

## Do digital devices make us dumb?

### 1 Warmer

**a. Discuss the questions. Give details.**

1. In your opinion, what are some advantages and disadvantages of the use of digital devices in classrooms and in education in general?
2. You are going to read an article that claims that the overuse of digital devices is 'dumbing us down.' What do you think this means, and do you agree with that assessment?

### 2 Key words

**a. Match the phrases in the box with the definitions. Then read the complete article to see how each of the phrases is used in context. The numbers of the paragraphs where the phrases appear (sometimes in a slightly different form) are in brackets to help you locate them quickly.**

braced for a hostile reaction (1)	foster cognitive offloading (4)	shallow processing(15)
MBA (1)	digital distraction (7)	the genie is out of the bottle(16)
stand-up comedy (2)	dubious reputation (11)	
put to one side (3)	screen inferiority (12)	

1. \_\_\_\_\_ : to encourage people to delegate mental tasks such as critical thinking to an external device rather than doing the tasks themselves
2. \_\_\_\_\_ : a term to describe poorer reading comprehension and retention of information when materials are in a digital format rather than in print
3. \_\_\_\_\_ : a live performance in which the performer interacts with the audience while telling jokes or funny stories, often using reactions from the audience to create jokes
4. \_\_\_\_\_ : an idiomatic expression that means that something has already happened and cannot be easily reversed or controlled
5. \_\_\_\_\_ : to choose not to use something, at least temporarily, in order to use something that might be better or more effective

6. \_\_\_\_\_ : when a reader focuses just on the basic meaning of the words in a text without analysing it or thinking critically about it
7. \_\_\_\_\_ : to be mentally prepared for criticism or strong opposition to something
8. \_\_\_\_\_ : the disruption of concentration caused by the constant use of devices like cell phones and tools like AI
9. \_\_\_\_\_ : abbreviation for Masters in Business Administration (a second degree after the basic Bachelor's Degree)
10. \_\_\_\_\_ : a negative or controversial opinion that people have of someone because of the person's actions or beliefs

## Digital devices are dumbing us down, multiple studies indicate

*SOME ACADEMICS ARE BEGINNING TO REACH FOR PAPER AGAIN, BUT IT IS NOT ALWAYS POSSIBLE TO ELIMINATE PHONES AND LAPTOPS*

BY ANDREW JACK

- 1 Raghu Rau was braced for a hostile reaction when he made a radical change to his MBA course at University of Cambridge Judge Business School late last year. He was so frustrated with the distraction of his students that he decided to ban laptops.
- 2 "You just see the backs of their computers but it's obvious they are multitasking, checking emails or buying things online," he says. "I was tired of putting a lot of energy into the class and getting nothing back. Teaching is like stand-up comedy: if the audience is engaged, it's easy. If there is no reaction, it's tough and exhausting."
- 3 His new policy mirrors efforts by a number of professors in higher education — and some students voluntarily — to put digital technology to one side to help improve their learning, social life and mental health. Studies appear to support the trend.
- 4 Much recent debate has focused on the risks of artificial intelligence in enabling cheating or in fostering "cognitive offloading", as people delegate their critical thinking to computers. But less attention has been paid to reduced concentration or retention when students engage too much with digital technologies.
- 5 In Rau's case, the laptop ban paid off. Despite a few disgruntled comments, he says his students were overwhelmingly positive. They gave him a strong overall rating for his teaching, and good feedback.
- 6 "Didn't realise this at beginning of term but it really helped me and the rest of the class focus and encouraged discussion," said one. "Most engaging class by far. Amazing what happens when students are not scrolling on their LinkedIns during class!" wrote another.
- 7 Rau is far from a Luddite: he recognises the importance of AI in the workplace, and encourages his students to use the technology elsewhere in courses and even assessments. But he is concerned about digital distraction.
- 8 One study of undergraduates showed that even when a mobile phone was turned off and put away in a bag or pocket, students suffered a "brain drain": they were less focused as they subconsciously reflected on the possibility they were missing posts and texts.
- 9 If laptops distract, the effect is likely still more powerful for those who study or attend class online, when the energy and communal experience of the classroom is replaced by a small two-dimensional screen image.
- 10 Aside from distraction, some studies suggest that using devices directly in learning has broader drawbacks compared with pen, paper and print. Geetha Murali, head of the charity Room to Read, which produces and distributes children's books in multiple languages, argues that reading in print is a powerful stimulus to comprehension.
- 11 The same is true for more mature readers. Naomi Baron, professor emerita of Linguistics at American University and author of *Reader Bot: What Happens When AI Reads and Why It Matters*, says: "I earned a dubious reputation by saying to my class: 'We're not going to use laptops. We're going to talk with each other.' I've gone into some classes where I think I'm in the Apple store. I hope there is a growing recognition that all this digital stuff is not necessarily helping."

