

Surfing the Web in class? Bad idea

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College students' exam scores drop when they surf the web in class, suggests a study by Michigan State University researchers. Credit: Michigan State University

Even the smartest college students suffer academically when they use the Internet in class for non-academic purposes, finds new research by Michigan State University scholars.

The study, funded by the National Science Foundation, speaks to typical lecture-hall culture in which professors compete for students' attention with laptops and smartphones.

"Students of all [intellectual abilities](#) should be responsible for not letting themselves be distracted by use of the Internet," said Susan Ravizza, associate professor of psychology and lead investigator on the study.

Ravizza and colleagues studied non-academic Internet use in an introductory psychology class at MSU with 500 students. The working theory: Heavy Internet users with lower intellectual abilities – determined by ACT scores – would perform worse on exams. Past research suggests smarter people are better at multitasking and filtering out distractions.

But surprisingly, that wasn't the case. All students, regardless of intellectual ability, had lower exam scores the more they used the Internet for non-academic purposes such as reading the news, sending emails and posting Facebook updates.

Ravizza said that might be because Internet use is a different type of multitasking, in that it can be so engaging.

The study also showed students discounted the effects of Internet use on academic performance, reinforcing past findings that [students](#) have poor awareness of how their smartphones and laptops affect learning.

Ravizza said it would be nearly impossible to attempt to ban smartphones or other electronic devices from lecture halls. "What would you do, have hundreds of people put their cell phones in a pile and pick them up after class?" Such a ban might also be a safety issue, since cell phones have become a primary source of receiving emergency messages.

The study appears in the online version of the journal *Computers & Education*. Researchers Zach Hambrick and Kimberly Fenn, both from MSU's Department of Psychology, were co-authors.

Provided by Michigan State University

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