

Texting in Class: A Rampant Epidemic at Adelphi

By Jaclyn Binstock

Adelphi University professors are growing frustrated having to increasingly compete with 3" x 5" objects for their students' attention.

No, it's not books, notepads or index cards.

Whether it's browsing Twitter, updating statuses on Facebook, or texting a friend, students are invariably using their smart phones more and paying attention less in class.

A confidential survey of 75 Adelphi students conducted by this reporter in November 2013 found that 95 percent of Adelphi students admit to using their cell phone during classes, with more than 65 percent saying that they use their phones at least sometimes. Almost 30 percent say they are on their phones all the time. Only four percent say that they do not use their phones at all. Many even acknowledge it's a bad habit, but say they can't help it.

School officials said they were alarmed by those numbers. "I'm surprised that almost 30 percent of students said they used it all of the time," said Provost Gayle Insler. "Texting and using your phone is distracting for you. If you are texting, you are not paying attention."

Laura Martin, an adjunct professor of communications, agreed. "If I'm trying to teach something or get a point across, it's distracting for the user to be focused on something else," she said. "A lot of research does show that we don't multitask well, so I think that your focus needs to be on the class materials when you're in here."

Many Adelphi students admit it's a faux pas, but do it anyway.

"You shouldn't use your phone when a superior is speaking, except I don't think of that in class, which is kind of rude," said one student who responded to the anonymous Adelphi survey.

Another anonymous survey taker said, "It's my own fault if I text in class. If a professor has worked really hard on a presentation and it shows, only then I'll put my phone away out of respect."

A fellow Adelphi survey taker agreed, saying, "It is disrespectful to use your phone while a teacher is speaking. If they're talking to you or to the class in general, it comes off disrespectful."

Students Addicted to Smart Phones?

Even though 30 percent of the responses from Adelphi students acknowledged that texting in class is "unprofessional," "rude," "inappropriate," and "disrespectful," 95 percent of students still do it.

Elizabeth Lindner, social worker from Harlem Hospital, explains that, for many students, smart phones have become an addiction.

"Knowing what I know about addiction, it is clear that people feel drawn to their cell phones on an emotional level," Lindner said. "Many people feel as if their phones are a part of their self-concept, a part of who they are as an individual."

Indeed, Adelphi junior Taylor Hayes said, "My phone is like my child." She said she takes her phone everywhere she goes and finds it hard to put it away while in class.

"I could not imagine life without it," Hayes said. "I don't necessarily have to be on my phone throughout the entire class but I need it to answer

texts and check the time. It's kind of like a sense of security."

Dr. Maria Xydas, a school psychologist from East Norwich, N.Y., said such dependency can hinder academic success.

"Our current generation is always attached to their technology devices, and they find it difficult to remove themselves from this attachment," she explained. "This can become concerning if it affects their work, school, family or personal responsibilities. I believe there will be a rise in treatment and rehab facilities focusing on technology addictions due to the changes in our society."

Even students recognize they may have a problem.

"It's embarrassing that we can't put our phones away for the duration of a class," said Adelphi junior Victoria Wink. "I speak for myself, as well. I think it says a lot about who we are as a society that we can't put our cell phones down for an hour, sometimes less."

In fairness, the problem isn't unique to Adelphi students. A 2012 study conducted by Barney McCoy, associate professor of broadcasting at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, found that of 777 students at six colleges and universities, more than 90 percent of students admit to using their cellular devices during class time. Only 8 percent of the people surveyed said that they never do so.

Professors Clamping Down

Although many Adelphi officials are concerned about the rise in smart phone use, the university has yet to develop a policy on the issue. While some professors have strict bans on phone usage in class, others regard it merely as poor etiquette.

"It's like having a conversation in class or passing notes in class," said Insler. "It's not evil but it's distracting for the professor and I think it's a little disrespectful. With that being said, there is no campus-wide policy, and we leave the rules [about cell phone usage] up to the discretion of the faculty member and the nature of the class."

Many professors have started addressing the issue in their syllabi. For example, one professor's syllabus warns: "No cell phones, beepers, or other distractions are permitted in class. Ten points will be deducted from your professionalism grade each time you use your cell phone during class time." Another professor's syllabus states: "Technology (cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, texting, cell phones, music players, etc.) that is not related directly to the class or class activities may not be used during class time. If you must attend to a personal situation or emergency during class time, please step out of the room."

Professor Regina Axelrod, chairperson of Adelphi's political science department, goes one step further by prohibiting any kind of electronic device.

"I don't allow any type of phone, computer or anything that would distract students from what's going on in the classroom," she said. "I don't look at cell phones as technology, I look at it as an interference. I think it's very rude because it sends the message that a student's personal phone conversation is more important than what's going on in the class."

While anti-phone policies may be gaining favor among faculty, enforcement appears to be lax. Like many other Adelphi professors, Axelrod admits that she does not walk around the classroom on the hunt for texters. "I don't walk around the classroom. I teach and if they're not distracted, they'll learn," she said.

According to the Adelphi survey, a mere 14 percent of students said that a professor has reprimanded them for using a cell phone in class, and 56 percent believe students should be allowed to use cell phones during class.

"Texting during an exam is unacceptable," said one survey taker. "But other than that I feel it is my issue. Anything I miss in class because of texting is my own fault and I will accept full responsibility for it."

Potential Positives

Not all professors despise smart phones in their classroom. In fact, some even welcome them – under certain circumstances. Martin, for example, acknowledged smart phones can be a distraction, but said, if used appropriately, can help enhance the classroom experience.

"I think it can be a great tool in the classroom," said Martin, who has a doctorate degree in educational and instructional technology from Texas Tech University and was recently appointed Adelphi's associate provost for online learning. "Often times I've used it myself. Professors will send a text to students to keep students up to date, send them links, or to send them an article that is related to the class."

As technology continues to advance, she sees it important to take advantage of these advancements.

"It is direct communication and you can find out things quickly, answer questions quickly, push out materials that are current and things that you come across on a daily basis," she said. "Cell phones allow students to reach right into the palm of their hand for the information they need when they need it."

Seventy-five Adelphi students were surveyed.

1) When asked if they have ever used their cell phone during a class:
96 percent said yes
4 percent said no

2) When asked how frequently they use their mobile device during class (This includes texting, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, etc...):

6 percent said not at all
65 percent said sometimes
29 percent said all the time

3) When asked if they have ever been reprimanded by a professor for using their phone in class (Accused of cheating, gotten your phone taken away, etc...):

14 percent said yes
85 percent said no

4) When asked if students should be allowed to use their phone in class:
56 percent said yes
46 percent said no

5) When asked if there is ever a time or place that they feel is completely inappropriate to use cell phones:

86 percent said yes
16 percent said no