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English 301

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Laptops in the Classroom:

Valuable Tools or Unnecessary Distractions?

We live in a world of technology, where computers and handheld devices are used every day and oftentimes all day. This is especially true for college students. Here at Washington State University, rarely are students seen without a cell phone, laptop, or both. Laptops and phones with the internet give students access to a myriad of information, including library articles, web publications, and the daily activities of their peers. Laptops allow them to work on computer-based assignments like typed essays or digital design assignments almost anywhere. Both phones and laptops give students around the clock access to information and social interaction.

But it is this very dependence on electronic devices that is fueling a heated debate among University faculty, among students, and even between instructors and students. This debate concerns the use of laptops in the classroom. Some strongly oppose laptop use in class, and some like Law Professor David Cole of Georgetown University, have gone as far as banning laptops altogether (Cole 2). Others, like eHow contributor Chris Joseph, advocate for the use of laptops in class, in spite of the opposition of professors or other students.

Those opposed to unregulated laptop use in the college classroom include members of the teaching staff. One such professor is Assistant Professor of Arabic Kamran Rastegar of Tufts University. Rastegar cites a lack of significant benefits as the primary reason for removing laptops from the classroom: "It didn't add much to what was going on in class and introduces all kinds of

distraction. Students with laptops distracted other students. It's not so much that they offend me, I just couldn't think of a good reason for them being in class" (Olson 3-4). Rastegar's assertion that laptops are distracting is not simply personal opinion. A study conducted by Carrie B. Fried of Winona State University investigated the effects of laptop use in the college classroom of a lecture style class. The students surveyed reported that laptops accounted for 64% of classroom distraction, more than all other given types of distraction (such as "other people talking" or "hallway noise") combined (Fried 909). A similar study by Connor and Miller of Virginia Tech yielded similar results. Although only 34% of the studied lecture-style class used a laptop, 86% of those students used them for purposes other than those related to class (Miller and Connor 1). Both of these studies illustrate that laptops can be very distracting, and that students, along with professors, are aware of this distraction.

Other professors give more personal reasons for banning laptops from the classroom. Tufts Associate Professor of Political Science Richard Eichenberg says, "As a lecturer, it's not fun to look at 60 laptops. I like to see faces and expressions so I can get a sense that what I am saying is hitting home. It has nothing to do with a theory of learning. I just need to have a connection with my student audience" (Olson 6). In this case, laptops created a classroom environment that the professor opposed.

The study conducted by Fried also supports the idea that laptop use can have a negative impact on student learning. She writes, "...the level of laptop use was significantly and negatively related to student learning....The more students used their laptops in class, the lower their class performance" (Fried 909). Considering that the classroom is intended for learning, this data that laptops are damaging to student learning helps support those advocating for a classroom laptop ban.

The last commonly given reason for banning laptops is the overwhelming tendency for students to surf the web rather than focus on the class or take notes. Fried explains that some professors became very frustrated by their students surfing during lectures, and that one faculty member manually unplugged the wireless transmitter (907). Clearly, students (at least in this particular classroom) used their laptops for non-related class purposes to such an extent that the professor terminated internet use for everyone, even himself.

The banning of laptop use in the college classroom comes with significant benefits. As Fried's study showed, laptop use is negatively correlated with academic performance, so it can be reasonably assumed that banning laptops would have the opposite effect and that academic performance would improve (Fried 909). Because the university is, obviously, a place of education, academic performance is first priority. Fried also demonstrated that laptops can be distracting (909). Removing this distraction would allow students to focus on course material rather than surfing the internet or playing computer games. This, in turn, also contributes to increased student learning.

As much as those for and those against laptop use may disagree, common ground does exist between the two sides of this debate. Faculty and students who dislike the use of laptops and people like me, who advocate for their use, are not so different. Those who propose banning laptops often cite educational reasons for doing so – laptops are distracting to both the students using them and to those around them (Fried 909). Also, students often surf the web instead of focusing on class, resulting in less information-intake by the student (Cole 4). I also value a classroom where distractions are minimized and I desire to take in as much information in class as possible. In short, education in the classroom is most important to both of us. We simply disagree on whether laptops aid or hinder this goal.

