



Laptops in the Classroom

Laptops and other mobile devices can be a big distraction for students. Instructors can easily get annoyed by students who are misusing their devices and not only hurting their own learning but also that of other students. Those devices are not going away though. They become smaller and more socially pervasive every year. Instructors will probably have more success using them or working around them than trying to eliminate them in the classroom.

Positive Aspects

- Portable within school & outside classroom.
- Students can share files and notes.
- Students can take neat, searchable notes.
- Students can quickly generate reports and presentations.
- Class can immediately access a variety of expert resources on Internet.
- Groups can conduct public writing on shared Google Docs or other Wiki space.
- Faculty can easily gather ungraded or low risk assessments.
- Student-centered instruction.
- Students can gather and/or produce materials for use in the next class.
- Students can participate in virtual communities outside the campus.
- Students with some disabilities can use specialized software on their desktop.
- Students like them.
- Prepares students for work-life.
- Typing is faster than writing (*If* the students are trained for it -- many are trained for texting, not typing!).
- Paperless classrooms can be greener and cheaper.
- Well-organized file folders make it harder to lose materials.
- Programs to render symbols and mathematical equations can be expensive.

Negative Aspects

- Introduces possible distractions from audio, video, and social media. Laptops are very tempting.
- Faculty must help support software
- Students need to be trained on ways to use laptops, including organizing data
- Laptops not as robust as paper. Students can lose work through dead batteries, lost files, lost wifi signals, etc.
- Faculty can't see what students are doing on laptops from front of the room.
- Students can introduce information for which the instructor is not prepared.
- Requires that faculty structure exercises for students involving problem-solving, critical thinking, or inquiry learning.
- Enables plagiarism unless instructor checks student work carefully.

Be Prepared to Train Students in the Technology

- Identify software packages with broad support and lasting usefulness. Work with Academic Technology to select preferred software programs.
- Be prepared to teach students to use the softwares and search engines you want them to use.
- Ask reference librarians to help you identify key resources for your discipline.
- Identify student experts in IT and allow them to contribute their expertise to the class. Reward them with letters of recommendation that describe their expertise and contributions.
- Be prepared to teach students not only to use Google in a sophisticated manner, but also to use other search tools
(<http://www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/information/5locate/adviceengine.html>)

Keep Students Busy Using Laptops with Class Work

- Keep them busy with work, so they don't have time to misuse the laptops.
- Have students turn in a copy of their notes or their work in class for grading.
- Groups can report out with GoogleDocs, a wiki, or through Synchroneyes.

Increase Communication between Instructor and Students

- Establish a backchannel on Twitter or through IMs so students can ask questions of the instructor or instructor's aide.
- Identify an anonymous survey tool you can use to gather information on student beliefs as you might with clickers.

Keep Students from Misusing the Laptops

- Move around the room so you can see what people are doing on the laptops.
- Solicit student feedback about what they consider to be appropriate use.
- Establish a civility contract for classroom behavior to ensure that students do not misuse laptops.
- Train students to treat the laptop as a work computer. They should not have anything on it that they are not willing to share out with the class!
- Make it clear that students who want to record classes must ask your permission in advance.
- Establish a policy for "screen down" times, especially for class discussion. Afterwards, allow students time to take notes on the laptop.
- Speak privately to students who fail to live up to the civility contract.