Should Students Use a Laptop in Class?

Is it OK to use a smartphone in class, email an instructor, record a lecture? A professor offers lessons.

By EVAN SELINGER

There’s a widely shared image on the Internet of a teacher’s note that says: "Dear students, I know when you’re texting in class. Seriously, no one just looks down at their crotch and smiles."

College students returning to class this month would be wise to heed such warnings. You’re not as clever as you think—your professors are on to you. The best way to stay in their good graces is to learn what behavior they expect with technology in and around the classroom.

Let’s start with the million-dollar question: May computers (laptops, tablets, smartphones) be used in class? Some instructors are as permissive as parents who let you set your own curfew. Others are more controlling and believe that having your phone on means your brain is off and that relying on Google for answers results in a digital lobotomy.

Professors are united, though, in the conviction that the classroom is a communal space and that students share the responsibility for ensuring that nobody abuses it by diminishing opportunities to learn. An instructor who lets you squander your tuition by using class time to fuss with your iPhone is likely to have zero tolerance for distracting activities that make it hard for the rest of the class to pay attention.

One of my colleagues has resorted to a severe policy that he calls the "Facebook rule," which turns the classroom into a wild west of bounty hunters and social media outlaws. Students are encouraged to earn extra credit by busting classmates who use their computers for activities like social networking, shopping or gaming during his lectures.

Other professors prefer imposing the scarlet letters themselves. One colleague became so fed up with a student who played games whenever the class went to a computer lab that he installed speakers on the offender’s machine. Halfway through the class, the speakers got turned on and everyone stared as the post-apocalyptic sound track started blaring.

Too much texting in the classroom could jeopardize your academic future, says R.I.T. Assoc. Professor Evan Selinger. So before you post that status update, keep in mind these tips.

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Ultimately, rule-breakers are their own worst enemies. Students may be savvy enough to text the occasional query to
partners-in-crime during exams. But it is only a matter of time before the mute button isn't pushed and the whole class gets to hear your "I'm sexy and I know it" ringtone.

Emailing professors is another self-sabotaging land mine. Some instructors appreciate students who don't bother with formalities and shoot off quick, direct questions about an assignment or grade. Others, however, expect a formal greeting and sign off, and view the cut-to-the-chase approach as a rude affront that treats educational conversation like an automated customer-service call.

As for that funny personal email address you got because it seemed cool in high school, ditch it. Your note from lovetoparty@____.com is on a collision course with a spam folder. And if it does reach your professors, they may question your judgment and priorities. If you forget to include your name, you can expect a reply like: "Dear alwaysstoned@____.com, I guess we know the real reason you missed class."

To avoid the double whammy of irritating professors and peers at the same time, record classes only if you have explicit permission. Privacy concerns in the digital age extend beyond worries about sharing personal information. Complete transcripts of class discussions will make some peers feel like you're the NSA. And when a digital recording gets posted online, the whole class is at risk of having outside parties receive and misconstrue sensitive remarks. Recordings also make students self-conscious and less spontaneous, which ruins the free exchange of ideas.

As students consider how to use their devices in the classroom, they should remember, above all, that tuition merely gets them into the lecture hall. If they want college to culminate in life-changing courses, mentoring from dedicated teachers and compelling recommendations for the world after graduation, they will earn these things the time-honored way, with courtesy and hard work.

As for professors, we can make things easier for students by including detailed etiquette policies in our syllabi. Too many of us leave our likes and dislikes to be discovered by trial and error.

But even the most detailed code of conduct can't hope to specify or resolve every possible sticking point. Society writ large is constantly struggling to come to grips with technological disruption, and so too are the adults at the front of the college lecture hall and the wired, distracted young adults who are there to learn from them.

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