

Touch Grass Week at NUS College encourages learning without screens

Students and faculty take the opportunity to reflect on how they use technology

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Six college students sit in a circle on the grass, discussing a short story and jotting down notes in their course books on their laps.

In another creative writing class, students pick out objects like a sponge or eggshells and write about a character made from that material – an exercise meant to encourage them to engage their senses and observe the world more closely.

These activities were part of a new initiative called Touch Grass Week. From Jan 26 to 30, classes were encouraged to go screen-free where possible, relying on discussion, physical texts, handwritten notes and other offline approaches.

NUS College dean Simon Chesterman said: “Touch grass’ is about stepping away from screens and back into the real world. In that spirit, the week is not about rejecting technology, but about noticing how it shapes our time, attention and connections, as well as what we might gain by occasionally putting it aside.”

He told *The Sunday Times* that the idea first came to him when the National University of Singapore (NUS) had e-learning weeks in the past and he joked that there should be a “zero tech week”.

Faculty and students he spoke to at NUS College liked the idea of having time to reflect on the way they use technology.

Professor Chesterman said more students are realising the impact of social media on mental health.

He said students are also realis-



(From far left) Students Zhuo Zhuzhen, Aayush Arya and Low Zhi Yi in a class conducted outdoors during NUS College's Touch Grass Week initiative from Jan 26 to 30. Classes were encouraged to go screen-free where possible, relying on discussion, physical texts, handwritten notes and other offline approaches.
ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

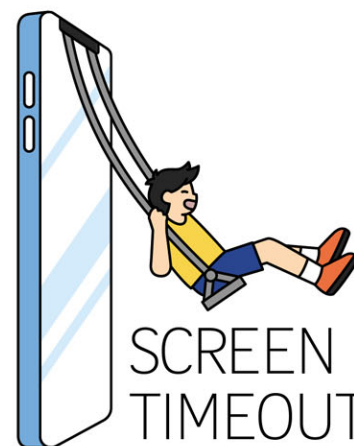
ing, with the rise of artificial intelligence and the impact on jobs, that merely using AI is not enough to distinguish themselves.

“You need those interpersonal skills, and one way we cultivate them is through in-person engagement,” he said.

“With the rise of generative AI, it’s possible that people might think they can’t come up with an answer to a question without asking AI. So I think we want to be aware of how reliant we are on these systems.”

He said the college is gathering feedback from students and faculty on Touch Grass Week, and will explore creating more minimal-screen spaces or reducing screen use on a more regular basis.

A highlight during the week was the Zero Tech Challenge on Jan 28,



when students and faculty were invited to try 24 hours of minimal screen use. This meant not sending e-mails, using PowerPoint, stream-

ing or social media, except for emergencies and essential needs.

The aim is not to enforce rules or judge anyone, but to encourage curiosity and experimentation, Prof Chesterman said.

NUS College is NUS’ honours college – a specialised programme within the university that complements a student’s main degree programme taken in another faculty.

The college offers 13 courses comprising foundational and common courses, interdisciplinary electives and a team-based project. Its curriculum takes up about a quarter to a third of each student’s overall curriculum across the four years.

First-year business analytics undergraduate Zen Phang said he found his Global Narratives class, which was held outdoors, refresh-

ing. “Being outside in the courtyard changed the atmosphere of the lesson significantly, making it feel open, conversational and grounded.”

Lecturer Samar Faruqi had the class – which is on literary works across global traditions – discuss a short story Love by Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector.

Mr Phang, 21, said he instinctively reached for his phone to look up references during the lesson. “It made me realise just how dependent I have become on immediate access to information.”

He added: “It was a little difficult to adjust, but did encourage me to rely more on critical thinking and discussion rather than immediately turning to online resources.”

Dr Carissa Foo, a senior lecturer at NUS College, maintains a no-de-

vice policy in her Brevity of Love: (Short) Storytelling class. She prints materials for students and has them do writing exercises with pen and paper.

During Touch Grass Week, Dr Foo swapped slides for the whiteboard and used an analog timer instead of a phone to time students’ writing exercises.

Ms Ng Yu Xin, a second-year English literature and theatre undergraduate in the creative writing class, said she enjoys the no-device environment, which she feels encourages mindfulness. “I usually favour typing over pen and paper in my other classes since we’re often expected to be taking notes at a pace that handwriting cannot keep up with, especially if everyone else is using digital devices.”

The 20-year-old said undoing mistakes is easier on a Microsoft Word document than on paper, and the no-device class encourages her to be less afraid of making mistakes in writing.

She said such classes guide her to hone not just her writing ability, but also her attention to detail.

“Writing in a notebook and scribbling on a printed text is also much more satisfying for some reason.”

Senior lecturer Chan Kiat Hwa held his Science and Society class outdoors, and kept his students’ phones away. His class was about how scientific knowledge and technological developments influence institutions, societies and environments.

Dr Chan said group discussions can benefit from being conducted outdoors. He had students discuss the scandal involving Theranos, a fraudulent Silicon Valley start-up that falsely claimed its technology could revolutionise blood testing.

First-year computer science major Yao Yutong said the session was difficult for her, as she is reliant on her phone.

The 21-year-old said she depends on apps like TikTok to destress, spending about three hours a day on the platform. “When my profs are talking, I zone out thinking about my phone.”

But she acknowledged that she could focus better with physical reading materials, without being distracted by pop-up notifications.

“I feel more grounded. I’m able to pay attention to the class better without any distractions,” she said.

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