COLLEGIATE TIMES

Column: Banning laptops in classroom not a solution

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As the first week of the semester has already passed, most classes have reviewed their syllabi and class rules. For some students, those rules have included a ban on laptops that probably comes as a surprise.

At first glance, it seems to be a confusing message: In 2002, Virginia Tech added a requirement that all students own a laptop, and in 2006 the engineering department began to require tablet PC's. One would assume the requirement to have a portable computer would be for bringing them to class.

However, it is also important to note that in 2004, Facebook was founded. Of course, there are thousands of distractions both on and off the Internet besides Facebook. For faculty, though, banning laptops in their classrooms typically is an attempt to remove those distractions from interfering with objectives for class.

Here is where the issue becomes a debate. Faculty members believe that removing these distractions means students will pay attention to their lectures and learn more. For students, laptops may be used for taking notes and researching topics discussed in class, or for checking their Facebook and Twitter news feeds.

But are the issues that simple? Will simply banning distractions get more students to engage and learn?

I'm going to approach that question like a research question. First, some theory: Motivation theories essentially say that we don't do anything without a reason, whether it be an intrinsic reason, an extrinsic reason, an incentive or to avoid a punishment. Further, engaging in an action for intrinsic reasons or for incentives is much healthier, on a psychological level, than doing so for extrinsic reasons (e.g., money or grades) or to avoid punishment.

Now, some data: I interviewed a few of my past engineering students to see how they were using their tablets in their classes. Some said they leave their laptop at home because it is too distracting. Some said they bring their laptops but have no problem paying attention, and it is an indispensable tool to have. Many students in between said that it depends on the class and whether or not it was engaging. A few others said that they can easily be distracted by AIM, Facebook, etc., yet they still bring their laptops or are required to do so. As well, a few students said they can lose attention in class with or without their laptops. Also, some students noted that others' computers can distract them when sitting behind someone playing a game or similar.

Next, some discussion: While this isn't scientifically collected data, there are still some observations worth noting. Clearly, the impact of having a laptop in class varies highly from one student to the next: Some students have no problem with having their laptop; others do. Some students use their laptops for taking notes, researching class material and related educational functions. So, the variables in the equation seem to include the student, the class and the instructor, and the outcome is either attention or distraction.

Finally, some conclusions: To illustrate, I'll use an example from one student's class. The professor began class with a rather lengthy talk about how important personal responsibility is and how each person must work to find

what he or she needs to do to be successful. Ironically, after this speech, he announced that too many past students were using their laptops for non-class purposes and that they were banned from his class. This illustrates the worst-case scenario: preaching one thing but not being able to uphold it given the circumstances.

This brings me to the explicit conclusions. First, each student needs to take personal responsibility to do what hee needs to maximize his opportunity to learn and pay attention, which takes time and reflection to find. Second, faculty should do as much as possible to make their classes engaging and interesting, using active-learning techniques and real-life examples as much as possible. Third, banning laptops won't make all students pay attention and will take an important tool away from some, so it should only be done as a last resort.

Returning to motivation theory, these conclusions have some important implications. If laptops are banned from a class when those students have done nothing wrong, it means they are only going to obey the rule only to avoid punishment. On the other hand, if the class is interesting and engaging, yet students are allowing themselves to be distracted by their computer, those students are going to miss important and exciting material as a consequence; therefore, they have an incentive to avoid the distractions. If this is coupled with an emphasis on learning (an intrinsic motivation) as opposed to grades (an extrinsic motivation) it is highly likely that both students and faculty will benefit from the learning environment created.

Again, this is not a scientific study, yet I'm sure that some students and faculty have done research on this topic. If so, I hope that this column serves to start the conversation about these issues so that we, as a campus, can create the best possible learning environment while maximizing the use of the technological tools available to us.

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