expecting these long-lost behaviors as the new given, and today I see no reason to ever go back to wrestling with cellphone issues. I am quite content to award extra credit for the attention of the class and for students' attention to their work all semester long. Twenty-one percent of my students received one letter grade higher for the course from extra credit; 79 percent did not. Any concerns about too much extra credit are easily handled by adjusting the total number of points for the course.

But I wanted to make sure the students really were benefiting. So immediately after they completed the final exam, I offered as many as five points of extra credit for completing a questionnaire and writing an essay on their phone-deprived experience. Of 90 students, 82 participated.

Questionnaire results indicated overwhelming recommendation: 61 percent of students said they loved the activity, 33 percent liked it, 5 percent didn't care one way or the other, and none indicated they didn't like it or hated it. Participation was high, with 61 percent of students saying they turned in their phones for every class session, and 37 percent for almost every class.

What's more, 60 percent of the students responding said they saw an overall big positive effect on the classroom atmosphere, and 67 percent said they were able to concentrate a lot better in class without the phones. The classroom atmosphere was judged to be much more focused by 62 percent and more respectful by 71 percent. Given those numbers, I wasn't surprised that, when asked if the practice should be used in future classes, 70 percent chose the response "Yes, it was awesome," and 27 percent voted "Yes, it was good." No one chose "It was awful."

In their essays, many students wrote that the feel of the classroom was significantly changed. Said one, "The students are more upbeat and lively, and not just wanting to leave because their friend texted them wanting to hang out." Many wrote that there was more discussion in class and that they were getting to know their classmates more than in their other classes.

Some wrote that if they spoke in class, other students were actually listening. Many wrote about the peacefulness and sense of freedom it afforded them to be unable to constantly check their phones: "As the semester went on, it was almost a relief to turn my phone off for that period of time a couple times a week. I guess you could say I looked forward to 'getting away' from the technological world and really focusing on learning Psychology."

Some wrote that they had started turning off their phones elsewhere. Many students said that their concentration was greatly

improved, and that they learned more, enjoyed and understood classroom material better, and felt the classroom was a more engaging and inviting place.

One student summed it up, saying that other students "may think it's just for extra credit, but in reality it's helping them out in more ways than they think." In addition to learning about psychology, the students also learned something else—a little bit about what life was like before the dawn of cellphones. And perhaps, just perhaps, they may have begun to look forward to their brief visits to that different way of life.

Louise Katz is a professor of psychology at Columbia State Community College, in Columbia, Tenn.

60 Comments

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Login ▾

Sort by Oldest ▾

Share ↗ Favorite ★



Join the discussion...

Steven Michels · 11 days ago

This is a great idea. But it's also sad.

The students can't seem to control themselves. Clearly, we are dealing with addicts here.

26 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

Virreinatos ↗ Steven Michels · 10 days ago

In students' defense, they are at that age where they are learning how to control themselves. Our job as educators is to show them means to do so, and more importantly, the benefits of doing so.

52 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

Bo Lockwood ↗ Virreinatos · 9 days ago

Well said.

2 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

berate_my_professor ↗ Steven Michels · 9 days ago

Professors are just as bad - look around any faculty meeting!

24 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

jrothastro ↗ Steven Michels · 9 days ago

Yes, they are addicts. But bear in mind that they were likely given unrestricted access to this gateway drug from a young age, without many if any lessons about maintaining balance. This is a giant social experiment being conducted on everyone, but especially upon youth, and this article shows one strategy for motivating self-control with positive incentives. One could do worse! Peace - J

3 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

closetothetruth ↗ jrothastro · 8 days ago

even more: these machines are specifically designed to override everyone's internal control mechanisms, especially those of children. they are addictive by design. seeing schools bend over backwards to accommodate them is deeply saddening.

2 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

gburghar · 11 days ago

I just do not allow cell phone use in the classroom if not for an approved activity. If something urgent arises they can quietly leave the room.

11 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

lah122 ↗ gburghar · 9 days ago

That keeps them from disturbing class, but it doesn't give them the full benefits of not having it available to them.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

betsyd · 11 days ago

I taught in Nanjing for almost 6 years where the use of mobile was never resolved. I like this idea and given the opportunity, I would try it out .

2 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share |

mbkirova ↗ betsyd · 10 days ago

I'm going to try it. I work in Azerbaijan and in general students will do nothing I want unless there are points attached to it.

