An Experiment in A Laptop Usage Policy

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For the past several years, I have had a laptop usage policy in my large enrollment, first-year Civil Procedure I and second-year Civil Procedure II courses. Before the first class, I provide students with the following notice, which describes my policy:

Laptop Usage Policy

As I will explain in class, Civ Pro I will have an "Internet Connected Area." Students who select seats in the back rows of the class may connect to the internet. If they choose to do so, students in the Internet Connected Area may surf the web, e-mail others (except for students in this class) etc. Since they are in the back of the class, I'm working on the assumption that their doing so will not distract students outside the Internet Connected Area. A student who selects a seat in the Internet Connected Area accepts the fact that others in the area will have permission to use their computers in ways that the student may find distracting. Obviously, there are limits on the use of computers even in the "Internet Connected Area." For example, students need to have the sound turned off, should not access sexually explicit sites, and should not use the University internet system in any way that violates UMKC policy. If anyone believes that a student has exceeded those limits, he or she should either speak to the student about the situation or bring it to me.

Students who do not select seats in the back of the class will be in the "No Internet Area." Those students may use laptops for note taking and for retrieving files that they have saved on their hard drives or thumb drives -- ordinarily word processing, powerpoint, or spreadsheet files. They may not connect to the internet during class.

They may not play games or use their computers in other ways that might unreasonably distract their colleagues, e.g., leafing through picture albums. In return, they will have the right to assume that their colleagues in the "No Internet Area" will be bound by the same restrictions.

In both cases, your choice will be binding for the semester. I reserve the right to tell everyone to put down their pens and close their laptops at any time.
All of this will be discussed further the first day of class and you will not need to make an election until the second day of class.

On the first day of class, when I introduce the policy, I tell two stories. First, I talk about sitting in the back of a class while evaluating an untenured professor and explain how difficult it was for me to avoid watching a computer golf game, a student making airline reservations, a solitaire game, etc. I also mention that I had the same experience when visiting a class of a famous professor at a prominent east coast law school. Second, I talk about the fact that, when I was in law school, I spent one entire course practicing drawing cartoon elephants.

I use these stories to make two points: First, the purpose of the policy is to avoid distracting other students. Second, I'm not the least bothered by people selecting the internet zone. As I tell them, if I can't keep you interested in my class, that's my fault. If you think accessing the net is educationally useful -- or a form of doodling -- I have no objection. I just want to avoid distraction for other students. I also tell them that, the one year I checked after grades were in, there was no significant difference in performance between the two groups. In my view, it's important for students to know that the policy is to improve learning -- not to assert dominance -- and that there really really is no stigma attached in my mind to those who are in the back. The students know that I use a random number generator to determine which students I will call on -- other than volunteers -- so they shouldn't fear I'll call on the internet zone students more.

After grades are in, I conduct an anonymous survey of the class regarding the policy. I have a little more than 50% response this year and roughly the same in the past. This year’s results are consistent with those of prior years.

When asked about the effect of the policy on the learning environment, approximately:

- 71% thought the policy made the learning environment slightly (46%) or significantly (25%) better,
- 25% thought it had no effect
- 3.5% thought it made the learning environment slightly worse. (No one responded that it made the environment significantly worse.)

Asked whether they would favor such a policy in future classes:

- 93% would somewhat (36%) or strongly (57%) favor such a policy
- 3.5% didn't care
- 3.5% somewhat disfavored such a policy. (No one responded that they strongly disfavored the policy.)

Students also provide written feedback, which always contains an interesting apparent conflict:
The vast majority of the comments say that the policy is helpful in reducing distractions. At the same time, there are always a few students who say the policy was not followed. I believe this results from the fact that the policy substantially reduces, but does not eliminate, net usage in the no internet area. I did a survey once that asked about other students' compliance and it indicated that compliance was quite high but not perfect. In this sense, the policy is like lots of laws that reduce but do not eliminate a type of conduct.

Enforcement has not been much of a problem. Over the years, I have had only one situation in which I have had to speak directly to a student about compliance after other students complained privately to me. There appears to be some peer pressure enforcement, which I encourage, and the survey results seem to indicate that compliance is high enough to make a difference without seeming oppressive.

Finally, the policy does nothing about "court reporter syndrome" i.e., the tendency of some students to use laptops to try to transcribe every word instead of thinking. I deal with that separately.

I and the majority of students like the policy, but that certainly does not mean that it is pedagogically superior to alternatives such as complete bans or complete free choice.

A copy of the survey questions and the comments provided by the students follows.

