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3 Principles for Student Devices in the Classroom

Submitted by Joshua Kim on January 27, 2016 - 9:00pm

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A consistent challenge faced by anyone teaching college today is how students use their technology during class. As Carl Straumsheim writes in his 1/26 article on [Digital Distractions](#) ^[2]:

"Students waste about one-fifth of class time on laptops, smartphones and tablets, even though they admit such behavior can harm their grades...."

I'd like to suggest **3 principles** that can help us think about classroom technology policies and educator choices.

By starting with principles, my hope is that our community can find progressive and flexible responses to the challenge of technology distraction during class time.

Principle 1. The Educator Has The Right and the Responsibility to Determine, and Enforce, Classroom Technology Policies:

This first principle, that how students use tech in the classroom is up to the professor, may be the most controversial. I offer this principle not from my understanding of the research, but from my own years of experience in the classroom. If I could not control the room in my own teaching, than I could not teach effectively.

An effective educator creates an environment where the full attention of the learner is focused on what is being taught. This is why we get so much better at teaching with experience. Over many years we learn what works and what does not in the classroom, and how to pick up nonverbal cues if our class is

coming along the journey with us. We learn to adjust in real time, and we get good at figuring out what changes to make in the class session that will promote the learning goals that we want.

None of this can happen unless the educator can direct what happens inside the classroom. The authority of the educator in the classroom must be understood and agreed upon by all parties. This does not mean that the educator can abuse that authority, as that will be the quickest way to break trust with the learners.

Being able to direct the students about when technology is used - even if the answer is that technology *is never used* - is necessary and appropriate.

It is up to the faculty. It is their call. *It is your call.*

Principle 2. Any Use of Student Technology In the Classroom Should Be Intentional:

The second principle is that any technology use in the classroom should be intentional. The ground rules for how and when technology in the class is to be used should be clear and transparent. There are many instances where technology is a tool that can assist in learning. And there are even more times where the technology can distract. The goal is to make sure that when students use technology in the classroom that the technology is being used for a reason.

The worst way for students to use technology is to take notes. If at all possible it makes more sense to hand-out class notes (or PowerPoint decks) before class. Let the students take hand-written notes on the slides. Try to avoid a situation where students feel that they need to transcribe the information that is being delivered in the front of the room. The goal of class should be synthesis, context, connection, thinking, discussion, and debate - not information delivery. In 2016 we have better ways of delivering information than one person talking (the professor) and another person (the student) madly trying to type whatever is being said.

A good use of technology in the classroom is to facilitate active learning. Laptops, tablets, phones, and the web (but especially laptops) are great for creating things. Use class time to have students or groups do research, create quick presentations, and lead classroom discussions. An amazing amount of actual work can be accomplished during class time - especially if the professor can walk around and coach.

This method is much closer to how today's students will use technology in their jobs. The technology will be a tool to accomplish work. We should be spending time practicing these skills - and doing so in the presence of experienced educators.

Principle 3. Classroom Technology Policies Constitute Teachable Moments:

The final principle that I'll offer to guide your decision making on technology in the classroom is to push for teachable moments. Your classroom technology policies should help your students think about how they use technology in their lives. Taking considerable time to talking with your students about your policies - and why and how you use technology in your own work - will help your students make good technology choices in the future.

It is always a good idea to make explicit your teaching choices. Investing class time in talking about how learning works, and in how you teach, can feel like a distraction. There is, after all, so much material to get through. But this is time well spent. Your students will be much more likely to accept (if not embrace) your classroom technology choices if you talk about the reasons behind those choices.

Are these 3 principles relevant to the decisions that you get to make in your teaching?

Do you have the authority and resources in your teaching environment to enact these principles?

What principles would you offer to refine, refute, or extend these ideas about technology in the classroom?

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[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/01/26/study-use-devices-class-nonclass-purposes-rise>