**Personal Devices in the Classroom**

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Electronic devices can create a barrier between the instructor and student. Instructors might wonder what students are doing on their devices. Is the student taking careful notes? Searching web sites relevant to the class discussion? Accessing Brightspace? It can be difficult for an instructor to distinguish these activities from chatting with friends, checking Instagram and TikTok, or shopping online.

The topic of developing policies around the usage of personal electronic devices in college classrooms has been hotly debated. Some have come out in favor of laptop bans (see Dynarski), citing studies that indicate that some students who use laptops in class retain less information and distract their peers more than students who do not use laptops (see Carter, Greenberg, and Walker). Others have defended the usage of personal electronic devices in the classroom in order to protect the privacy of students who must use them for accessibility reasons and to allow for easier integration of online tools in classes (see Pryal). Still others have called into question whether the debate around banning laptops and other electronic devices distracts from the larger mission of enhancing the learning experience for students (see Lieberman).

For a variety of reasons, banning electronic devices such as laptops can lead to negative outcomes. However, many faculty will want to establish clear, compassionate policies that guide students in using technology well in face-to-face classrooms.

Set clear guidelines upfront by including a statement in your syllabus about the use of personal electronic devices. Here are a few questions to guide you when thinking about what role students’ personal electronic devices will play in your classroom.

**Will electronic devices be integrated into your classroom activities?**  
Electronic devices may make sense in some classes more than others. If your class is largely discussion based, then it may be appropriate to adopt a policy that limits the use of electronic devices in class.

**Are course assignments posted electronically for students to access?**  
If your students will be accessing content and resources for your class via Brightspace or if the class involves using a particular piece of software like Excel or Photoshop, then a stronger case might be made for the inclusion of laptops and other electronic devices in class so that students can access these resources.

**Is the class structure consistent from one meeting to the next?**  
An electronic devices policy does not have to be an all-or-nothing proposition. It may be that such devices are more useful or acceptable during some class meetings than others. In these instances, a hybrid policy might be beneficial.

**In what ways will students themselves help to shape a technology policy in my class?**

Students have a vested interest in the structure and effectiveness of classroom activities. Involving students in a discussion or even a development of a technology policy reinforces their role as co-creators of the classroom experience. How do students want to engage in class discussions? How do they see technology as necessary for their own learning? What kinds of policies will help them do their best work?

Considering these questions will also help you communicate to students *why* a policy is in place, potentially resulting in better acceptance of the guidelines.

## **Developing A Policy**

Once you have determined the extent to which you and your students will useelectronic devices in class, you will want to develop a supporting policy statement for your syllabus. This could take many forms, and may depend on the nature of your course.

**Purpose**  
Explain why you have implemented a policy. It could be that the format of your class relies heavily on discussion or other activities from which electronic devices would distract. This is a great opportunity to explain your teaching philosophy and expectations for student engagement during class.

**Definitions**  
State clearly what devices your policy includes: laptops, cell phones, tablets, etc.

**Procedures**  
If laptops and other personal electronic devices are allowed in class, how will the use be managed? Some policies simply require students to be conscientious of others in the classroom. Will students be able to connect the laptop to a power outlet or only use battery power? Should students put the lid down on the laptop during class discussion time? What behaviors will you expect from students? Will students who want simply to take notes be permitted to use the laptop, but not an Internet connection? How about students who benefit from accessibility features on their devices?

**Consequences**  
Clearly state the consequences students will face when they do not adhere to the policy. Make sure the penalties are enforceable and that you are willing to follow through with them. If you have involved students in this policy from the beginning and they have bought into the principles behind the policy, just reminding students of the agreement the class made as a group will help get folks back on track.

**Exemptions**  
Keep in mind any accessibility related reasons a student might have that require 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. For instance, it may be worthwhile to consider if your policy for a certain class would inadvertently single out students with disabilities and/or accessibility needs.

**Syllabus Design**

It may be useful to keep in mind general best practices for good syllabus design, including co-creating rubrics with students (when applicable), as you define and communicate your policy around the usage of personal electronic devices in the classroom.

Past Vanderbilt University Senior Graduate Teaching Fellows and Graduate Teaching Fellows Jessica Riviere, Danielle Picard, and Richard Coble produced a [guide on Syllabus Design](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/syllabus-design/). The guide considers what components can be incorporated into a syllabus and how a syllabus is related to course design.

The University of Colorado Boulder developed [a teaching resource that explores the process of co-creating rubrics with students.](https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/teaching-resources/assessment/assessing-student-learning/rubrics/co-creating-rubrics-students) The resource offers some approaches and best practices for this rubric co-creation process, such as focusing on learning outcomes and continuing to draft the rubric as the course progresses.

The Center for Education Innovation & Learning in the Sciences at the University of California Los Angeles has gathered several resources on inclusive syllabus design [in a teaching guide here](https://ceils.ucla.edu/resources/teaching-guides/syllabus-design/). It highlights how a syllabus can welcome students and promote student growth. Additionally, Professors Tracie Marcella Addy, Derek Dube and Khadijah A. Mitchell wrote about steps that instructors can take to foster an inclusive classroom in an [Inside Higher Ed feature.](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/08/05/small-steps-instructors-can-take-build-more-inclusive-classrooms-opinion) Their suggestions include but are not limited to regularly communicating with students and highlighting diverse practitioners in the field.

## **Instructional Strategies**

In addition to a written policy, there are also techniques you can incorporate into your teaching that will help you manage students’ use of electronic devices in the classroom. One simple technique is to have a screen-up and screen-down time in order to focus student attention. This strategy, as well as others can be found by exploring the links below.

Ellen Granberg and James Witte, assistant professors of sociology at Clemson University, published [this book chapter](https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-wp0/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2010/06/09114746/Teaching-with-Laptops-for-the-First-Time.pdf) about their experiences with laptops in the classroom. They found that laptops had a great potential to increase student engagement and learning when clear directions and instructions on when to use laptops were given.

[The Teaching, Learning, and Technology Group](http://www.tltgroup.org/) has developed a [collection of instructional strategies for teaching with technology](http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/8thprinciple/examples) based on Chickering and Gamson’s “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.” This rich resource contains an assortment of practical ideas you can incorporate into your teaching. This includes using digital tools to publicize your availability and to virtually meet with students when the need arises.

## **Student Considerations**

The decision to allow or restrict use of electronic devices in class can be a complex one. Policies will likely differ among your colleagues and may even differ for yourself among the courses you teach. Don’t hesitate to [contact the CFT](http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/about/contact-us/) if you are part of the Vanderbilt instructional community and would like to talk further with one of our consultants about this topic.

**Citations**

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