Smartphones in the Classroom? Let Students Decide.
by David Gooblar

Should students be allowed to use personal technology in the classroom? That's a contentious issue for many instructors, myself included. Concerns about distraction—web-surfing, Facebook-checking, Scrabble-playing—may prompt instructors to adopt policies that ban students from using laptops, tablets, and smartphones in class.

Understandably so. It is incredibly frustrating to be trying hard to connect with students from the front of the class, only to see their screens. Students have all day to check their email. Shouldn't class be a time when they are completely present, free from the constant attention-hogging of today's Internet?

But there are a number of compelling reasons to rethink such strict policies. Many teachers—I'm one of them—think: "Taking notes by hand was good enough for me when I was a student. I don't see why it's not good enough for them." But the fact is that new technology has thoroughly transformed many students' study skills for the better.

Students can now take notes on their laptops, organize them easily, share them with their classmates, and make use of them when they are working on essays or other assignments, also on their laptops. They can also refer to any course material the instructor may have posted online during class, check their notes from prior classes, or bring outside evidence into class discussions.

What's more, by banning laptops and other electronic devices, instructors may be inadvertently discriminating against students with disabilities who need such devices to take notes. Even if your syllabus invites students to come to you if they need accommodations for legitimate reasons, some may not wish to reveal to you or their classmates that they have a disability. The best way to avoid discrimination, then, may be to allow laptops for all students, so those who need one as an accommodation for a physical or cognitive disability can participate fully in class without any unnecessary difficulty or stigma.

So here's one intriguing way out of these conundrums: How about making the acceptable use of technology in the classroom a topic for discussion? Start a conversation with students that raises your concerns about the use of electronic devices, including the potential for discrimination against those with disabilities. Simon Bates and Alison Lister, who both teach in the physics and astronomy department at the University of British Columbia, have done precisely this: They allow their students to collaborate on an acceptable-use policy for technology in the classroom.

Bates and Lister introduce the concept on the first day of class. They direct students to a collaborative online space, where they have posted a basic document with a number of guidelines for the students to consider. The students are given a set amount of time—say, a week—to contribute to the document and to edit the rules as they see fit. A vote is then held in class to decide the fate of any rules that the students are divided on. In this way the class works as a unit to devise their own guidelines for what is (and isn't) appropriate.

This strategy is an ingenious way to navigate the tricky terrain of technology in the classroom. And discussing what is acceptable and unacceptable in class may also get students thinking about what you're trying accomplish as an instructor. Or it could prompt them to consider some valuable questions: How do we think our class time should be spent? How does learning best occur? How do we create an environment that accommodates everyone's needs?

This may even lead students to think about their role in the classroom, become more conscious of their own learning styles, and take on some measure of responsibility for what occurs over the course of the semester. Best of all, it also absolves you, the instructor, from having to police the students—by allowing students

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