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
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 retrain 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.

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
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Thought For the Week

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--Mark Twain