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No, Banning Laptops Is Not the Answer

And it's just as pointless to condemn any ban on electronic devices in the classroom

By James M. Lang | September 11, 2016

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James Yang for The Chronicle Review

Too many of our students are distracted by devices. We all know this. In recent months the profession has been vigorously debating whether to solve that problem by banning any and all electronic devices from the classroom. Laptops have been center stage in that debate.

Most faculty members allow students to use cell phones, clickers, and other hand-held devices only for very limited purposes (such as polling) — if at all. Laptops, by contrast, have become so commonplace that many faculty members have begun to question whether their omnipresence interferes with student learning.

More academics than I care to count, for example, have posted links on Twitter to studies that support the value of taking notes on paper. These advocates argue that learning improves when we force students to slow down and write out their notes. They have to think more carefully about what to write, since they simply don't have the ability to

write down everything they see and hear, compared with how fast they can type.

That's a valid objection. If I'm taking notes on my laptop and see a wall of text on a slide (which means it's a terrible slide, but we'll leave that argument for another day), I can type most of the information quickly without much thought. But, faced with that same wall of text, if I only have a notebook and pen in hand, I know from the start that I can't copy all the information from the slide. I have to think about what matters: What is the main idea here? What are the key words? What can I take away from this slide in 30 seconds? To take effective notes on paper, I have to be actively engaged with the material, and that exercise deepens my learning.

An equally important and valid objection to laptops stems from their distractive power. We all know from experience that students with open laptops in class (not to mention faculty members with open laptops at conferences, department meetings, and even in the classroom) may have multiple browser windows running at a time, at least some of which have nothing to do with class.

I have always been less concerned about those students than with the collateral damage they're causing. If students choose to distract themselves in my classroom, they will find a way to do so whether they have a laptop or not. The real problem arises

from their ability to distract others who may be trying valiantly to pay attention and learn but whose eyes are continually drawn to the video playing on their neighbor's laptop.

Frustrated by such challenges, many faculty have reached a stark solution: Ban laptops from the classroom. Force everyone to take notes on paper. Let students distract themselves the old-fashioned way — by staring out the window.

A smart and empathetic group of educators has responded to that argument with the excellent point that some students require laptops for accommodation purposes. Issuing a general laptop ban — with exceptions for students with accommodations — calls everyone's attention to the fact that the students in the room who have laptops need accommodations. The decision to be open about their accommodation status should be left to the students, runs this argument, and should not be forced by an instructor ban on laptops in the classroom.

In fact, a good case can be made that students can learn — or, more precisely, can be taught — to take notes effectively on their laptops, iPads, or other such devices. As Jeff McClurken has rightly argued, for most students the "problem isn't which device (pencil, laptop, phone, quill) they use to take those notes, but how to take them and how to use them to learn." We as faculty could use the presence of laptops in the classroom as an opportunity to help students better understand how to learn, how to take notes (whether by hand or on a device), and how to learn from the process of taking notes.

For academics arguing in favor of electronic note-taking, the implication is, as Kevin Gannon provocatively put it in a May blog post: "Let's Ban the Classroom Technology Ban."

It probably comes as no surprise that the most eloquent arguments against laptop bans have come from those who work in educational technology, or who research and write about educational technology. I find it equally unsurprising that the most ardent advocates of laptop bans are working faculty members flummoxed by the growing problem that these devices present in the classroom.

Sharp people on both sides of this debate speak from deep investment in their work. Perhaps they can all agree on one thing: This problem is not going away. Devices have backed their way into high-school and elementary classrooms, and students in college will continue to want access to tools that have been present since their earliest school experiences.

So the debate over laptops and learning will only continue to intensify. But bans are not the solution — neither a ban on laptops in the classroom, or a ban on laptop bans. We need a more nuanced approach.

I view the presence of distracted students on laptops in the classroom just as I view cheating — as a problem that can help us take a closer look at our teaching and make better decisions about it. When half the students in your class plagiarize your 10-year-old essay assignment on the death penalty, it's time to craft a new assignment. Likewise, when you have a sea of distracted students while you are reading slides from the front of the room, it may be time to explore some new teaching techniques.

Our classrooms should be a space where students have the opportunity to engage in multiple forms of learning. Sometimes they are receiving first exposure to new information and ideas (through lectures); sometimes they are generating examples of how those ideas connect to the world beyond the classroom (through discussions or group work); sometimes they are practicing the skills we want them to demonstrate on their papers, projects, or exams (such as writing, presenting to their peers, or solving problems).

The classroom should serve as an active laboratory of learning, a place where students engage with the course material through multiple cognitive streams.

If that applies to your classroom, as it should, then your laptop policy should vary, depending on what is happening that day in class. On the days when you provide first exposure to new information, let students use their laptops. Use the moment, as Jeff McClurken has argued, to teach students how to take notes most effectively on a computer (or invite someone from your campus teaching center to talk about that in your class).

But on days when you have asked students to work in groups, to debate opposing sides of a key issue, or to try their hand at solving some complex problem, you can tell them to put the laptops away.

Set the class ground rules at the beginning of the semester. Explain that their laptops should remain closed for the first 10 minutes of every class, while they participate in a group effort to recall and reflect what was learned in the last session. Or if you end class by asking students to write down one main concept they drew from the course material that day, and then invite a handful of students to share what they wrote, your policy might be that laptops are always closed for the final 10 minutes of class.

When you present your laptop rules, explain the reasons for them: When I lecture, you can use your laptops; when we are engaging in conversation with one another, we put them away. When you are solving problems, you can use your laptops; when we discuss the meaning of those problems, we put them away. When we write in class, you can use your laptops; when we are giving one another feedback on our writing, we put them away.

Formulated that way, your laptop policy will have two major benefits:

First, it will help you think more strategically about what students are doing in your classroom and why. Do they really need first exposure to course material from you? Or can they get that from the textbook or a video? How much time have you allowed for active learning, and how much time are you lecturing? How deliberately are you thinking about the shape of the class period — the opening and closing minutes, or the middle period when students need a change of format to renew their attention?

Second, it will lead to greater transparency in teaching, a highly underrated value in academe. I am convinced that a majority of student complaints about their courses arise because they misunderstand the purpose of so much of what happens in the classroom. Be transparent about your teaching. Explain the reasons for what you are doing, and what they are doing.

Transparency should be layered over everything we do in college courses, in our everyday conversation with students:

- "Today I am lecturing because this material is incredibly complex and I'd like to boil it down to a few essentials for you."
- "We spend a few minutes writing at the start of every class period in this course because it helps prepare you for discussion."
- "We use groups in this context because I want to help you connect with peers with whom you will be working on your final projects together."

Such transparent talk doesn't require much time, but it makes the classroom more like a learning community than like a magician performing for his mystified audience.

So let's hear no more talk of laptop bans or blanket condemnations of laptop bans. Let's talk about laptop policies instead, and may those policies lead us to more strategic thinking and transparency about what we do in the classroom.