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Let's unplug the digital classroom

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We are entering an age when the “digital delivery of course content can free faculty in traditional institutions to engage in direct dialogue and mentorship with students.”

So says the Ontario government's 2012 white paper on education, “[Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge](#).” Professors muse that the classroom must “evolve or die” to become more “fun and engaging” for the modern student.

Such views are misinformed at best, crude propaganda for Apple and Microsoft at worst. The use of digital technology in higher education has promoted ignorance, not knowledge, and severely degraded basic reading, writing and thinking skills. It's time to hit the off button.

One problem with the most enthusiastic futurists is that too many of them haven't spent any time in the classroom in the last decade. If they had, they'd realize that digital technology is already omnipresent there, used by both students and professors. Almost all undergraduate students in North America are addicted to texting on their smartphones and checking their Facebook pages on an hourly basis. Almost all professors use computers, projectors, Power Point presentations and the Internet as part of their lectures. Calling for more digital technology in education today is like calling for more white people in the Republican party.

The real question is how computers, smartphones and iPods are used, and whether these uses contribute anything to the main goal of higher education: to improve students' minds and characters by helping them to learn facts, debate ideas and understand the world better. The answer, for the most part, is no — study after study shows that digital technology has dumbed down higher education. They may make education more “fun” and “engaging.” But that's only saying that they've turned education into a form of entertainment. Writing essays, reading difficult texts or figuring out complex mathematical problems have never been “fun” — and never will be.

On the plus side, the use of the computer as a delivery device for texts and images is largely a positive development. Gone are the nights spent in the bowels of the university library looking through card catalogues and the social science index for books and articles. It's also useful from a teacher's point of view to be able to display images and video via classroom computers when teaching things like fine art, comics and film.

Laptops in the classroom are much more of a problem. Yes, one student in 10 actually uses them to look up relevant facts and issues, but the other nine are using classroom Wi-Fi to check their Facebook pages, email or celebrity websites. Portable computers combine all four of the general functions of digital technology: information delivery, peer communication, entertainment and procrastination. Cellphones concentrate on the last three functions and have no pedagogical purpose.

Anyone who has walked to the back of a university classroom and looked at what students are actually looking at on their various screens will abandon any sense that digital technology plays a positive role in the classroom. Facebook and celebrity websites dominate their screens.

What's especially frustrating when we hear the blind support for digital technology bruited in government white papers and the mass media today is the refusal to acknowledge the substantial empirical research over the last 15 years that questions the value of such technology. Mark Bauerlein's [The Dumbest Generation](#) contains literally dozens of studies that show how digital technology has helped to create a generation of proud bibliophobes who avoid complex knowledge like the plague.



What's on that laptop?

GLENN LOWSON PHOTO

Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell's *The Narcissism Epidemic* shows how celebrity culture, the web 2.0 and soft parenting have accelerated young people's sense of self-esteem beyond all reasonable boundaries of actual achievement. The mass culture tells them that everyone can be a star, facts be damned. Digital narcissists don't care about their inability to read and write English or their ignorance of a range of basic historical and political facts.

My solution? Hit the off button in as many places as we can. Turn off Wi-Fi in the classroom, restricting it to student lounges scattered across campus. Create a schoolwide policy that bans the use of cellphones during lectures and seminars. Since texting has become an addiction for many, treat cells like cigarettes: if you want to text, do it outside. Ban the use of social networking websites during class. Stop promoting Internet-managed distance-education courses: these are cheap imitations of the real thing. Digital technologies can be great delivery devices. But what they too often deliver has nothing to do with education.

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