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Inattention, Distraction, and Dysfunction - Modern Challenges for Business Education and Practice

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Introduction

Students of every generation have faced factors that limited the amount of time available for study based on responsibilities such as family and jobs. There were also potential distractions that challenged students' willpower to focus on academic activities instead of other completely discretionary uses of their time. The choice was between activities that provided immediate gratification versus academic activities that would yield a far greater payoff over the long run.

The last decade has seen a significant array of new temptations in the form of smart phones and other personal technologies that are powerful, portable, and pervasive. While these technologies offer many benefits to learning and productivity, they also provide the potential to negatively affect student academic performance, business and professional success, the quality of social and familial relationships, and general well-being.

The purpose of this research is twofold. First, we provide a brief overview of key literature related to distractions in the academic environment and their effects on thought, concentration, reflection, and self-regulation. Second, we report the results of a questionnaire administered to junior-level undergraduate business students aimed at evaluating student awareness and personal management of these potential distractions, student self-regulation of learning, student time orientation, and additional descriptive information about the circumstances under which students study and learn.

Literature Overview

Much research exists that emphasizes the importance of student management of their learning environment and academic progress. Zimmerman and Kitsantas (2007) argue that self-regulated learning and practice constitute "the hidden dimension of personal competence," and they articulate three phases of self-regulated learning: the *forethought phase* (goal setting, strategic planning, self-efficacy, task interest, goal orientation, and outcome expectancies), the *performance phase* (task strategies, metacognitive monitoring, and self-recording), and the *self-reflection* phase (self-evaluation, self-attributions, self-satisfaction, and adaptive inferences). As students are self-regulating their learning process and making key decisions about their learning environment, there are two elements that require consideration. First, students must know the methods, activities, and mindsets to learn effectively. Second, they must demonstrate the motivation and persistence to do what they know must be done. Students should not despair if they are unfamiliar with self-regulation or how to develop this skill, as many have written on the subject, including Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovach (1996) who provide a thorough description of self-regulated learning and lay out a series of steps and activities for developing self-regulated learners. Student self-regulation can be measured, too, and results used as a developmental tool. For example, Pintrich and De Groot (1990) developed the Motivated Strategies Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), an instrument which measures 15 scales to evaluate various aspects of student motivation and self-regulation.

Other factors that impact the student learning environment exist beyond simply the ability of students to self-regulate. Mischel (1996) highlights individual differences in willpower, and he states that students must demonstrate a concern for the future that causes them to be willing to delay gratification and make wise, long-term choices. Bembenutty and Karabenick (2004) support

this linkage, adding that students with a future time perspective are more willing to delay gratification and set more temporally distant academic goals and self-regulate their learning, factors associated with academic success.

What arguably impacts student attention in today's academic environments most negatively is personal technology. Modern technologies provide many opportunities to boost productivity; however, there is also much evidence that negative effects are associated with information and communication technologies (ICTs), and it is imperative for both students and professionals to make mindful, self-regulated choices about when and how to utilize these devices. In many cases, the learning environment is not the most effective place for technology. Starting with student classroom performance, Mueller and Oppenheimer (2014) found that taking hand-written notes shows many cognitive advantages over taking notes on a computer; specifically, longhand note-takers show stronger conceptual understanding and greater ability to integrate and apply material. Beyond classroom note-taking, Junco and Cotton (2012) found students' frequent use of ICTs was negatively associated with grade-point average, and they argue that using social media and/or sending text messages while studying lowers students' capacity for deeper levels of concentration and learning. This concern for the depth of concentration and focus is supported by Compernolle (2014) who describes three distinct cognitive processes: the reflex brain, the reflecting brain, and the archiving brain. He contends that the preoccupation with ICTs is causing students and professionals to utilize primarily their reflex brain which focuses only on what is happening at the current moment, and by doing so these individuals greatly limit the depth of thought and the ability to find solutions and to sort out the information they have assimilated in a reasoned fashion. The impacts of ICTs are not limited to thinking and learning, as Roberts and David (2016) report that some individuals' relationship satisfaction with romantic partners is negatively impacted by preoccupation with cell phones by one or both individuals.

Institutions of higher education must realize that undergraduate students are adults with legitimate demands on their time such as work requirements and work-life balance pursuits. But as justifiable as some of these demands may be, students must recognize the need for appropriate ordering of priorities. Being able to weigh the benefits of an academic degree and being able to properly allocate time, energy, and attention is a critical requirement of success. Thus, this research seeks to explore the following research questions:

1) What are the physical, emotional, and cognitive circumstances under which students study?
2) To what extent do students make mindful, self-regulated choices about their study?
3) What are the impacts of ICTs on students' concentration and study?

Method

Junior-level, undergraduate business students from a large, regional Midwestern university will be invited to participate in this research. Students will be asked to participate in a 15-20 minute questionnaire administered through Qualtrics in exchange for one bonus point toward their final grade in their Management course. The questionnaire contains several widely used scales measuring, for example, time perspective (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1990), delay of gratification

(Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1996), and motivation and self-regulated learning (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990), as well as a variety of self-report measures created for this project.

Results & Implications

(Note to reviewers: The questionnaire will be administered at the start of February 2016. Data will be analyzed and ready for presentation at the 2016 ARBS, and select results will be added to this structured abstract prior to submission of the camera-ready copy.)

Conclusion

(Note to reviewers: Conclusions will be drawn from the collected data and ready for presentation at the 2016 ARBS. Select conclusions will be added to this structured abstract prior to submission of the camera-ready copy.)

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