Attention Spans and Technology: Two Veteran Teachers' Views

By Spencer DuMontier

Observers worldwide say people's attention spans are decreasing. According to King's College in London, half the public feels like their own attention spans are shorter than they used to be. Educators and researchers attribute that at least partly to frequent screen use. We commonly use the word "screenager" to describe a generation dependent on smartphones and other devices. Some even apply the phrase "screen zombie."



Others think most adults are too reflexively fearful and restrictive when it comes to technology. They point to what they call technophobia as exemplified by Alabama's "Focus Act," which would ban teenagers in public schools from using their phones in academic settings. The Altamont School has a similar policy. In order to improve focus and attention, students are prohibited from using phones at school almost all the time. Perceptions of the policy's effectiveness – and students' attention spans in general – vary, but two veteran teachers shared their thoughts with *The Acta Diurna*.

On student attention spans, 27-year Altamont French teacher Peter Rosborough says, "Decline? Yes, somewhat. But 'major' might be too extreme of a descriptor."

AP Economics and Modern World History teacher Chris Thomas, a 30-year veteran, added, "[technology] just gives them something else to draw their attention away from what's going on." He says that, while students tend to handle individual computer work well, class discussions can become very challenging: "If you want to take notes, close your computer, take out paper."

Both teachers identified the constant distraction of screens as a factor. "Attention spans may possibly decrease when people habituate themselves to consuming content or interacting with their world in sound bites or short and highly visual stimuli," says Rosborough. "The question of attention span seems to be more a question of engagement: what lights up one's brain and what is one's mastery over their brain's attention center?"

Thomas reflected on how screens have become omnipresent in our lives. "Give us more than 30 seconds of free time and our phone is going to be out. It is so tough in this world to turn it off and tune out because everyone expects you to respond to a text, respond to an email. It's just kind of this instantaneous availability … Laptops, yes, they have their place in an academic setting, most definitely, but to kind of develop an entire curriculum or class schedule around it, no, I don't think that's the way to go … It's just simply too easy to cheat. Not that everybody

cheats, but enough to create concern, and things are going to start shifting more towards what we call summative assessments or cumulative assessments – one big unit test."

Rosborough tries to keep his students engaged to maintain their attention. "In my class, almost everything is done on the computer – which puts a lot of responsibility on the student to stay on task. Sure, I try to do as much as possible to keep students engaged, but they also have to make conscious choices."

Thomas focuses on making the differentiation between time on and off the screen. "You just have to say *this* is screen time, *this* is not. And really … nine times out of ten, it's probably better to have those kids close the laptop."

As the longstanding debate over technology and our own attention spans continues, students, teachers, and administrators must work to find the right balance between new, screen-based technology and old-fashioned "IRL" (in real life) learning.