*Continued on next page*

- 12 She points to work around “screen inferiority”, including brain and eye scans that suggest greater efficiency and better recall and understanding when participants read on paper rather than digitally — albeit marginal. One study suggested that even when students believed they better understood when reading digitally, tests found that in fact they recalled key points and other relevant information better when engaged with print.
- 13 Explanations may include a greater facility for absorbing new concepts when reading on paper than when scrolling through information online. The broader range of senses and stimuli involved in reading a book including turning pages or even smelling the paper, could also be important.
- 14 However, Baron points out that publishers have increasingly switched to digital formats, and some professors argue that because they are lower cost, they improve accessibility. “There may be greater equity but less learning,” she says.
- 15 A final area where computers may hinder learning is in note-taking itself. Students have long used their laptops to transcribe lectures, and increasingly are turning to AI to help. But a study on students at Princeton led by Pam Mueller suggested that while those who type take more notes, they are engaging in more “shallow processing”. They are less effective at summarising ideas and perform less well when tested afterwards on the concepts discussed.
- 16 Mike Barnett, professor at Rutgers Business School, says that while he has always banned phones in the classroom, the presence of electronic course materials makes it difficult to exclude laptops. “It’s a difficult balance, as once the electronic genie is out of the bottle, it is infeasible to fully contain,” he says. “[I’m] pondering a return to paper only.”

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Andrew Jack, 16 March 2026.

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## 3 Understanding the article

a. Choose the correct answer to each question according to the information in the article.

1. Why did Raghu Rau introduce a laptop ban in his class?
  - a. He wanted his students to take handwritten notes instead.
  - b. He was frustrated that students were not engaging with his teaching.
  - c. He was concerned about students using AI to cheat in assessments.
2. According to paragraph 4, which aspect of digital technology use has received relatively little attention in academic debate?
  - a. The effect of digital technology on students' ability to concentrate and retain information.
  - b. The way AI encourages students to delegate their thinking to machines.
  - c. The benefits of digital technology in supporting independent learning.
3. What does the response of Rau's students to the laptop ban suggest?
  - a. They had not realized how much laptops were negatively affecting their learning.
  - b. Most of them were very negative about the change.
  - c. They had expected the ban and had already prepared for it.
4. What does paragraph 7 reveal about Rau's overall attitude towards technology?
  - a. He believes digital technology has no place in higher education.
  - b. He supports the use of technology in appropriate contexts but worries about distractions.
  - c. He thinks AI is valuable, but that all other digital tools should be restricted.
5. What is particularly striking about the research finding described in paragraph 8?
  - a. Students were distracted even when using their phones for academic purposes.
  - b. Students who left their phones at home performed significantly better in tests.
  - c. Students were distracted even when their phones were switched off.

6. Which of the following best summarises the research on reading in print versus reading on screen described in paragraphs 12 and 13?
  - a. Reading on screen is generally more efficient, though retention of detail is slightly weaker.
  - b. There is some evidence that print reading supports better recall and comprehension, though the differences are slight.
  - c. The research is inconclusive, with digital reading shown to be superior in certain conditions.
7. What tension does the article identify in paragraph 14 regarding digital formats?
  - a. Digital texts are cheaper and more widely available, but may result in weaker learning outcomes.
  - b. Publishers prefer digital formats, but students continue to request printed materials.
  - c. Digital formats improve accessibility for students with learning difficulties but are opposed by academics.
8. What does the Princeton study suggest about the relationship between effort and learning?
  - a. Students who type notes learn more because they are able to record more information.
  - b. Students who take fewer notes perform better because they listen more carefully.
  - c. The physical effort involved in handwriting helps students process and retain ideas more effectively.