I contend that laptops should have a place in the classroom. Contributor to eHow.com Chris Joseph outlines a number of ways that laptops can actually enhance the classroom experience. He explains that laptops allow students working in a group to research premises put forth by other students and that “The group can also use the Internet to brainstorm ideas about a topic or concept” (Joseph par. 3). In this case, the internet would be contributing to the knowledge that students have to use in completing a project.

As with those who wish to ban laptops, personal experience contributes to a desire to use a laptop in the class room. As a University student, I use a laptop to take notes quickly. When I am allowed to do so, I am able to get all of the notes written down much faster, because I can type more rapidly than I write. I am then able to engage in class discussion and actively listen to the questions and ideas of other students. Although it can seem counter-intuitive, I am actually able to learn more when I get through the notes quickly and can then actively engage in class. It has been proposed that handwriting notes forces students to slow down and take in the information (Cole 3). However, when I am required to hand write notes, I find myself scrambling to get all the information written down before the current slide is changed, and I rarely have time to take in that information, much less ask questions. Washington State University sophomore Ashley Larsen has similar experiences with laptop use in the classroom: “I take my laptop to class every day. I can type so much faster than I can write, so using a laptop helps make sure I don’t miss anything. Without it, there’s no way I’d get all the information down” (Larsen). It is easy to see that not being allowed to use a laptop to take notes often leaves students flustered and frustrated. They miss out on lecture information and active class discussion.

Allowing laptop use in class provides considerable advantages to students. Personal experience has shown me that it gives them the tools they need to keep up with professors who

lecture rapidly or provide a lot of information. This ability to take down more information allows students to increase their knowledge, which contributes to student learning. Also, when used correctly, the internet is a treasure chest of knowledge that both single students and groups can access in order to complete assignments.

In spite of the benefits each stance on laptops in the classroom has to offer, each possesses a number of possible downfalls. A ban on laptops can be a detriment to student learning. In the instances that professors move too quickly through notes, students lose the opportunity to record all the information if they are required to take notes by hand. This reduces the amount of information a student takes away from the classroom, the amount of material they review at home, and therefore what they learn from the class. This undermines the university's main goal of educating students. However, use of laptops is not necessarily beneficial in all cases. If students choose to use them for purposes other than class work, they could primarily be a distraction rather than an instrument of learning.

Those advocating for or against laptop use do so with the best interest of students at heart. Each side seeks to enhance the educational experience in the classroom. Therefore, I propose a compromise that would benefit each side. I suggest that laptops be allowed in the classroom, but that the wireless internet be turned off for the class period. The instructor can still hook up to an Ethernet connection if use of the internet is required for instruction, or they can require that student laptops are closed while the instructor uses the wireless connection. This way, students who would like to use a laptop for quick note taking, allowing more time for class discussion, may do so. Also, instructors who fear that their students are surfing the web rather than engaging in class, need not worry. If students wish to use the internet for group work as previously discussed, the instructor could turn on the internet for that time, but only allow one person in the group to

use a laptop. That way, the students in the group would all have to focus on that one computer for the group's research, rather than each one using a laptop for their personal agenda.

Another possible option is a professors' willingness to post PowerPoint presentations online after class. Professors could still elaborate significantly on the points in the slides, therefore encouraging students to attend class in spite of notes being available online. In this case, students would not need laptops in class, because they could take hand-written notes on the actual verbal lecture, and obtain the PowerPoint information offline. Either of these options removes the danger of distraction and promotes learning and information intake by the student.

Laptops are a daily part of the college student's life, and this is not likely to change. Technology continues to transform and improve in efficiency and capabilities. It is important to recognize that even as their utility grows, technological equipment such as a laptop can still be detrimental if their use is not regulated in certain situations. The classroom is one of these places. Although laptops can distract students and harm their academic performance, they can also aid in education if used correctly. Growth through learning can still be the first priority of a University classroom that allows laptops, and compromises exist which make this possible.