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As laptop use rises, so does virtual note-taking

By Kate Lyon, The Dartmouth Staff

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Dartmouth's much-touted wireless computer network lets student use their laptop computers all over campus -- in Novack Cafe and on the middle of the Green, as well as in the classroom. These capabilities permit students to use their laptops in class not just to take notes, but also to send e-mails and instant messages and browse the Internet.

Laptops are increasingly the computer style of choice, with 98 percent of the Class of 2007 opting for laptop computers this year instead of desktops, but are students using their laptops to enhance their learning experience or to make a dull lecture less painful?

Most students who use computers in the classroom have compelling reasons to do so, at least in theory. The ease of typing lecture notes and the organizational benefit of knowing notes are archived in files are two stated reasons why students opt for computers.

"I'm not very organized," said Sam Valverde '04. "If I save lecture notes as a document, I know where it is. Also, when I write quickly, I can't read what I've written. That's not an issue when notes are typed."

Computers are both beneficial and appropriate in large lecture classes, said Jane Viner '05, but she cautioned against using them in smaller classroom settings.

"I think seminar classes and other small, more discussion-oriented classes would be inappropriate for computers because then students aren't interacting with the discussion and with the professor," Viner said.

Other students prefer to refrain from using a laptop to take notes because they say taking notes by hand makes them learn better.

"I think I process the information better writing it down," Colleen Harrison '05 said. "It's slower, so you have to think about it more while you're writing."

History professor Carl Estabrook also worried that students who take notes on computers do so without putting much thought into what they copy down.

"Students using computers aren't developing skills of listening and translating into their own words -- they're just taking down dictation."

Dartmouth's extensive wireless network is cause for another concern about student use of laptops in class. Students can easily use their laptops to send BlitzMail messages or chat on AOL's Instant Messenger while sitting in class.

"If a professor is boring, I check blitz," said Valverde. "If he's bad, I'll start talking on AIM. If he's horrible, I'll do the crossword puzzle."

Curiously, it seems to be students, rather than professors, who are most irritated by this behavior. Harrison commented that using a laptop in class is a "not-so-sneaky way to blitz, IM or search the web while seeming to pay attention."

"I have never seen the need to use a laptop in class, and frankly many of the people I see are using them for things other than note-taking," Julia Saraidaridis '05 said.

Professors, however, expressed less concern over what students may be doing behind their computer screens.

"Computer use is a courtesy issue," Estabrook said. "Students reading the newspaper in class is not courteous, but it's hard to know where computers fit in. I assume if a student is in class, they're using their computer for class purposes."

Classics professor Roger Ulrich agreed.

"My own teaching is not affected by the presence of laptops in class," Ulrich said. "I have found that most of the students with laptops in class tend to be among my more motivated attendees -- although there are plenty of excellent students who never bring a computer to class."

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