

Wide Web of diversions gets laptops evicted from lecture halls

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David Cole of Georgetown Law was among the first professors in the Washington region to ban laptops for most of his students. A few are selected to use them to take notes, which others may then borrow. (Bill O'leary/the Washington Post)

On a windy morning in downtown Washington, a hundred Georgetown Law students gathered in a hall for David Cole's lecture on democracy and coercion. The desks were cluttered with books, Thermoses and half-eaten muffins.

Another item was noticeable in its absence: laptop computers. They were packed away under chairs, tucked into backpacks, powered down and forgotten.

Cole has banned laptops from his classes, compelling students to take notes the way their parents did: on paper.

A generation ago, academia embraced the laptop as the most welcome classroom innovation since the ballpoint pen. But during the past decade, it has evolved into a powerful distraction. Wireless Internet connections tempt students away from note-typing to e-mail, blogs, YouTube videos, sports scores, even online gaming -- all the diversions of a home computer beamed into the classroom to compete with the professor for the student's attention.

"This is like putting on every student's desk, when you walk into class, five different magazines, several television shows, some shopping opportunities and a phone, and saying, 'Look, if your mind wanders, feel free to pick any of these up and go with it,' " Cole said.

Professors have banned laptops from their classrooms at George Washington University, American University, the College of William and Mary and the University of Virginia, among many others. Last month, a physics professor at the University of Oklahoma poured liquid nitrogen onto a laptop and then shattered it on the floor, a warning to the digitally distracted. A student -- of course -- managed to capture the staged theatrics on video and drew a million hits on YouTube.

Cole was among the first professors in the Washington region to ban laptops, in the 2006-07 academic year. He found them an "attractive nuisance." It was a bold decree: Georgetown had only recently begun requiring that first-year law students own laptops, after painstakingly upgrading the campus for wireless Internet access.

Just last week, a colleague of Cole's unwittingly demonstrated how thoroughly the Internet has colonized the classroom. When Professor Peter Tague told students a canard about Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. stepping down, students promptly spread the news into the blogosphere. Later in class, Tague revealed that the tip was false, part of a lesson on credibility, according to the blog Above the Law.

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The laptop computer, introduced in 1981, has become nearly obligatory on campus; some colleges require them. They are as essential to today's student as a working stereo system was to their parents.

"My laptop lives with me. I'm always on it," said Madeline Twomey, 20, a George Washington junior.

Twomey has used a computer since age 6 and had her first laptop at 15. She senses a widening generation gap. "Most professors, even at their youngest, they're in their 30s," she said. "They don't understand how much it's become a part of our lives."

The 'cone of distraction'

Professors say they do understand -- all too well.

Diane E. Sieber, an associate professor of humanities at the University of Colorado at Boulder, has debated her students on the collegiate conceit of multitasking, the notion that today's youths can fully attend to a lecture while intermittently toggling over to e-mail, ESPN and Facebook.

"It's really serialized interruption," Sieber said. "You start something, you stop it, you do something else, you stop it, which is something you're doing if you're switching back and forth between World of Warcraft and my class."

One recent semester, Siebert tracked the grades of 17 student laptop addicts. At the end of the term, their average grade was 71 percent, "almost the same as the average for the students who didn't come at all."

Sieber believes that those students, in turn, divert the attention of the students behind them, a parabolic effect she calls the "cone of distraction."

José A. Bowen, dean of the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University, is removing computers from lecture halls and urging his colleagues to "teach naked" -- without machines. Bowen says class time should be used for engaging discussion, something that reliance on technology discourages.

Cole surveyed one of his Georgetown classes anonymously after six weeks of laptop-free lectures. Four-fifths said they were more engaged in class discussion. Ninety-five percent admitted that they had used their laptops for "purposes other than taking notes."

Even when used as glorified typewriters, laptops can turn students into witless stenographers, typing a lecture verbatim without listening or understanding.

"The breaking point for me was when I asked a student to comment on an issue, and he said, 'Wait a minute, I want to open my computer,' " said David Goldfrank, a Georgetown history professor. "And I told him, 'I don't want to know what's in your computer. I want to know what's in your head.' "

Some early attempts to ban laptops met resistance. In 2006, a group of law students at the University of Memphis complained to the American Bar Association, in vain. These days, the restriction is so common that most students take it in stride.

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"I think that a professor's well within reason to ban laptops," said Cristina Cardenal, a 20-year-old Georgetown junior. "Professors aren't stupid. They know what's going on." She also happens to believe that the rule benefits students, who should know better than to "pay as much money as we do to sit in a class and

read a blog."

Flipping a switch

Perhaps no college has experienced the good and bad of laptops like Bentley University in Waltham, Mass. In 1985, Bentley was the first college in the nation to require students to own portable computers. By the late 1990s, professors complained of distracted students. In 2000, the college installed a custom-designed system to let professors switch off Internet and e-mail access in their classrooms. They've flipped the switch "thousands of times," said Bentley's Phillip G. Knutel.

Universities have stopped short of disabling Internet access entirely, which might create a raft of new complaints from professors who routinely ask students to go online in class.

Plenty of professors still allow laptops. Siva Vaidhyathan, an associate professor of media studies and law at U-Va., generally permits them in his classes. He remembers his own college diversion: reading newspapers surreptitiously on the floor beneath his desk. He believes that, ultimately, it is a professor's job to hold the class's attention.

"If students don't want to pay attention, the laptop is the least of your problems," he said.

Vaidhyathan, an Internet scholar, senses a losing battle. In an era of iPhones and BlackBerrys, Internet-ready cellphones have become just as prevalent in classrooms as laptops, and equally capable of distraction. If professors had hoped to hermetically seal their teaching space by banning laptops, they might be about three years too late.

"The question 'Laptop or not?' isn't as big a question as the question of a screen or not," he said. "And, sitting in front of 200 students, I can't really enforce a ban on anything."