

RECLAIMING THE CLASSROOM: FIGHTING BACK AGAINST WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade there has been a tremendous increase in the availability and use of technology in the classroom. Marketing faculty often teach in “smart” classrooms that have computers, DVD players, projection systems and high speed Internet access which provide us with many more delivery options than the traditional classroom where we relied upon chalk or white boards and overhead projectors. Instructors teaching in these classrooms can now use a variety of technology-based tools such as power point lectures, videos and clickers to engage students and they can also import information from the Internet that can be shared with the class and used as a basis for discussion. Unfortunately, the availability of technology in the classroom is proving to be a double-edge sword as students come to class armed with their own arsenal of technological devices including cell phones, smart phones, iPads and/or lap top computers. These devices are often *weapons of mass distraction* as students use them to text, tweet, surf the Internet, watch YouTube videos, update their Facebook pages, and/or work on assignments for other classes rather than being attentive to, and actively engaged in, a lecture and classroom discussion.

Advocates of technology have argued that it can revolutionize the education process and provide ways to better engage students and appeal to those with different learning styles. However, despite claims that technological innovation can enhance the educational experience, it can easily be argued that it is actually having the opposite effect. Of particular concern is the availability of wireless Internet access in the classroom which makes it possible for students to engage in a myriad of activities that serve as a distraction to themselves, as well as to others. Wireless networks are now available in well over half of the nation’s college

classrooms and the availability is increasing as more schools invest in technology and smart classrooms. Many of today’s students are part of the Net Generation that has grown up with the Internet and spends countless hours online being entertained, communicating with friends and looking for information. This generation of students lives in a world of social networking and spends a great deal of their time (including class time) online. Many of these students, as well as educators who defend their behavior, argue that they are “multitaskers” who can simultaneously engage in two or more processing activities at the same time. However, most of the empirical research shows that this is not the case as most students do not really possess these skills and multitasking negatively affects the processing of information and learning. Research has shown that multitasking is negatively related to learning, in addition to being a distraction to students around them as well as to the professor trying to teach them.

While many universities recognize the problems that lap top computers and mobile phones are creating in the classroom, ways of dealing with the problem vary. Some schools have implemented educational campaign to make students more sensitive to the problem and provide ground rules for the use of laptops and mobile phones as well as encourage classroom etiquette. However, there is also considerable variation among instructors regarding how they deal with the problem. At one extreme are faculty who take the position that most students are not using lap tops to take notes, have no tolerance for their use and ban them entirely. At the other end of the tolerance spectrum are those who take the position that students are able to multitask and/or feel that students have the right to do bring laptops to class. The position of many faculty is somewhere

in the middle of these two extremes as they will put information on their course syllabus regarding the use of computers and cell phones but often do not enforce their own policy for various reasons. These might include concern over student evaluations, not wanting to create an uncomfortable classroom environment, or acquiescence to the problem as something that really cannot be resolved.

The session discusses ways to deal with the increasing use of weapons of mass distraction in the classroom. The panel will make presentations on various aspects of the problem including the prevalence of the use of computers in the classroom and the impact on the learning environment; the role of technology on student learning styles; findings of research conducted on multitasking and the impact on learning; and possible solutions to the problem.