

Small but Mighty: Using Students' Smartphones in College Teaching

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A recent study showed that because of the abundance of learning tools, apps, digital books with interactive elements, visual content, cameras and browsers, students can engage in learning activities with fewer space and time restrictions using smartphones (Fichten et al., 2019). However, some consider smartphones to be a distraction to learning and teaching (Bennett, 2019). When used in a responsible, well informed, and timely manner during a lecture, the smartphone can be an efficient tool to increase and improve the inclusion of all students, whether they have a disability or not. Moreover, smartphones have been cited as a useful tool for remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Blagg et al., 2020).

Since most students own a smartphone (Galanek et al., 2018), our initial thought was “Why not use this small tool in the classroom to make a big impact?” With this idea in mind, we conducted a series of focus groups where participants were students, teachers, and professionals. Group members co-created activities for using smartphones. We also developed an online survey to examine how students used smartphones in class and what pedagogical practices they find helpful. We found that teachers used students' smartphones to administer short quizzes, assess comprehension, make e-textbooks and library resources more readily available, poll students and allow students to practice concepts. We also found that teachers used smartphones to help students access class material, to Google information, and to work in small teams on shared documents.

Many free apps and websites offer the opportunity to use smartphones in class. Two of the popular sites mentioned by focus groups participants, Poll Everywhere and Kahoot, allow teachers to poll their students for ideas, opinions, comprehension, etc. in a confidential manner. Teachers can use the smartphone polling option in individual, collaborative and competitive formats.

References:

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