



Dealing with Laptops in the Classroom

More and more Princeton students are using laptops in the classroom, and more and more faculty are concerned about what those students are doing with their computers. When we at the McGraw Center observe classes we can see that some students are indeed taking notes—at least some of the time. They are also emailing, surfing the web, shopping on-line, and doing work for other classes. Instructors often ask us what, if anything, they can do about this behavior. Here are questions to think about as you confront this issue in your classroom.

- What are your goals for your students' learning? Share with students your understanding of the importance of engaging with the ideas presented and discussed in lecture for their understanding. Is it important to you that they interact with you and their fellow students as a community of learners? How may their use of laptops enhance or constrain that experience?
- Are students aware that certain uses of technology in the classroom are inappropriate from your point of view? Students live in a high-tech, multitasking universe, and they are used to being constantly on-line or connected. They may need instructors to distinguish between what they as students perceive as “normal” from what we might consider “rude.” Consider outlining your policy about technology in the classroom at the beginning of the course and include it on the syllabus. Remind students of it occasionally.
- Does a student's use of the computer pose a distraction for that student only, or is it disrupting the general climate of learning in the classroom? Some instructors feel uncomfortable asking students not to use computers, believing that the student must decide on how to take notes and whether to pay attention. If a student is distracting others, however, then the issue goes beyond personal freedom. Being silent about indiscriminate laptop use can be perceived as tacit permission, so more and more students may use laptops inappropriately as the semester goes on unless instructors give them boundaries. Periodically asking students to close their computers and answer questions or dialogue with their neighbors can break the hypnotic spell that computers exert and bring back student attention at least momentarily.
- Student laptop use may require us as teachers to ask ourselves a hard question: does our teaching style need to be updated given the easy access to information available to students now? If lectures are mainly reiterations of information that students have in hand, e.g., lecture notes, PowerPoint slides, textbook or readings, is it surprising that they are tempted to disengage from class? The more interactive the class, the less likely it is that students will seek a distraction—and the more they are apt to retain from the class.
- Are there ways to turn the use of computers to advantage in your course? Occasionally asking students to look up something on the web to add to class discussion can help students re-engage with the task at hand. Asking students to discuss an issue and text message their response to other members of the class before in-class discussion may be a novel way to re-orient students' thinking about the role of technology in the classroom—as well as their own use of it.

In the final analysis, you do have the right to ask students not to use their laptops.* If you make that choice, sharing with them your reasons for doing so can help them understand your goals and expectations for their learning. As a result, you may also help them limit their distractions, think about their notes rather than take dictation, and, ultimately, consolidate their attention to connect as a community of learners.

* Students with certain disabilities may need the use of a computer in class.