

TECH IN THE NEWS

College Lectures- Technology



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Step Three:

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EDSURGE PODCAST

Student Disengagement Has Soared Since the Pandemic. Here's What Lectures Look Like Now

By Jeffrey R. Young

Dec 13, 2022



EdSurge photo by Jeffrey R. Young

This article is part of the guide: [Attention Please: Professors Struggle With Student Disengagement](#).

SAN MARCOS, Texas — As a digital media course got underway on a recent Wednesday at Texas State University, a trickle of students took their seats in one of the largest lecture theaters on campus. On paper, this was a huge class, with about 220 students registered.

But there was not much buzz of activity as the class settled in. Only around 60 students showed up. And they were scattered in clumps around the vast room.

I visited this campus to get a sense of what college classes feel like now that COVID is more under control, and just about all colleges are fully back in person. That's after years of pandemic disruptions where classes couldn't be held in person, and teaching was forced online for long periods, in an era many students refer to as Zoom University.

My goal in flying down to Texas State was to find out, what do college classes look and feel like now—especially in large lectures like this one?

We've been hearing that things are different these days in lecture classes like this. That students are more distracted than ever by their devices—the laptops, smartphones and iPads that just about everyone in this class has out on their desks. But it's more than that. Some professors around the country are reporting that students just don't seem as into their classes since the pandemic, or maybe that they're not convinced that this ritual of lecture is worth doing at all.

And so the stakes are huge, because the concern is that maybe the social contract between students and professors is kind of breaking down. Do students believe that all this college lecturing is worth hearing?

Or, will this moment force a change in the way college teaching is done?

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An Invitation to Observe Lecture Classes

Back in 2020, I did [an interview for this podcast](#) with James Lang, about a book he had just written about student distraction in college classes. And I mentioned in that

episode that I've long wanted to sit in the back of a bunch of large lecture classrooms on a campus to see what students are really doing on their devices. After all, the professors lecturing don't know what students are looking at on devices, but it would be easy to see if you stood in the back of the room. But Lang figured it was unlikely that I'd actually pull it off.

"I think it's a good idea, but good luck finding volunteers for it," Lang told me.

It turns out a professor at Texas State heard that episode, and she thought it didn't sound like that crazy of an idea. A podcast club she's in with other professors on campus listened to that episode, and they decided they'd be up for trying the experiment.

"So I emailed you and said if you want to, we're willing," remembers the professor, Rachel Davenport, a senior lecturer in biology at Texas State. Regular listeners might remember Davenport, because she's been on this podcast as part of a series we did in the fall of 2020 called [Pandemic Campus Diaries](#), where every other week we published an episode capturing what campus teaching and life was like during the first full semester of major pandemic disruptions.

But all the reporting for that series was done remotely, so I had never been to Texas State before.

Thanks to the invitation from Davenport and others in her podcast club to let me observe some classes there, I got the chance to go in person. She helped line up permission for me to visit three lecture classes in three different departments. One of them was one of her biology classes designed for majors, many of them pre-med. Another was a psychology course for non-majors, and the other was the communication class in the large lecture theater on campus, which has a mix of majors and non-majors.

My goal was to sit in the back of each lecture, and walk around to try to see how tuned in the students seemed, and try to see what they are doing on their devices.

I asked Davenport in advance what she thought I'd see in her class.

“Because this class is so integral to future careers, and because they're so grade-motivated in order to have the best applications possible, I think you're going to see a lot of students on task and engaged,” she said. “But I think you will probably see some social media up on their computers, probably a lot of texting with other people. I have heard stories of even students like watching soccer games or YouTube videos of music videos or sports. So I would be very curious to learn after the fact if you see anything like that.”

A View From the Back of the Room

During my visit to Texas State, I first attended that digital media course. The lesson of the day was focused on the topic of video storytelling, taught by Jon Zmikly, a professor in the Digital Media Innovation program and assistant director of the Media Innovation Lab.

