

Laptops in the Classroom: Pondering the Possibilities

By Tracy L. McGaugh

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In my capacity as Generations Nerd, I am frequently asked what I think about laptops in the classroom. Like any good nerd, I think this is a really complex question, which is why the forum in which it is usually asked, i.e., on the fly at some conference or other, is not the best forum for a good answer. A good answer would first break the global question (“what do you think about laptops in the classroom?”) into the subsidiary questions that professors are really asking. Then, of course, it would answer them in a way that gives everyone something to consider, regardless of where they ultimately come down on the issue. This column attempts to provide a good answer; at a minimum, I hope it informs the discussion.

Here are the questions about laptops in the classroom that I believe professors really want answers to:

1. Why do students use laptops inappropriately in the classroom?
2. How can I persuade them not to do that?
3. Can I police inappropriate laptop use effectively?
4. Can I sidestep the whole thing by (a) not caring or (b) banning laptops?

Why Do Students Use Laptops Inappropriately in the Classroom?

I am starting with the premise that professors are most concerned about inappropriate use. If students always used laptops appropriately, where would the dilemma be?

The students currently in our classrooms come predominantly from two generations: Generation X

and Millennials.¹ One characteristic that both generations have in common is being accustomed to “edutainment.” Edutainment is education presented as entertainment; think *Sesame Street*, *Zoom*, *Blue’s Clues*, and *Dora the Explorer*.² These two generations also have in common being phenomenal information managers.³ When they were old enough to begin taking an interest in news, for example, they already had the 24-hour news cycle courtesy of CNN and every major newspaper in the country online at their fingertips. Even mail, once something that came to your door at a single predictable time every day, is now on a 24-hour cycle. When this much information flies at you all day, every day, you learn to sift through it quickly, and you learn to sift while you are doing other things, so no moment is wasted.⁴ This creates a habit of constant movement and constant processing.⁵ The insides of their brains surely look something like the trading floor at the stock exchange.

Into this frenetic “All swim!” of information comes the law school classroom: an environment that requires their undivided attention and, yet, is slow moving by student standards. The few minutes that it takes a professor to load a PowerPoint presentation or circulate handouts is just enough time to get started on a game of solitaire, check e-mail, or check news headlines. If the class is moving slowly (i.e., not focused directly on them), they find ways to engage themselves with things

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¹ Tracy L. McGaugh, *Generation X in Law School: The Dying of the Light or the Dawn of a New Day?* 9 Legal Writing 119, 120 (2003).

² *Id.* at 124.

³ *Id.* at 125.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

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that seem more interesting, knowing that the likelihood of being detected is low. After all, the click of laptop keys sounds the same whether the clicks go into class notes, e-mails, or instant messages (IM). And speaking of instant messages, what better way to help out a classmate across the room than to IM her the answer she’s fumbling so badly?

When I consider all of this, I am less amazed that students use laptops inappropriately and more amazed that the inappropriate use is not more rampant.

How Can I Persuade Them Not to Do That?

Just because inappropriate laptop use is understandable does not mean that it is inevitable. After all, the first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem. The next step to recovery is having a plan. Here are some features of a generation-savvy laptop plan:

- Acknowledge to students the many things they could be doing with their laptops during class.
- Acknowledge the benefit of using a computer to take notes (faster and neater than handwriting) and the detriment of using a computer to take notes (encourages taking dictation rather than synthesis and organization of material, creating the habits of a court reporter rather than the habits of an active participant to the proceedings).
- Point out the distraction laptops cause for other fee-paying students.
- Explain how you intend to minimize “downtime” so they have little time in class for inappropriate laptop use (how to minimize downtime in class is beyond the scope of this short piece; however, creating an active learning environment is key).
- Give notice of the penalty, if any, you will impose for inappropriate laptop use. Penalties might include a ban on laptop use for the remainder of that particular class session, a ban on laptop use for the remainder of the semester, or even consideration as inadequate class participation. Whether you have a penalty and, if you do, its severity will vary depending on your personal

style. While some professors may be content to cover the preceding points and let students do what they will, other professors may want something with some “teeth” in it.

Your plan could be more formal, incorporated into written course policies, or more informal, incorporated into a general first-day-of-class discussion about the course or a specific discussion as the need arises.

Can I Police Inappropriate Laptop Use Effectively?

If you choose to impose some kind of penalty for inappropriate laptop use, you will need a way to monitor laptop use. My personal feeling (keep in mind that I am an Xer) is that, once you have explained the pros and cons to a group of adults who are paying money to be educated, they can make their own decisions about how to handle themselves. If the voluntary nature of a legal education, the privilege of having been selected to receive it, and the financial burden associated with it is not sufficient to motivate them to participate fully in an active learning environment, then the specter of playing “cat and mouse” with me is not likely to push them over the edge. However, knowing that others feel differently and may want an enforcement mechanism, I offer these suggestions (none of which is original to me; my apologies for having long-ago forgotten who specifically offered these in conversation):

- Be present throughout the classroom and be aware of whether students seem particularly engaged by another student’s screen. This is also part of providing an active learning environment in which professors give up their role as “the sage on the stage” and move throughout the classroom during class. This is my favorite because the primary purpose of being present throughout the classroom is to create a positive learning environment, so it doesn’t require a special effort to monitor laptop use.
- Have someone else monitor laptop use periodically. If you have a classroom with a window or door behind the students, this person

could just stop by periodically to peer in without even intruding into the classroom. Otherwise, you can ask a colleague or TA to periodically sit in the back of your classroom to see what's on the screens. I recommend telling students that this monitoring will happen during the semester to avoid the negative feelings they may have about being secretly spied on.

- Restrict student ability to access the Internet. Many schools have the ability to “turn off” the wireless capability in certain classrooms or areas of the school. Where students have to connect to the Internet with an actual cable, you can prohibit that.

No policing effort will result in 100 percent compliance. If a student is determined to avoid his or her education, it will be difficult for you to force him or her to get one.

Can I Sidestep the Whole Thing by (A) Not Caring or (B) Banning Laptops?

The short answer to both is “yes.” You can simply decide not to address it with your students and let them do what they will. I know of one wise professor who co-opts the laptop use by periodically saying something like, “Could someone with the Internet up run a Google search on X?” or “Could someone please pull up X case or statute on Westlaw to help us answer this question?” This technique acknowledges that students are on the Internet and at least keeps Internet use on the class topic.

You can also ban laptops altogether. Of course, you can expect some grumbling or resistance, but *it is your classroom and you have the right to run it as you see fit*. I have already described the pros to laptop use in the classroom; if you are willing to forego those on behalf of your students, ban away! Do keep in mind, however, that some students may require a laptop to accommodate a disability. Their use of a laptop in the face of a ban does single those students out as different, and you should consider seriously whether you want to do that just to exert your control over the classroom.

Parting Thoughts

As with any distraction (eating in class, listening to a baseball game on an earpiece, doing taxes or crossword puzzles), you should weigh the pros and cons of allowing it against the pros and cons of curtailing or banning it. Ultimately, the best antidote to bored students looking for an outlet is an interesting and engaging classroom experience. So as you consider whether and how much energy to pour into creating and enforcing a laptop policy, consider whether you might get more bang for your buck by pouring that energy into livening up the classroom experience.

As for me, the next time I'm asked my thoughts on laptops in the classroom, I can say, “Do you receive *Perspectives*? There's an awesome column that tells you everything you need to know.”

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