



Random Thoughts from a Distracted Mind...

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An article, by Dr. Larry D. Rosen, “Distracted Minds” published in the October issue of Phi Delta Kappan Magazine recently caught my attention:

“Due to the constant temptation to check their smartphones, today’s students are spending less time focused on their schoolwork, taking longer to complete assignments, and feeling more stressed in the process. Just how big of a problem is digital distraction, and how can teachers respond?”

Dr. Rosen goes on to question what this digital “obsession” means for today’s students. In doing so, he quotes several recent research findings that are sobering:

- Typically, college students unlock their phones 50 times a day, using them for close to 4½ hours out of every 24-hour cycle. Put another way, they check their phones every 15 minutes — all day long (and sometimes all night) — and they look at them for about five minutes each time.
- Teenagers are almost always attempting to multitask, even when they know full well that they cannot do so effectively.
- When teenagers have their phones taken away, they become highly anxious (and visibly agitated within just a few minutes).
- The average adolescent or young adult finds it difficult to study for 15 minutes at a time; when forced to do so, they will spend at least five of those minutes in a state of distraction.

As I read the research, I was reminded of a day last week when I had misplaced my cell phone while at the office. It was mid-morning when I noticed it missing and was immediately annoyed. My inner voice joked what a ‘blessing’ this was - knowing ‘the curse’ (as I often refer to my friend Siri) was in the building somewhere and sure to turn up given time.

While I clearly am a long way from my teen years, ‘highly anxious and visibly agitated within just a few minutes’ would certainly describe my state within about 8 minutes of trying desperately to focus. Despite my attempts to rationalize that

I had a landline phone at my elbow and a laptop computer in front of me, I soon found myself unable to concentrate on anything else. I soon recruited two of our support staff to help me look for my phone. After 15 minutes I was quickly reduced to a state that my childhood neighbour would have best described as ‘fit-to-be-tied’. Although we eventually found the phone, my reaction to losing it continued to bother me. I pride myself on not being ‘driven to distraction’ by technology. I am the first to turn my phone off for important meetings and always place my phone in the back seat when driving to avoid the temptation of looking at it when driving and yet I was clearly driven to distraction upon a few short minutes so of not having it on my person.

Since that experience, I have watched closely as the adults and children in my life interact with their technology. In doing so, I have concluded that the research Rosen highlights is credible and probably applies to adults as well. Given that, I share Rosen’s five recommendations for teachers and challenge you to consider what implication they might have for our students, families and even ourselves:

#1. Make sure students understand that their brains need the occasional “reset.” Young children should spend no more than 30 minutes at a time using interactive technologies, followed by a break of at least an equivalent amount of time, or more when possible. As they reach preteen and adolescent years, they should spend no more than 90 minutes at a time with technology, followed by at least 10 to 15 minutes of some activity that neuroscientists have shown to calm the brain, such as going outside in nature, exercising, listening to music, meditating, taking a hot bath or shower, talking to a friend in person, playing a musical instrument, or practicing a foreign language. Ten to 15 minutes should be sufficient to reset the brain.

#2. Help students build stamina for studying with tech breaks. If they’ve become habituated to constant smartphone use, students may need to relearn how to focus for periods of time without interruptions. I recommend treating this like any other kind of strength training: Start off easy, and then build stamina. For example, imagine that a student is sitting down to study with a phone by her elbow. Ask her to take a minute to shut down any web sites and apps that are irrelevant to what she’s studying. (Don’t just minimize those apps, since they might buzz with alerts and notifications, creating an anxious need for her to check in.) Have her set an alarm for 15 minutes, silence the phone, turn it upside down,

and put it within sight — this should keep her from becoming anxious, since 15 minutes is not long to wait. When the alarm rings, allow her one minute to check her messages and social media, and then repeat the process.