I wanted to be upfront with students about what I was doing, so at the beginning of each class I observed, I got up on stage in front of the group and introduced myself and explained the project. I didn't tell the students that I was so intent on looking at what's on their screens, because it did seem like that would have changed their behavior. But I noted that I was there to talk to students and professors about what class feels like in this post-COVID moment. And I had the professors promise that they wouldn't punish any of the students who admitted distracted behavior in class.

So I headed to the back of the room to watch.

As I looked out across the lecture hall, almost everyone had a laptop or iPad in use. I counted only five or six people out of the 60 students with no device out on their desk.

On many of the laptop screens, I saw students looking at the slides from the day's lecture, which the professor had made available for download beforehand on the

learning management system. Most students seemed to use their smartphone for things that seemed to have no connection to their studies.

“I kind of have my phone close to me at all times,” Sydney Dawkins, a junior at the university, told me later. “And I’ll hear that buzz sound and I think I have to look at it. It’s more of like an impulse thing that I have to look at it.”

By just five minutes in or so, I started seeing some pretty blatant disengagement—the kind of thing that I had heard happened these days but that I’d never seen in a class before.

One student near the back in a white T-shirt and black baseball cap seemed to be playing a first-person shooter video game on his phone. Another student in the back appeared to be shopping for a used bed on Facebook marketplace. One was definitely watching sports clips on YouTube on his phone.

In one of the seats in the back near the exit, Haley Hearne was scribbling furiously in a notebook with a red pen. But it turns out that hard work was for another class.

“I had another exam that day that I was trying to finish my study guide for,” she later explained.

I asked Hearne if she noticed other students acting disengaged during the class session. In a way I wanted another witness to confirm what I was seeing.

“From my own observations, I’d say maybe half of them don’t seem like they’re paying attention,” she said. “They’re on their phone or on their laptops doing other things. Some people are just straight-up watching videos—like doing stuff that you can tell they’re not working on any type of different school thing. Like they’re just basically sitting there doing nothing.”

So why did Hearne bother to come to this lecture if she just spent the whole time working on a study guide for another class?

“For this course we have a stricter attendance policy,” she said. “We clock in and that’s how he knows we came to class. We have little scanners on the outside of the doors where you can scan your Bobcat ID card or put in your Bobcat number. That’s how he knows that we came to class.”

This practice of scanning into big lecture halls at universities does sort of resemble the way workers clock into a factory job. And you could argue that the policy at a college can easily backfire, forcing students to attend class even when they don’t really have the time and attention for that class that day.

In fact, the professor in this class seems to feel that way.

It turns out that the student misunderstood Zmikly’s policy, and that he doesn’t require attendance but tells students they should come if they want to do well in the class.

“I have tried the requirement to swipe in and swipe out,” he said. “But then I become their parent. And I’ve had students where they swipe in, they leave and go get some lunch, and then when it’s time for me to end class, they just wander back in and swipe out.”

To be clear, I did observe several students who seemed to be taking notes about the class and mostly paying attention. One of them was Bailey Green, a junior, who was in the second row with a laptop displaying the class slides.

Even this student, though, says she sometimes struggles to focus in lecture these days.

“I do think that our tech makes it harder to pay attention,” she said. “In one of my other classes, there’s a guy that sits in front of me that plays video games. And it’s distracting to me too because I’m trying to listen, but I’m like, ‘How’s he doing? How’s his game going?’”

It turns out Zmikly and other professors are very aware of this issue of second-hand tech distraction.

“I’ve had complaints from students saying just that,” the professor told me. “Like, in my final evaluations they say, ‘I’m really glad that you do allow us to use our devices in class because I use it for note taking. But I will say that somebody in front of me was shopping on Amazon the whole time and it distracted me from what I was doing because my eyes were wandering onto their screen.’”

The professor now has a line in his syllabus, he explained: “It says ‘beware that others can see what you’re doing and stay on task.’ And I can only really police it to that level. I can’t really monitor what everyone’s watching or doing.”

