

An Innovative Use of Fidget Toys in the Classroom at Utah State University

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Introduction/Need for Idea

Each student is unique and carries with them different experiences, expectations, and needs. To maximize students' learning experiences, instructors should be sensitive to the needs of their students (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2012). In the university classroom, students tend to multitask on their cell phones and laptops, which in turn can distract students and make it difficult to focus on the topic at hand. Physical activity – even the slightest movements such as foot-tapping or gum chewing can increase focus and attention (Ratey, 2013). The use of fidget toys helps students when it becomes hard for them to focus. According to Zentall (2006), students tend to tune out information when the activity is increasingly long, familiar, or repetitive. An activity that uses a sense other than the task at hand – using fidget toys while writing notes during a lecture – can enhance performance in students. While multitasking with music, computers, or cell phones can often distract students, the mindless yet intentional activity of fidgeting can focus the brain on the primary task. While university students are often permitted to use personal technology devices in the classroom, the question remains – how do instructors encourage undistracted engagement?

How it Works

The Methods of Teaching Agriculture course at Utah State University introduces pre-service teachers to an array of methods and strategies to be used in the school-based agricultural education classroom (SBAE). Fidget toys including Rubix cubes, flarp, puzzles, silly putty, magnets, and stress balls, were incorporated into the classroom. These toys were used to limit outside distractions while allowing students to keep their hands busy fidgeting with something that would keep them engaged in the content being taught. This innovative idea was implemented into the senior-level agriculture education teaching methods course with 20 students. Initially, this idea was developed to keep students off their cell phones and laptops, keep them engaged, and demonstrate a strategy that could be implemented into their classrooms. The fidget toys were placed in a bucket at the middle of each table allowing students to use them when needed. Students had access to the fidget toys during the lecture and laboratory section of the course. In total there were five groups of tables with four students at each table

Results to Date/Implications

Overall, as displayed in Table 1, students enrolled in the Agriculture Teaching Methods course at Utah State University had a positive experience with the fidget toys. The students indicated that the toys should always be available for use in the class as well as showing a high need for other university instructors to incorporate fidget toys into their courses. Although sanitation of the toys became an issue that limited the use, the majority of students continued to play with the toys as a way to increase concentration. Students had a positive reaction to the innovation and indicated that the toys increased their ability to focus in class. Students said: “[the fidget toys] gave me a physical outlet to concentrate”, “[the fidget toys] helped me to stay off my phone”, and “[the fidget toys] served as a reminder to not be on my phone and to find something else to fidget with.” Additionally, the experience encouraged pre-service teachers to incorporate the toys into their classes; "I want to implement fidget toys into my classroom when I am teaching," and another student said "I loved them! I want [the fidget toys] to be incorporated into

the classes I teach.” One student said “I paid so much more attention in this class compared to my other classes. They allowed me to focus on the content rather than my phone.” Overall, the fidget toys were seen as a positive innovation in the agriculture teaching methods course as the concentration level increased and cell phone use decreased.

Table 1

Fidget Toys in Agriculture Teaching Methods

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
What was your reaction to the introduction of fidget toys in class?	3.80	1.00
What is your normal fidget (e.g., doodle, play with your pen, text message) level in class?	3.75	0.91
How often should the fidget toys be available in this class?	4.50	0.88
What level are you able to concentrate on class proceedings using the fidget toys?	3.75	0.55
How often would you use the fidget toys in class?	3.45	0.88
Would you like other instructors to incorporate fidget toys in their college classes?	3.90	0.91

Note. $N = 20$. *Scale = 1-5*

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans include integrating fidget toys into a larger classroom setting consisting of approximately 50 students enrolled in an agriculture leadership course at Utah State University. It is recommended that the toys be frequently sanitized as they tend to collect dirt very quickly, which can decrease the use of the toys. Fidget toys should be displayed at an easily accessible location, as it will increase the use of the toys. Additionally, it is recommended research be conducted to determine when fidget toys were used the most in class – during individual work, direct instruction, group work – and if the toys effectively kept students engaged in the course. Emphasis should be made to teach pre-service teachers how to use fidget toys in their future classrooms.

Resources Needed

Costs and resources associated with this innovative idea were minimal. The primary resources needed for this innovative project were the fidget toys themselves. These toys were purchased at Wal-Mart and on Amazon, which totaled less than \$50 for a classroom set consisting of approximately 50 fidget toys. Additionally, baskets to hold the fidget toys were purchased at the Dollar Tree for \$1 per basket, costing \$5 total. For someone considering the implementation of fidget toys in the classroom, it is recommended to purchase toys on Amazon in bulk.

References

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