**Question One:**

What effect did the creation of internet-permitted and internet-not-permitted zones have on the classroom learning environment for you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It made the learning environment significantly worse for me.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It made the learning environment slightly worse for me.</td>
<td>3.571%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It had no effect on the learning environment for me.</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It made the learning environment slightly better for me.</td>
<td>46.429%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It made the learning environment significantly better for me.</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unanswered</strong></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question Two:**

If you were in one of my classes in the future, would you favor or disfavor such a policy?
Answered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would strongly disfavor such a policy.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would somewhat disfavor such a policy.</td>
<td>3.571%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would not care one way or the other.</td>
<td>3.571%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would somewhat favor such a policy.</td>
<td>35.714%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would strongly favor such a policy.</td>
<td>57.143%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unanswered

0%

Question Three:

Please give me any other thoughts you have about the policy including reasons to continue it, change it, or eliminate it. Thanks.

5 Unanswered Responses

- I believe the internet policy was a good idea and was beneficial to myself. Without constant website images and such it made the class much more enjoyable and less distracting.

- Keeps people who don't like internet in front of them from having to deal with it, and allows people who need or want internet connection to not stress about being on the internet. Overall, good policy.

- Personally, I enjoyed having the internet and no-internet zones. I found that I actually used the internet less in this class than I normally would, though I did occasionally still utilize it while sitting in the appropriate zone, and I'm sure that other students enjoyed not being distracted by sitting behind those of us who were using it. It's nice to know that some professors are realists about the use of computers in their classrooms and work proactively to ensure that they are not a distraction to the class as a whole.

- I'm unsure of the intent behind the internet policy. If it is to minimize distraction to surrounding students, I don't think it has that effect. Early on you grow accustomed to people accessing the internet and any distracting effect dissipates. You could just as easily be distracted by the wallpaper or screensaver someone has on their laptop, or even by idiosyncratic habits someone around you has. People who will be distracted will be distracted. (Granted, there could be extreme usage that would be unavoidably distracting such as playing high speed video games, but I haven't seen that in other classes. Most of it is things like checking sports scores or clothes shopping). Also, I sometimes felt limited because I wanted to quickly check a term, or pull up a case on Westlaw, and couldn't.
If the intent of the policy to prevent distraction to the ones using the internet, I still don't think it has that effect. As I said, those who will be distracted will be distracted. Moreover, I really don't care. If they're going to be distracted, they're adults and that's their problem. Plus, how could anyone ever be distracted in a class as engaging as yours?????? ;)

- The internet policy was beneficial for me because it kept me off the internet. I usually end up surfing the web in class, but because I was sitting in the non-internet area I stayed off of it in your class. This ended up being good for me because I think if I had been online during Civ Pro I would have been totally lost in your class. Staying offline made me pay closer attention, which in turn helped me out a lot because some of the stuff we did was so confusing. While I don't really care if other people are on the internet around me, the internet policy was beneficial for me because it kept me offline.

- I feel that the internet policy allowed people to continue looking on the internet if they wanted too while allowing me to have class without distractions from another person's computer.

- My only concern is that sometimes, when I don't understand something, it's easy to go online and look up the answer or explanation. With this policy, I feel a little guilty about going online to do that, but I do it anyway. I reasoned that the purpose of the policy is to avoid distracting sites, but looking something up on Westlaw is just as distracting as switching my screen from my notes page to my outline page on my laptop. Text only is not distracting.

- I completely agree with the internet policy. It is very distracting when people sitting in front are on the internet.

- I thought the internet policy was a good way to remove any distractions from students who are in the front of the classroom and distracting the rest of the class. However, I do not think that it would have been a problem in your class anyway, because I sat in the internet only part of the classroom and due to your particularly intense classroom setting, no one in my area was ever on the internet. To do so would risk certain embarrassment when called on. So I think it is a great policy for most classes, but in your class it almost seems irrelevant.

- I believe the no-internet policy helped me stay more focused in class. Having no internet distractions helped me to concentrate on what the professor was saying, instead of being distracted by others around me on non-school related websites.

- The internet policy idea is a nice thought. However people don't follow it and no students are going to report it because all of us have come to grips with the fact that some of our classmates are going to browse the internet during class. So we have learned to ignore it so we can learn.

- It was followed for about 3 weeks
• It helped cut down on being distracted by other people's computer screens. Although I have to wonder if choosing the internet section may send a signal of 'I'm on those folks who does not pay attention so please call on me'.

• I sat in the internet zone but did not at all use a computer. It had no effect on the way I approached the class. But I think it's a very useful gesture to accommodate students for whom noticing lots of different/changing internet activities would be distracting.

• I thought the policy was great. I sit in front, but would be distracted if I saw other screens around me flashing to different sites. That being said, I can't imagine how people are able to learn anything in your class when they are distracted by surfing the web. The best internet policy is just your teaching style: calling on everyone in the class in a random pattern and constantly calling on different students. That being said, I think your policy of front rows (no internet) and back rows (internet) at least establishes an expectation for those that don't wish to be distracted.

Thanks. Have a great summer.