Distraction on the Rise

Some of this isn’t totally new—and has been an issue in lectures for a few years. But just about everyone I talked to said this kind of blatant disengagement during lecture has skyrocketed since COVID.

For student Sydney Dawkins, she says she struggles to overcome some bad habits she developed when all of her classes were on Zoom. Like many students during that time, she chose to turn her camera off so the professor had no idea whether she was paying attention or not.

“During COVID I would just be camera off, muted, and I’m on my phone the entire time.

I would watch full-on TV shows. I’d be doing other things, and kind of treating it almost like a podcast—like I’m listening, but I’m doing other stuff,” she said. “So now that we’re back in the classroom, with the tech it’s easier to zone out, if that makes sense.”

That time of Zoom University was hard for professors too, because they suspected that students were tuning them out, but they really didn't have a way to tell which ones were or how their words were landing.

“It was really hard to get any engagement at all—I was talking to a box of blank screens,” said Zmikly.

Now to be clear, this is not just in this class. Zmikly is a successful teacher who has been doing this for years, and he's definitely not alone. Students like Hearne are seeing it all across campus. Something has deeply shifted.

“This is the first time I've ever had two of my different professors literally yell at us because of the way people are acting,” she said. “People are talking, or we have guest speakers and then people are just getting up and leaving in the middle of class—that's very rude and disrespectful. I've just never had that happen before until this year.”

And it's not just at Texas State.

I reached out to a national expert on college teaching, Josh Eyler, director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Mississippi, who has written [a book on effective college teaching](#). And he said this is happening across the country.

“I did a workshop on my own campus about student disengagement a few weeks ago with my colleagues. And the first thing we talked about was a major hurdle at this moment is that students are bringing with them their conditioned Zoom behaviors into the in-person setting,” he said.

He explained that students got used to turning off their cameras and listening to live lectures in the background, and they're now falling into that habit even when they are in a lecture hall.

“What we're seeing is that the distraction was cultivated in a certain kind of way by the teaching modality that most people were using [during the pandemic],” he explained. “I mean, we had to use it. But it has created an environment or cultivated behaviors that students are now bringing with them.”

Experts have been calling this a nationwide [student disengagement crisis](#).

And Eyler says professors he's talking to are really struggling with this because it's not just a crisis for disengaged students. It's a crisis for the educators.

“Teaching is a deeply personal thing, and faculty take it very seriously and they take it very personally,” he said. “And so even though they're trying their best, this has been deeply frustrating and has affected their approach to the classroom.

Some are even rethinking their careers.

“We have lots of evidence of people leaving higher ed because they just can't do this anymore,” he added. “They can't be in a situation where they just feel like what they're contributing in the classroom is not landing, and that the students are not engaging with them.”

Of course not all students are disengaged. For the diligent students coming to class, seeing so many students checked out is also deeply frustrating.

“I have some classes where attendance is literally part of our grade and people don't show up— and that stresses me out,” said Green. “I know people that will like, ‘I don't really wanna go to class, I'm just gonna sleep in.’ And I'm like, ‘How do you do that?’ Because you're paying for this education, you chose this major because it's what you want to learn about and yet you're not showing up.”

She does have a theory, though. And it has to do with that the period of Zoom teaching led not just to bad classroom habits, but it shifted how some students valued time in class.

“I feel like COVID and Zoom stuff, it just made school less important for everyone,” she said. “That’s why people are skipping now—because they’re like, ‘I can look it up or I can find this somewhere else, or I can contact someone that’s in that class and get help that way.’”

Does she worry that these no-shows may end up with the same diploma she’s getting?

“Yes. Because if having a degree is part of having experience, and I’m someone who has worked their butt off to have that, and another person just like cheats their way through and is able to get this degree... [then] they might get a job over me, but I have a better understanding,” she said.

