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Use the Screen for Gain, Not Loss

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Use the screen for gain, not loss.

Vinay Kanth Rao Kodipelly

Introduction

While there are numerous examples of why implementing the Emporium model in teaching math courses is needed, there are also reasons why the model fails to work. One of them, *and the most important*, is the use of mobile devices by students during the emporium when they are supposed to be using the computer-based software to do their homework and take tests. The following are some of my experiences as a tutor in such an emporium (called

Math Zone, Math Center or Math Lab in different universities).



- Once a student asked me to help with a math problem while video calling his friend. Throughout the tutoring process, there were many irritating pauses as the student interrupted me to talk to the friend. This is a problem faced by many tutors.
 - There are also students who want the tutors to repeat information, not because it was hard to understand, but because they were not paying attention to the explanation.
 - Many times I have had to tutor students who were listening to music.
 - Many students do not seem to care about other students who are sitting near them. There have been many instances of students playing their music so loudly that it could be heard across the room. This has become so common that tutors will ignore them in order to avoid conflicts.
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- Another issue is that some students will sit together in groups talking and laughing loudly. This can be resolved only by moving students away from each other, but this leads to conflicts. Therefore, tutors hesitate to help students in groups because they are not likely to pay attention and there will be ongoing chatter which disrupts the tutoring.
 - Once when I was standing with another tutor, we had a view of the entire room. By looking at all of the students with mobile devices in their hands, he stated that there was literally no learning occurring even though the room was full of students. The room had turned into more of a cafeteria than an academic setting. Students were attending the lab just to complete the assignments because they were forced to do so for academic credit.

From my rough calculations, at least 10% of the students use video calling to talk to their friends and 50% use social and music apps during their entire time in the lab. Many students are simply trying to pass the course so that they can leave math behind permanently. Many times, tutors simply provide the solutions because students keep interrupting the teaching process with *avoidable* phone calls, video chats, or music. Tutors cannot act as disciplinarians while trying to teach. This not only obstructs the learning process, but also the teaching process.

A most extreme case of disrespect toward a female tutor led to a male tutor shout at the disrespectful student. In his own words,

"I experienced the distractions in my teaching due to social devices. It is disturbing and disheartening when students lack the empathy and awareness that is required for their own learning, and that of their peers. By implementing a no or very limited electronic device usage policy and inculcating a feeling of solidarity and empathy among young students, we can alleviate these problems."

The distractions and disturbances not only fail the Math Emporium model but also fail the tutors who are trying to address the learning difficulties. If the tutors are there only to give answers without explaining the process, *which many students want*, then there will be no knowledge seeking or sharing. To many students, a math class has just become a

requirement. They feel they are being forced to take math classes and are not learning math for practical uses in their future.

While completely banning smartphones may not be possible, students can be required to leave the room if a call has to be answered. There are some disciplined students who already do this. These are the students who get frustrated because of the loud music being played by others. My hope is that we can ban the use of such devices in the Math Zone, so that students may have the opportunity to actually learn math. This would also help earnest students be more involved in his/her learning while helping the tutors teach with more interest. I believe that there will be a substantial improvement in students' performance if we can eliminate the use of social devices in the Math Zone. I can see that happen because of my previous experience as a tutor in a different institution where there was a strict rule prohibiting the use of smartphones. At that university, there was extreme productivity among the students as well as tutors.

This could be accomplished by posting signs stating the "prohibition of smartphones" in the Math Zone, and asking the teaching faculty to emphasize on the rule during lecture time. After all, the Math Zone should be a place to learn without distractions. Students' focus on math could be attained by eliminating distractions, thus promoting thinking skills.