## 4 Business language – words with a general meaning and a business meaning

- a. Match the words in the box with the definitions. Then look back at how the words are used in the article to check your understanding of them. The paragraph numbers are in brackets to help you find them quickly.

audience (2)

assessments (7)

facility (13)

retention (4)

brain drain (8)

accessibility (14)

paid off (5)

screen (9)

equity (14)

1. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** produced a positive result (G) **2** gave an employee money when their employment was terminated or finished paying a loan or an expensive item like a car or a house (B)

2. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** equality in allowing everyone to have access to something (G) **2** the value of shares in a company or the value of a property minus any money that is owed for it (B)
3. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** remembering something you have learned (G) **2** keeping employees or customers from leaving a company or a product (B)
4. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** (n) the flat surface on a phone, TV or computer (G) **2** (v) to check backgrounds and interview potential employees (B)
5. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** the people who listen to or watch something (G) **2** the specific group or groups of people that a company markets a product to (B)
6. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** a reduction in mental abilities or concentration (G) **2** a reduction in the number of people who are qualified to do certain jobs, often because they go to work in other (B) countries
7. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** the ability to get or use something or the ability to pay for something (G) **2** features like ramps or automatic doors that allow people of all abilities to use a building (required by law for businesses in some countries) (B)
8. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** the ability to do something (G) **2** the building that a business is in or where events take place (B)
9. \_\_\_\_\_: **1** evaluations or tests that students have to take (G) **2** evaluations of an employee's performance or of the amount of risk involved in starting a new business or product (B)

**b. Use the words from the previous activity to complete the sentences. After each sentence, write G (general meaning) or B (business meaning) according to the context of the sentence.**

1. When there are fewer university graduates from other countries who stay in the host country to work after graduation, it can cause a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ in certain industries. \_\_\_\_\_
2. The marketing department is focusing on customer \_\_\_\_\_ by offering discounts to returning customers. \_\_\_\_\_

3. By the time we sold our house, the value had increased, and we had quite a lot of \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ gave a standing ovation to the cast when the play ended.
5. The company is doing \_\_\_\_\_ of the levels of efficiency in its production methods to see whether changes are needed.
6. A lot of parents limit their children's \_\_\_\_\_ time and encourage them to interact face to face with family and friends.
7. The students' hard work \_\_\_\_\_ because they won an award for their science project.
8. There are regulations that require \_\_\_\_\_ features like wheelchair ramps in public buildings.
9. The committee is looking for a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ that is big enough for the conference.

## 5 Discussion

### a. Discuss these questions.

1. The article suggests that digital technology is changing not just how we learn, but how our brains function. Do you think this may be true, or do you think it's just easy to blame technology for problems that have other causes?
2. Several people in the article take steps to limit their own or others' digital use — banning laptops, choosing print over screen, asking students to take notes by hand. Do you think instituting rules like this may help students become less dependent on technology, or is it too strong an effort to control the way individual people choose to do things?
3. The article focuses mainly on the negative effects of digital technology on learning and cognition. What arguments could be made on the other side, and do you think the tendency to switch to digital formats for textbooks and other educational materials have a generally positive, negative or neutral effect on learning?



## 6 Wider business theme – Effects of digital dependence on employee cognition

- a. With a group or a partner, make a list of physical and mental effects that you think spending too much time using information technology, especially AI, can have.
- a. Read the text and check your ideas from task a. Were most of the effects mentioned in the text on your list? Did any of the information in the text surprise you?

### The Effects of Digital Dependence on Cognitive Abilities

Some recent research shows that the overuse of technology, especially AI, can have serious negative effects on our ability to process and remember information and to think critically. Some of the effects of digital dependence:

- Because workers constantly switch screens in order to consume different types of information, answer emails and check other notifications, the brain never rests. This actually reduces brain cell density, which means that our brains are actually getting smaller. It also causes high levels of stress and anxiety.
- Because AI now does a lot of our analytical thinking, many people have less ability to think critically and solve problems. There is less activity in the memory-related parts of the brain, and the ability to learn is reduced.
- There are other physical effects on the body, such as eye strain, frequent headaches, muscular pain and feeling too tired to think.

The results of these changes are:

- less creativity and ability to innovate
- slower thinking
- poorer judgment and decision-making
- shorter attention spans
- less ability to control emotions
- less ability to communicate and relate to other people

Many of the changes that can be caused by an overuse of technology are the same as symptoms of early dementia in older people, so there is a reason to worry that extreme dependence on technology, especially AI, could increase the possibility of early dementia.

c. You are department managers, and you are noticing that your employees seem increasingly unable to think in creative ways and to solve complex problems. There also seems to be a growing number of health-related absences. Suggest some things the company could do to minimize the following problems.

1. Employees are stressed, and many find it difficult to concentrate on important tasks.
2. Employees are allowed to use AI tools, but they seem to be getting worse at solving problems and making good decisions.
3. Employees are taking more and more sick days, and many complain of eye strain, bad headaches, muscle pain or extreme fatigue.

## Useful language

*In the first situation, I/we would ...*

*I/We would ask the employees to ...*

*I/We think the best solution to the first problem is to ...*