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The truth about mobile tech benefits in classrooms

Published Jan. 22, 2020

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The embrace of mobile technology in higher education appears to now include at least a small majority of college instructors. In a recent survey of instructors conducted by Education Dive Brand Studio and Cengage, **53% of respondents said they used mobile to access e-books and other digital course materials**, while 46% used it to research class topics.

Yet there are still plenty of doubters, and two issues seem to worry them the most. Among those reporting they do not use mobile, 43% said they were concerned that not all students would have equal, affordable access to the devices, and 24% said they were concerned it would distract their students too much.

While these are valid concerns that many instructors share, we'd like to lift the lid and explore the truth behind mobile in the classroom.

Digital Native Generation

A recent Pew Research Center report describes how, over the last several decades, digital technology has progressed from a novelty to a more normal part of the lifestyle of each successive generation.

“Generation X grew up as the computer revolution was taking hold, and Millennials came of age during the internet explosion,” writes Pew Research Center President Michael Dimock. “In this progression, what is unique for Generation Z is that all of the above have been part of their lives from the start.”

Gen Zers, born in the mid-1990s, are true digital natives. By the time the eldest of the generation reached their teens, Dimock notes, mobile devices, Wi-Fi and high-bandwidth cellular service had become the main vehicle for young Americans to connect to the web. They take constant connectivity and on-demand communication for granted.

College students, who now consist primarily of Gen Zers, never leave home — and some never go to bed — without their smartphones. “Students are using their phones for everything. It’s more than just to communicate,” said Courtney Doyle Chambers, marketing manager for digital solutions at Cengage Learning. “It’s how they transfer money to friends, research restaurants, make art and everything else — and, of course, sharing all of that through social media as well.”

Ryan Jenkins, speaker and expert on millennials and Gen Z, sums up the cohort this way in an article for Inc.: “Generation Z is a video and mobile-centric generation where their mobile devices serve as the remote control of their lives.”

Using the same technology to engage these students and keep your course content front of mind may seem like a natural transition for this generation.

Near-Universal Access to Mobile

Despite some college educators’ concern that using mobile technology might put many students at a disadvantage because of the cost, research shows that more than 90% of Gen Z is mobile connected. A recent Educause study reveals that **95% have access to smartphones** and 91% have access to laptops. The authors note that their analysis turned up no patterns of inequity along the lines of ethnicity, gender, age or socioeconomic status regarding access to digital technologies that are key to students’ academic success.

Nicole Naudé, technical product manager at Cengage, has seen evidence of this near-universal access firsthand. “Every student

that I've talked to in any research I've done shows that access to a smartphone is super common, largely because they are using apps for social media," Naudé said. She added that many students seemed to prefer the combination of smartphones and tablets for mobile connection, rather than using laptops. "They really like that they can have cellular data as a backup to Wi-Fi, which is not something you can get on a laptop."

Engaging Students Inside and Outside of Class

The results of the Educause study also run counter to the idea that mobile will entice students to spend more time posting selfies and playing video games than studying. Students surveyed said they spent more time doing homework and research online than using social media, streaming video, gaming or other online activities.

Many college educators who have adopted mobile technology as a teaching tool will attest that, far from being an inevitable distraction, it offers innovative ways to keep students more engaged with learning. In the Education Dive Brand Studio and Cengage survey, when asked to select the most important benefits of using mobile inside the classroom, **75% of respondents checked, "It provides new ways to energize my class and engage students in learning."** It was far and away the most popular response. The second top choice, at 44%, being that "It enables every student to benefit equally from the sharing of digital resources and ideas for using them."

Just as mobile tech facilitates engagement and access to digital learning resources within the classroom, it also provides flexibility and convenience to students and instructors outside of class. In the survey, **76% of respondents cited that "It gives students more opportunities to access digital content on demand, and study at their convenience."** Roughly equal proportions of respondents selected having more time and flexibility to connect with students outside class hours (60%) and the ability of students to use digital content for group study sessions and projects outside of class (58%) as key benefits.

Maximizing the engagement-enhancing benefits of mobile becomes easy when the digital learning app includes features such as notifications to help students keep track of assignment due dates and test scores, flashcards and practice quizzes to help them study, and polling tools to allow instructors to gauge student knowledge and spark classroom discussions.

Building Instructor Buy-In

The Educause report cites data from its 2017 study showing 70% of students saying their instructors were banning or discouraging smartphones in class, and 40% saying the same for tablets. Only 25% reported that their instructors encouraged smartphone use. Fifty-two percent of faculty reported they banned or discouraged smartphone use in class, while 24% said they banned or discouraged tablet use.

“In some cases, faculty ban or discourage devices in classrooms on the basis of research that simply confirms their biases against those digital devices — that they are distracting, that student device usage implies disrespect or a lack of attention, or that students are not taking good notes,” stated the 2018 Educause report. But the authors warn that limiting the use of mobile devices may unintentionally harm certain groups of students who view them as especially important to their academic success. Research has shown these include students of color, students with disabilities, first-generation students, students who are independent and students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, Educause noted.

That is, the very issue of inequality that some college instructors wished to avoid by shying away from mobile, may be exacerbated when it’s banned.

For the reluctant mobile adopters, the most effective way to onboard might be to start with a narrow application and gradually expand. Initially, they may invite students to use some of the study and career-development tools available on a mobile learning app before exploring how it can enhance their teaching. For instance,

they might discover how much easier it is to check attendance through students' smartphones than trying to do a roll call while they drift in and mill about the classroom. Next, they might check out the polling feature to see how well students understand class topics and boost their active participation in class.

Students Leading the Way

For today's college students, mobile technology is a constant companion. They crisscross the campus, enter classrooms and return home with smartphones and tablets in hand. College teaching and learning methods must evolve to meet these students where they are, allowing them to access course materials and other success tools with the same ease and convenience they get when connecting with friends or sharing photos. With students holding a learning tool with so much potential right in the palm of their hands, educators can't afford to miss out on the opportunity to use it to capture their attention and create a more engaging learning experience.

To hear what educators had to say about the Cengage Mobile App [click here](#).