Feeling Stressed

But the more I talked with students and professors, though, the more I understood how complicated this issue is. Because I grew to understand that it’s not some simple narrative that disengaged students are just being lazy.

That was especially clear from something that Hearne told me, the student who was studying for another class during this lecture.

“I know for me I have a lot of social anxiety now,” Hearn shared. “It’s physical symptoms. I’ll get sweaty palms. I can’t even muster up the courage to raise my hand and say something, which I know sounds stupid to say.”

Several students I talked to said they knew peers who were struggling to handle in-person classes.

“I know lots of people who feel like they need to drop out or they need to leave school because it’s just too much on them,” said Dawkins, the student who says she used to listen to Zoom lectures while walking her dog. “For sure some people have a really hard time getting back in the flow of being in school. That loss of motivation, that

burnout, the feelings that you get when you just can't get up to go to class physically, I think is real.”

So what about the student I saw apparently playing a video game on his phone during class?

It turns out, there's more to his story than I first guessed.

“I'm a fidgeter,” said the student, Austin Nunez, when I talked to him after class. (I had noticed that all during class he was tapping his right leg nervously, like maybe it was a struggle to sit still.) “I mean, I'm more focused on the lecture than on my phone, but I need something that diverts my eyes too, you know? I'm not really doing anything that's really taking up my attention on my phone. I'm really listening to a lecture, but I'm just moving around.”

I mentioned this moment to my host, Rachel Davenport, the senior lecturer. And she was sympathetic to this student's situation.

“I will share my own story, which is that I have been diagnosed with ADHD,” she said. “And so for me just sitting still and passively absorbing is not a possibility. I can't just sit still. I don't just have that in classes or meetings. I even have that with watching TV. So even if you're showing me an action film with a ton going on, I still cannot just physically sit still, especially not for a long period of time.”

“And one of the strategies that I use,” she continued, “I pull out my phone and I'll glance at something and sometimes it's just the weather app. But I do it when I start to feel my focus shifting. When my focus starts to shift, I'll often kind of give myself something different, and then that kind of helps reset. And so then when I tune back in, maybe I was only tuned out for 10 to 30 seconds, but it really does help me focus back in.”

So it's not that smartphones and laptops are somehow all bad. It's clear they're everywhere these days, and perhaps even more of a go-to tool now since the

pandemic.

In fact, I noticed that Nunez, the student who was tapping his leg during class, was looking at a lot of pictures on his phone.

And it wasn't as off-task as I had guessed.

“We have to create a slideshow” for class, he said. “So I'm looking through my old concert photos and moving them into Google Drive so I could edit them later.”

‘It Almost Feels Like a Gift That They Come to Class’

As the lecture on digital video wound down, the professor ended with details about the next assignment, which did have Nunez and other students attentive again.

So how did the professor think that went—with the low attendance and distraction?

“It almost feels like a gift that they come to class,” Zmikly said, remembering the years of teaching on Zoom or trying a hybrid format where some students were in person and others watched remotely. “It kind of feels like, OK, at least there were 60 in the room and I didn't have to do Zoom and I'm doing the best I can physically here with what we have.”

With the rise of Zoom and our growing attachment to our devices, it sometimes feels like our relationship to media has changed more in the past few years, since the pandemic, than it did in the past decade. And that's especially for students.

“I think it's changed forever, to be honest,” said Zmikly. “I think that there will always be this kind of thing for students where in the back of my mind, ‘Well, I could be doing something else.’ You know, at work even—I've had students do that—or whatever

they're doing, kind of doing school from home. And so it's kind of become less of an in-person experience.”

Or at least the old ways of doing that in-person experience may not work like it used to.

This was just the first of three classes I was here to see. Next I was headed to a psych class and a biology class. And in those classes, the professors were already trying to adjust how they teach to adapt to these changing student behaviors and expectations.

What does that look like? Find out in part two of this series, coming in January.

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Editing this episode by Rob McGinley Myers. Music by Komiku.

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