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Electronics in the Classroom—Time to Hit the Escape Key?

With each new term and each new syllabus, a perennial question emerges: should I ban laptops in the classroom?

The motivations for this question are understandable. Research shows that students learn better when they take notes by hand rather than typing them (www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/). Moreover, laptops (and other electronic devices) in the classroom distract not only the owners of the screens, but also all of the nearby students who can see the screens. A recent study found that not only electronic multi-taskers, but also students seated near them, experience a drop in grades.

On the other hand, for some disabled students, and for ESL students, laptops can be crucial learning tools. While disabled students can get special permission to use laptops in courses in which such devices are banned, their use of the devices thereby “outs” them as having special needs. Violating their privacy in this way is, on my view, unacceptable. (It might also be illegal.)

Moreover, whatever the pedagogical merits of hand-written notes, those of our students who go on post-university to work with words and ideas (a large proportion of Arts alumni, clearly) will likely do so with computers in front of them. Thus, to educate them in a computer-free zone is not only anachronistic, but arguably means missing an opportunity to train our students in the thoughtful, appropriate use of electronic devices.

It’s worth noting that university faculty and staff themselves spend a great deal of time multi-tasking on electronic devices. One need only attend a meeting of Senate or a university Town Hall to see university employees using their screens in ways very similar to those that we discourage among our students.

So, what is to be done?

I used to put my laptop users in the last couple of rows of the classroom so that they wouldn’t distract anyone behind or beside them. I’ve come to think better of this. After all, some of these students may have good reasons to sit in other locations in the classroom. Over the years, many of my front row, hands-always-up students have been laptop users. And, of course, a student with limited hearing or vision may need to sit at the front.

Here’s my new solution. At the first class meeting, I lay out all of these difficulties for my students. I discuss both the cognitive merits of writing notes by hand, and the distraction attendant upon using a laptop or sitting near someone who does. I discuss the important role that electronic devices can play for disabled students, and the reasons to respect those students’ privacy. Then, I instruct students to spend the next couple of classes getting used to the physical learning space, and developing some ideas about the most appropriate “zones” for laptop users. The only stipulations

I make are that whatever zones the students develop cannot be exclusively at the back of the class, and must leave some portion(s) of the classroom free from the distraction of nearby

laptops. After a couple of classes to get used to the space, the students themselves draw the boundaries of the distraction/no distraction zones in the class.

Is this method perfect? Probably not. But it helps students to make empirically-supported decisions about what devices to bring to class; it keeps some spaces distraction free; it models inclusiveness; and it supports students' development of intellectual autonomy and metacognitive skills.

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