Professors need to be entertaining to prevent students from watching YouTube in class

June 26 2019

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Students think it is instructors' responsibility to ensure they don't surf the web in class, according to a new study.

In a recent mixed-method study, researchers from the University of Waterloo surveyed 478 undergraduates and 36 instructors on their perception of technology use in class.

The survey found that nine per cent of students thought [course materials](#) that could be seen on other students' laptops were distracting, whereas 49 per cent thought that non-course materials on other students' screens were distracting.

Although most students used technology in class to keep up with the course, some also used it to catch up on other classes, or because they felt bored and not engaged in the classroom. Students felt strongly that it is their right to use technology as they see fit, since they are adults paying for their education.

"While students felt that it was their choice to use the technology, they saw it as the instructors' responsibility to motivate them not to use it," says co-author Elena Neiterman, a School of Public Health and Health Systems professor.

Instructors saw technology as useful for providing accessible education, but it was also distracting for them: 68 percent were bothered by the use of phones in the classroom. Only 32 percent were bothered by the use of laptops and tablets, however, probably because they assume that laptops and tablets are used by students for class work. Some instructors also reported that off-task technology not only affected [student](#) learning, but also hindered their own ability to teach effectively.

"Some students said that instructors need to be more entertaining to keep students engaged in the classroom, but this a big ask, given that we are not employed in the entertainment industry," says Neiterman. "There is also a question of what we are preparing our students for: If we are training them for future employment, we might need to teach them to focus even if the class is 'boring.'"

The majority of instructors understood that banning technology in class is not an answer.

"Technology makes education accessible for students with disabilities, and many instructors use online tools such as Ted Talks and YouTube videos in class," says Neiterman. "Our students use technology to take notes—students today don't even learn cursive in school. "

She added that banning technology in the classroom would not be lawful because it would expose students who use technology to accommodate a disability. Even if it were possible, however, it is not feasible. "A ban means policing," says Neiterman. "With larger class sizes, who is going to police students to ensure that they do not use technology?"

The study, titled "A Mixed Blessing? Students' and Instructors' Perspectives about Off-task Technology Use in the Academic Classroom" was co-authored by Elena Neiterman and Christine Zaza and published in the *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of the Teaching and Learning*.

Provided by University of Waterloo