#3. Advise students to treat sleep as sacred. The National Sleep Foundation urges people not to engage in any active technology use in the hour before bedtime. The Mayo Clinic is a bit more lenient, recommending that LED-based technology should be placed no closer than 14 inches from one's face and the brightness dimmed — and both iPhones and Android phones include a setting that gradually changes the light from blue to pink at night. Recommendations for the hour before going to bed include: reading a paper book (paper reflects light in the warm spectrum, which continues the secretion of melatonin!); watching a favorite TV show, preferably a repeat since this requires less mental processing than a new show; or listening to a playlist of favorite songs, preferably ones that you can “sing in your sleep” since that requires much less mental effort than listening to new music.

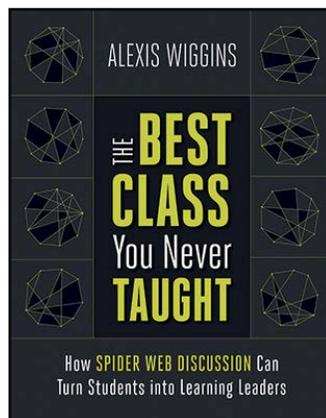
#4. Tell students to minimize the alerts and notifications. It may not even occur to students that they can turn off the alerts and notifications on their phones. But, if they can be persuaded to shut them down, that will reduce some of the stimuli that appear on their screens and beckon them to tap and click, almost without conscious effort. (Personally, at the end of the day, when I flick away all my open apps, I am always shocked to see how many of them I opened during the day. Most of them I don't even recall using.) It also can be helpful to suggest to students that they move their apps into separate folders so that fewer icons will catch their eye when they unlock their phones — the fewer apps they can see on their home screens, the fewer of those rabbit holes they're likely to dive into.

#5. Advise parents to create specific tech-free zones. This can include the dinner table, a restaurant, the car, the family den, or the bedroom (though this may require weaning the student from the habit of studying in bed, surrounded by devices). At first, teenagers may need to be given a one-minute break (midway through a meal, a drive, or whatever the activity may be) to check their phones and quell the anxiety that they are missing out on something happening on social media.



Book Give-Away!

Congratulations to Tracey Johnston of Florenceville Middle School for winning last month's book draw. This month's draw is for *The Best Class You Never Taught: How Spider Web Discussion Can Turn Students into Learning Leaders* by Alexis Wiggins (September 2017). Sound interesting? Send me an email with the subject line 'Book Draw' before December 15th.



More random thoughts from my readings this month:

“Every school has a mission statement, but how many schools practice the values that they preach much less check to see if students are aware of those values?”
Brian Sevier (Kappan Magazine, September 2017)

“We tend to think of creativity as fairy dust, magic, and eureka moments. In fact, it's a process that experts have advised for decades involves four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification.”
Carol Ann Tomlinson (Educational Leadership, October 2017)

“Our goal was to provide whole-class instruction in a way that included all students, not in an adapted or “sit-with-an-education-assistant-at-the-back” kind of way, but in a “we-picked-a-starting-point-everyone-can-launch-from” kind of way. Planning in a multi-age classroom was almost overwhelming in the beginning, however if I structure my lessons according to Shelly Moore's idea of “all, some and few,” the teaching becomes very fluid and all of the students feel involved and successful.”
Kerri Steel (EdCan Network, Fall 2017)

“We spend a lot of time focused on data related to the outputs of education, whether that is focusing on the Fraser Institute report or the latest results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). But do we spend enough time looking at the inputs of education? (...) I don't know about you, but I am starting to get tired of this worthless debate over test results, “fixing” curriculum and so-called discovery math. If we want to get real about improving education outputs, let's focus on fixing the education inputs.”
Jonathan Teghtmeyer, ATA News Editor-in-Chief (October 2017)
<https://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20News/Vol52/Number-4/Pages/Editorial.aspx>

“There is no documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership. Principals who are struggling with burnout or their own personal well-being are less able to support teaching and learning in their schools.”
Dr. Katina Pollock, EdCan Magazine (September 2017)



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