

Do digital devices make us dumb?

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions. Give details.

1. Do you use your phone or laptop during classes or meetings? If so, what for? Do you think using a digital device helps or hurts your ability to concentrate and remember what was discussed?
2. Do you prefer to read on screen or on paper? Why?

2 Key words

a. Match the words in the box with the definitions. Then read the complete article to see how each of the words is used in context. The numbers of the paragraphs where the words appear are in brackets to help you locate them quickly.

braced (1)	multitasking (2)	recall (12)
hostile (1)	cognitive offloading (4)	shallow processing (15)
MBA (1)	disgruntled (5)	infeasible (16)
distraction (7)	undergraduates (8)	

1. _____: doing several different things at the same time
2. _____: something that takes your attention away from a task you should be doing
3. _____: letting a machine or a tool (like AI) think for you
4. _____: a little angry or disappointed about an occurrence or a situation
5. _____: very opposed to or aggressive toward something or someone
6. _____: impossible or impractical to do
7. _____: people who are studying for a basic university degree, usually four years in the USA
8. _____: approaching information superficially, without thinking critically about its meaning
9. _____: prepared for something difficult or for a negative reaction
10. _____: abbreviation for Masters in Business Administration (a second degree after the basic Bachelor's Degree)
11. _____: the ability to remember something

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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3 Understanding the article

a. Choose T (True) or F (False) for each statement according to the information in the article.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. When a University of Cambridge professor banned laptops, the students had an extremely negative reaction. | T | F |
| 2. The professor banned laptops because he knew that students were doing other things besides focusing on the class. | T | F |
| 3. A lot of recent research and debate has been on the effects of digital devices on students' concentration and retention. | T | F |
| 4. The Cambridge professor encourages his students not to use AI or other digital technology at all. | T | F |
| 5. One study showed that even when university students did not use digital devices in class, they were still less focused on the class than students in pre-digital times. | T | F |
| 6. There is some indication that people retain information better when they read on paper than when they read on a screen. | T | F |
| 7. Printed books are generally cheaper than digital materials. | T | F |
| 8. One study indicated that using AI to transcribe university lectures helps students have a deeper understanding of the material than taking notes by hand. | T | F |

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

a. Match the words 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. According to the article, what are some of the negative effects of the overuse of digital technology on learning?
2. In your experience, do most students use their phones or laptops in class for activities that are not related to the class? If so, what do they usually do with them?
3. In your opinion, does the switch to digital formats for textbooks and other educational reading materials have a positive, a negative or a neutral effect on learning?
4. What other invention did people accuse of dumbing people down in the past? Do you think that was true? Why or why not?

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

- a. With a group or a partner, look at the list and tick (✓) the physical and mental effects that you think spending too much time using information technology, especially AI, could have on people.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> less creativity | <input type="checkbox"/> less ability to communicate with people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> less ability to control emotions | <input type="checkbox"/> poor decision making |
| <input type="checkbox"/> smaller brains | <input type="checkbox"/> less ability to learn |
| <input type="checkbox"/> poorer memory | <input type="checkbox"/> symptoms of dementia |

- b. Read the text and check your ideas from task a. Which, if any, of the possible effects surprised 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. In groups, look at three problems that a company has. For each one, suggest one practical action the company could take to reduce the negative effects.

1. Employees are stressed because of constant distractions from emails and other notifications. They find it difficult to concentrate on one task at a time.
2. Employees are relying too much on AI to help them solve problems and make decisions quickly in order to stay on schedule with their tasks. This is resulting in some poor decisions.
3. Employees are frequently taking days off because of medical problems like eye strain, bad headaches, muscle pain and 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 ...