Managing Students’ Use of Personal Technology in the Classroom

Most of us have faced the frustration of looking out over our classroom to see students texting, surfing the net on their laptops, or playing with their iPods—all while we are deeply enthralled with our subject matter. It’s easy to interpret such behaviors as willful disengagement, but it may not be that simple. A recent study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that the average American child age 8 to 18 spends more than seven and a half hours a day with a smart phone, computer, television or other electronic device, not counting the time they spend texting or talking on their cell phones. This research suggests that while we may interpret our students’ constant fascination with personal technology as rude in the classroom, for them it may be business as usual. They are so consistently “connected” with the outside world that they may not understand why class time should be any different.

This may sound like a hopeless case, but it’s not. Our students’ dependence on technology is not irreversible. In fact, the University classroom is a great place for them to learn to take responsibility for appropriate uses of technology. What follows are some best practices for managing students’ use of personal and educational technologies in the classroom.

1. Keep students active as they learn.
The best way to deal with inappropriate technology use is to prevent it by regularly asking students to do work related to that day’s learning goals. Expecting students to spend long periods of time listening and/or taking notes will exacerbate the problem of inappropriate technology use. While we may think of listening and note-taking as active enterprises, for many students these can become an exercise in mechanically copying down what’s on a set of power point slides. We tend to forget that students are capable of getting information from textbooks, podcasts, or videos—all things they can access outside of class. Some professors have found themselves making the transmission of information an entirely out-of-class activity, making it the responsibility of students. Class time then becomes more active and interactive: it is a time for students to practice applying concepts while the professor is there to offer guidance and feedback. Students in these classrooms are too busy to play on their cell phones or laptops. The graph on the right depicts what an active learning sequence might look like.

It is very difficult to eliminate lectures altogether, of course. When you need to give students information in the form of a mini-lecture, the key is the timing: try to break long lectures into smaller chunks interspersed with moments of interaction between you and your students and among the students themselves. Use these “breaks” to check students’ understanding by asking them to do something (e.g., solve a problem, answer a question, respond to a short case, or analyze a short piece of text) with the content you’ve just presented. This will help you learn what students are retaining from your lectures and will reduce their temptation to reach for those cell phones.

2. Put technology to use in the classroom.
Some professors have found that personal technologies can be used to engage students rather than distract them. Here are some techniques that have been used with success:
• Ask students to take notes on their laptops and email or post excerpts from the notes for the professor to see.
• At the end of class, ask students to use their laptops to write a short “minute paper” that explains what they took from the day’s meeting and email it to you (or to each other).

A Sequence for Active Learning

1. Students read/watch/listen to acquire basic concepts before class time.

2. In class, students complete a basic task (e.g., short quiz, writing assignment, or solving a problem) to assess their understanding of core concepts.

3. Instructor offers mini-lecture to fill in gaps in student understanding or address concepts students didn’t get from the reading.

4. Students complete task (problem solving, respond to case study, analyze text, etc.) to apply concepts. They share results with the class.

5. Instructor assesses application activities and may present material once more to sharpen students’ understanding.

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• If students are working in groups, have them use laptops to record the activities or findings of their work and email or post them.
• Have students follow along on their laptops with your PowerPoint slideshow in Design mode (not Run mode). Show them how to take notes in the bottom of the screen so they can be occupied both mentally and physically during lecture. Incorporate blank or incomplete slides which they must finish after—or during—the class. These are spaced about every 4-5 slides.
• Allow/require students to tweet (using twitter, a social networking tool that allows very short posts) at designated times during class. You may ask them to articulate their understanding of a concept or summarize what they have learned to a certain point in the lecture. You can find more information about this tool at www.twitter.com.

3. Create a set of manageable policies.
State the rules clearly in your syllabus; explain what your expectations are and why they matter to the way you view teaching and learning. Most students use personal technologies as a way of interacting with their peers, and they need to be reminded that technology used in the classroom will be serving a different purpose. It is important to remind them of those policies during the first few days of class. Below are some issues to consider (adapted from “Wireless in the Classroom,” by Rhett McDaniel of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching).

• Purpose
Explain why you have implemented a policy and how you believe that policy supports student learning. If you are asking students to refrain from technology use altogether, you need to remind them that their behavior can be distracting for you and their fellow students. This is a great opportunity to explain your teaching philosophy and broader expectations for student behavior during class.

• Usage
Explain the difference between appropriate and inappropriate usage, and consider designating “screens-up/screens-down” times—and announce those as needed. If technology use is not appropriate in your classroom at any time, state that clearly.

• Responsibilities
Appropriate technology use is ultimately the responsibility of your students, but it is up to you to tell them what is appropriate in your class. For example, you might want to remind students to silence their cell phones before coming to class or to put the screen down on their laptops during class discussion time (“screens down” time).

• Consequences
Remember that you don’t want to put yourself in the position of “grading” student behavior, so resist the temptation to threaten to penalize students’ grades for inappropriate technology use. If you do use penalties, make sure they are enforceable and that you are willing to follow through with them. In most cases a simple reminder to students will be sufficient. If there is evidence of continuing misuse, discuss the situation one-on-one with the students involved rather than imposing some restrictive, impossible-to-effectively-enforce rule on all students.

• Exemptions
Keep in mind any legitimate reasons a student might have that require the use of a laptop or other electronic device for class. The policy should not be so restrictive that it impedes the rights of those students with special needs or does not make allowance for ADA compliance. There may also be situations where students have legitimate reasons for needing to have access to a phone: some professors allow students to leave phones on vibrate in special circumstances but ask students to leave the room before taking a call.

4. Remember your priorities.
Don’t allow concerns over potential misuse of technology to get in the way of your core goals. It is easy to get so caught up in policing students’ behavior that we forget the real reasons why we don’t want them to use technologies in the class—or we ignore the potential value of technology to help our students learn. It is possible to exploit our students’ fluency with technology for the purpose of learning while making clear what is or is not tolerable to other students and you. The key is to keep your focus on what you want students to learn in your class and make any policy decisions based on those goals.

Resources: