



Laptops in the Classroom: Minimize the Distraction

What is it?

Laptops can be distractions during class with students checking e-mail, doing IM or surfing the web. But they hold great potential as a tool for learning and there are a variety of strategies that faculty can employ to minimize the laptop as a distraction and utilize it as an important component of your course.

Why is it important?

Students use technology in every part of their lives; to communicate, to shop, for banking, and for collaborating. When we ask them to come to class and turn all devices off, we're encouraging a big disconnect between the way they live and the way they learn. Using the tools in class that students use as part of their daily lives is a great way to bridge that gap.

There are many good reasons to be using laptops as part of your course curriculum, they allow students to engage with course content and facilitate teamwork and knowledge building. It can be a daunting task to figure out how to effectively use the laptop as part of your course but the result will be students who are interested, participating, and actively building knowledge related to the curriculum.

Pros...

- Providing guidelines for classroom device use puts students at ease; they know what behaviors are expected.
- Utilizing laptops in the classroom shows students that you are trying to improve their learning environment and will generate respect at times when you ask the lids to be down.

Cons...

- Allow extra time for troubleshooting potential problems and always have a "Plan B" in case the original activity goes wrong.
- Sometimes the physical arrangement of the room is not conducive to using the laptops. Try to arrange desks in small groups and be sure to walk around the room to prevent misuse of the tools.
- If you don't know how to work a piece of equipment or software-it's ok! Most students enjoy helping and they really appreciate that you're willing to try something new.

How to Use them...

Ask students to help develop and implement a set of guidelines for classroom use of electronic devices. Include the guidelines in your syllabus and refer back to it when necessary.

Start to make the laptop seamlessly integrated into course work by introducing one or two activities and repeating them so students get in the routine and understand how the process works. Once everyone is comfortable with the activity, it becomes easier to branch out and implement new ways to use the tools. Think about these ideas:

- **Lids Down:** there will be times when you want undivided attention, so ask students to put their lids down.
- Students can look up answers to questions that pop up during class: **"Who can find the answer to that question?"**
- Work collaboratively during class to build **"stand-up"** presentations or "elevator" speeches
- **Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching:** utilize web based simulations or interactives from Merlot (<http://www.merlot.org>)
- **Quick Polls:** to gather feedback and check for understanding

Who tried it...

Faculty Spotlights:

<http://www.wit.edu/td/resources/spotlights.html>

Fred Driscoll Thoughts on the Laptop Initiative

Madhu Dutta Integration of Digital Technology

For further reading...

Wireless in the Classroom highlights guidelines for technology use from the University of Wisconsin.
http://www.doit.wisc.edu/network/wireless/advice_stu.asp

"Laptops in the Classroom", by Andrea Campbell of Clemson University discusses a variety of strategies and activities for integrating laptops into the curriculum.
http://www.pace.edu/emplibary/p98_campbell.pdf

"Making the Laptop Disappear", by Howard Levin explores the process of seamless integration of the tool into the course content.
<http://howardlevin.com/disappearing/index.html>