CELL PHONES AND YOUR BRAIN

Your professors (including me) are always on your case to get off your phones during class, but why? What's the big deal? Below is a quick overview of some scientific studies on cell phones and attention that explain how your constant texting can be working against your academic success.

THEY IMPACT GRADES

A 2013 study showed that students who did not use their cell phones during a class lecture took 62% more notes, took more detailed notes, remembered the lecture better and scored A FULL LETTER GRADE BETTER on a test on that lecture than people in the class who listened to the exact same lecture while they were using their cell phones. (Kuznekoff 2013)

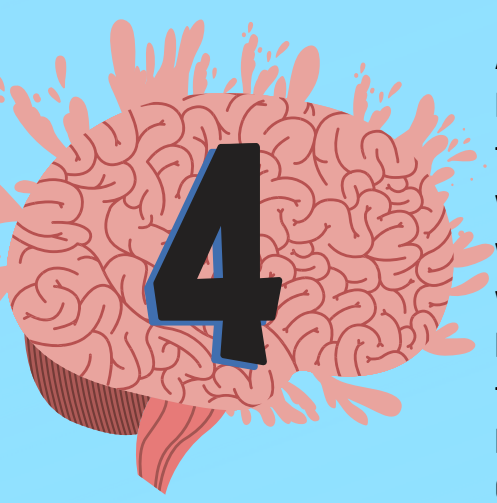
THEY INCREASE BOREDOM

A 1989 study took three groups of people and put them in a room to watch a video. In the next room, a tape recorder was playing. In one group, the recording in the next room was very loud, in another group it was just barely loud enough to hear and in the third group it was silent. The group with the barely loud enough recording reported being bored WITH THE VIDEO THEY WERE WATCHING (not the recording in the next room.) The other groups said the video was pretty interesting because either they didn't hear the recording, or they knew the recording in the other room was to blame for the distraction.

This suggests that when you are distracted and you don't know why, you are bored with what you are supposed to be doing, even though it is the fault of THE THING THAT IS DISTRACTING YOU. When you are waiting for someone to text you, you're like the distracted guy who can barely hear the recording in the next room. This means the more you're on your cell phones while you're reading/ writing/ doing your homework, the more bored you are with that homework. Your phones are making you more bored. (Damrad-Frye and Laird 1989)

THEY INTERRUPT THE "FLOW"

Dopamine is a chemical (called a neurotransmitter) released in your brain when you are seeking something that will give you a good feeling (food, drugs, sex, fame, positive feedback.) When you check your Twitter or Instagram or snaps or text messages, you release dopamine into your brain, because you are seeking a social reward, even if nobody texts you back (it's the SEEKING that gives you the feeling.) The problem with this is it's very addictive, and it's a very surface attention. You might all know what it feels like to get into the zone when you're playing sports, writing poetry or music, skateboarding, or doing anything that makes you feel laser-focused. This is called a "flow experience--" you are paying deep attention. The dopamine-seeking experience interrupts that flow and clears out your deep attention. And the problem is, it's easy to get caught in what's called a "dopamine loop," an addictive place where you're seeking out dopamine and you just keep checking and keep checking and keep checking your texts all the time, keeping you on the surface and away from that feeling of deep attention and flow.



THEY CAUSE "BRAIN DRAIN"

A 2017 study, "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smart Phone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity" suggested strongly that students were distracted by their cell phones even when they were face down on the table (and even, to some extent, when they were turned off in their bags.) "Cognitive Capacity" is the amount of work one's brain can do. In the case of the cell phone, the brain is too busy waiting for messages, thinking of what might be happening on the phone, to concentrate well on whatever other tasks might be at hand. There is also significant evidence that the sight and sound of OTHER PEOPLE'S phones contributes to this "brain drain."

SO WHAT DO WE DO? IT'S EASY TO SAY WE SHOULD JUST PUT OUR PHONES AWAY AND NEVER LOOK AT THEM THROUGHOUT CLASS, BUT I'M INTERESTED IN DEVELOPING A CELL PHONE POLICY THAT'S REALISTIC. THIS IS WHY I WANT TO WORK TOGETHER AS A CLASS TO COME UP WITH A POLICY THAT YOU THINK WILL WORK!