

Computers in the classroom – New distraction, as old as day dreaming

A recent *New York Times* article sparked an interesting LAWPROF listserv conversation on how laptop computers in the classroom affect teaching and learning. The following excerpts, expressing varying points of view, are only a few of the contributions.

Bill Slomanson:

As more and more students shift to laptops for the classroom, and ExamSoft for finals, technology presents a greater challenge to holding their attention.

But if my students choose Solitaire or day trading as an alternative to me, then this is MY problem. In this context, technology is actually a tool for self-assessment rather than a barrier to my lesson plan. It is my job to be more creative in finding ways to hold their attention. I rely on the

potential for distraction as a gauge of whether I have more to offer than what may lurk on the other side of those increasingly ubiquitous laptop screens.

Edward P. Richards:

While I can do a pretty good standup routine in Torts, there are lots of difficult areas in Administrative Law that defy the Robin Williams approach to learning. For students with short attention spans, there is no effective way to compete with computer-based distractions, much less online instant messaging and porn. While students have always done things to waste time in class, the pre-computer distractions were less compelling. More importantly, they were less distracting to others – a student might do the crossword or read a paperback, but in most classes they at least kept them hidden. With the computer we have given them open invitation to do other things, and to distract those around them as well. Students who go into a trance and type a transcript of the class provide a pretty noisy distraction to those around them. Even if we do not care about whether some students zone out in class, don't we have a duty to the students who are not yet zoned out?

Bill Slomanson:

I agree we have a duty to the students who are not yet zoned out. What I'll dub technology's "Distractor Factor" helps me to fulfill that duty. It requires me to be ever-vigilant about making my class time more interesting and more useful than any distraction, including the technology revolution. I refuse to blame a lack of interest on anyone but myself.

I appreciate your challenge to my basic beliefs, which forces me to reassess them.

M.H. "Sam" Jacobson:

The best way to get students off the computers and prepared for class is to give them something to do. Despite all of the literature about the effectiveness of active learning, most of our classrooms have students sitting and listening, the most passive of activities, while only one (the professor) or two (the professor and a student) get to talk about and be actively engaged in the material. If you let all of the students apply the information (e.g., to solve a problem) or discuss the information in groups, computer

usage grinds to a halt, all of the students have to be prepared to be able to solve the problem, and all of the students are actively engaged in the material because each has the opportunity to talk about it.

Daniel A. Levin:

I essentially agree that it is the professor's obligation to engage students so that students choose to pay attention to the class, rather than to non-course-related activities. My concern is with the power of a computer to distract other students. Some students always have and always will conduct non-course activities in class. Students have always been able to read a newspaper, do a crossword puzzle, work on homework for other classes, etc. Doing these things in class can distract other students and so I have always asked my students not to do so.

Computer screens can be large and are often filled with color and motion. This creates a new and increased power to distract students, at least those sitting beside and behind the screen in question. In summer 2002, I took a five-day computer law seminar at Harvard. It was an excellent seminar. A conference attendee in front of me was surfing the Web during much of the seminar. The Web sites this person was viewing were not related to the issues we were discussing in the seminar. Even though I was deeply interested in the seminar presentations and discussions, my eyes were drawn to the color and motion on the screen of the attendee Web-surfing in front of me. So I was distracted even though I really did not want to be. I tried to avoid looking at her screen, but that was difficult, as she often changed Web sites, creating motion on her screen. If she had been sleeping, reading a newspaper lying flat on the desk, or doing a crossword puzzle, I don't think I would have been distracted nearly as much, if at all.

Ralph L. Brill:

Yes, students do play games, send email, surf the Web. Some get great training to be court reporters by attempting to write down everything that is said, without much passing through their brains. But in the pre-computer days, some

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read papers, passed notes, did crossword puzzles, played tic-tac-toe, doodled; some wrote everything that was said in class longhand, without anything passing through their brains.

Are the student performances any worse than they were before? There obviously are some variables that would have to be accounted for, like a higher average LSAT for the current generation, but in my experience the answer is a resounding NO. Good teachers still get rapt attention. Classes taught after lunch still get some sleepy students and no one could wake them up. The computer is just the replacement for the pen; the students and their motivations stay pretty similar. I remember when schools wanted to ban students' bringing in calculators in accounting or math classes, or ban typing exams.

There are many things one can do to combat the problem. Counting class participation as part of the grade is one. Calling on students, randomly and repeatedly, helps. Using computers and projectors instead of blackboards can help, by forcing the students to at least look at the screen. I have taken the position that one needs to use many different devices over a semester. Some students are visual learners, so I draw a lot of pictures or scan photos into my PowerPoint or Corel Presentation screens. Some are aural learners, so I try to repeat important things at least three times during a discussion or summary, in non-identical terminology. Many can't understand without concrete examples, so I provide lots of examples, either orally, visually, by video, by acting out, etc. I use familiar people as the basis for examples, either people in the news, celebrities, or other professors. I constantly use humor as best I can. One hopes that something one does will work. In my opinion, though, artificially trying to control the students by turning off the access to the Web, or banning computer use, is not worth the effort.

Barbara Glesner Fines:

While the distractions are new, the issue is as old as daydreaming. We cannot blame technology for distraction – it is a natural response. Prohibiting technology in the classroom will not keep minds from wandering. Students who are somewhere else – whether the *NYT* crossword puzzles, the cram for the following class, or the Internet – can indeed disturb their classmates and we do have an obligation to keep disruptions to a minimum, but again, the culprit is not technology, it is people.

We have a responsibility to all the students – zoned out or not – to make class time productive and engaging. Our responsibility is to engage those people with ideas. Entertainment and engagement are not the same thing, and surely our goal should not be for the students to be paying attention to us but to the ideas we are trying to explore. To engage students, lecture – even Socratic-punctuated lecture – is one of the most difficult teaching methodologies. Some folks are absolutely brilliant at engaging from the podium

but I've personally only known a handful, and even they had their days.

Surely the answer here is to find better ways to engage and energize the students in our classrooms. I don't think the answer is to simply ditch classroom teaching altogether – though that might be perfectly appropriate if delivering information is our sole teaching goal. If that were our only goal, and if students prefer to receive their information through technology rather than lecture, we could simply cancel all our classes (or make attendance optional) and spend the time developing engaging, accurate, thorough, and interactive CALI lessons, Web pages, and other electronic materials. But I think all of us share other skills goals better acquired in face-to-face interaction – critical thinking, confident dialogue, brainstorming, etc. The challenge is devising teaching methods that can actively engage students in learning these skills in large classroom settings.

If we're really looking for root causes of student disengagement in learning, I wouldn't point a finger at technology. I'd look at large enrollments, auditorium-style seating, etc. Ask your clinical teaching colleagues how many of them have students surfing the Web during their teaching.

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