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Technology as a 'Flotation Device'

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Technology as an academic 'flotation device' for students

Submitted by M.O. Thirunarayanan and Taylor Campbell on May 9, 2018 - 3:00am

"In the event of an educational emergency, please use your laptops, tablets, smartphones or other mobile devices ..."

We're not aware of any professor who has started the course journey for students enrolled in her class this way, like flight attendants do before takeoff. But many college and university students do indeed use the technologies at their disposal as "flotation devices" equivalent to the seat cushions on airplanes, for purposes good and less so. (*Note: One of the authors, as an undergraduate in her co-author's course, came up with the idea of technology as "flotation device" in a class presentation.*)

Students who work and have other responsibilities outside the classroom are often overwhelmed and start "sinking" in their course work. This is especially true of those who take too many courses every semester, or who have to complete courses whose content is of little interest to them. They resort to using tools of technology to stay afloat or to keep up with the demands associated with successfully completing the many projects, tests and other academic course work.

Some students also spend large amounts of time on nonacademic pursuits, such as playing games -- including video games -- hanging out with friends and even partying extensively. And many students may also procrastinate and wait until the last minute to complete their projects and assignments. When they start working on their papers and reports and other classwork close to the submission deadline, they start realizing that they do not have much time.

The use of technologies as flotation devices has both positive and negative connotations.

On the positive side, after writing reports, students use the spelling and grammar checkers built into word processors to help correct errors so they can submit a paper or report free of such mistakes.

Quite a few students search the web just hours and even minutes before an assignment is due, to find useful and relevant information they can include in the work they submit. This includes viewing online videos to learn at the last minute what is needed to complete and submit class projects.

Another positive way students use technologies to stay afloat is to use instant messaging to communicate with their classmates to help each other keep up with the demands of academic course work.

But technology can keep students afloat in less positive ways, too.

Scratching the surface. Students sometimes conduct what can be called superficial searches of the web to find information related to a paper or report that they have to submit before a fast-approaching deadline. With a deadline looming, a thoughtful and thorough search is sacrificed in favor of finding documents in a hurry that can be cited or used to write a paper or report.

Also, instead of reading the documents that are listed in the search results, the first listed document is often skimmed through superficially and used for purposes of including quotations and a citation.

Rushed assignments like these typically become more opinion based than fact based, which could make the student's work stray away from the actual guidelines of the assignment.

Enabling excuses. Students have always made up excuses to negotiate extra time to submit their projects, from accidents and health emergencies -- for which doctors were not consulted -- to deaths in the family. Email and texting technology -- and the distance and comfort and security of home that they afford -- make it possible to send messages to course instructors at the last minute claiming such excuses.

Sending last-minute text messages to classmates or course instructors asking questions about projects and assignments that are due is another way students use technologies as flotation devices. Students also post questions about projects and assignments on discussion boards hoping someone will respond to their questions, even though answers to some of their questions may already be available in the project guidelines prepared by the course instructor and shared earlier with all the students in the class.

Skipping class. The use of technology by course instructors promotes absence, and students tend to miss classes because they often take for granted that course instructors put all of the class assignments, grades and expectations online. This becomes an excuse for students to not come to class and participate since they believe all they need to know is already online and available at their fingertips. Students tend to think that they can “float” through a course without attending classes, with the help of technology alone.

Submitting “nothing” online. When students are expected to submit assignments online, one of the tricks they use is to submit a blank assignment to meet a deadline. Students click on the links to submit an assignment by the due date, but they do not include anything in the submission. A day later the student sends a message to the instructor stating that he or she mistakenly clicked the “Submit” option before including the required work. This is another way of using technology as a flotation device.

How should professors respond to the idea that students may use technology to stay afloat academically? We have some tips:

- Advising students to take fewer courses each semester. Even if students take just 10 hours of course work during the fall, spring and summer sessions, they should be able to graduate in four years.
- Giving students sufficient time to complete their class assignments.
- Reminding students in a timely manner about upcoming assignment submission deadlines.
- Providing students time in class to complete their projects and assignments. This will hopefully encourage many students not to wait until the last minute to start working on their classwork.
- Using formative assessments to check students' work in progress during class. If students know that course instructors will be checking and making comments on work in progress, they will be less likely to wait until the last minute.

- Making it mandatory for students to bring their incomplete projects and assignments to the course instructor's or the teaching assistant's office during posted office hours for review and feedback.
- Having students submit partially completed work via email or post it online for review and feedback by the teaching assistant or course instructor or even their peers.

We'd welcome your thoughts on our concept of technology as a flotation device, and our ideas for overcoming the negative aspects of how students use technology. Please add your own in the comments below.

Digital Learning ^[1]

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