

Laptops May Have a Place in Law School Classrooms



Summary: A new theory based off of one Ohio State Law School class suggests that some students can handle using a laptop in class and get the same grades as those that take notes by hand.

Before law professors start banning laptops from class, they better read up on the latest reports - taking notes by hand may not be the most effective way of learning anymore. New evidence suggests that laptops are not a complete distraction in law school, according to Karen Sloan's article on Law.com. A new law review article found that law students that use laptops during class perform just as well as students that do not, assuming those students are not on social media sites during class.

Ruth Colker wrote the article Sloan references, which appeared in the Cardozo Law Review, "Universal Design: Stop Banning Laptops!" after she compared the grades of her students who regularly used a laptop to those who didn't. Colker found that the grades from her constitutional law class at Ohio State University Michael E. Moritz College of Law were equivalent.

Colker suggests that law professors give their students the ability to choose which method works best for themselves since not everyone learns the same way. However, she does think that law professors should make a very clear rule prohibiting the use of the internet during class for other purposes besides class.

In an interview reported by Law.com, Colker said, "I'm reluctant to make a choice for my students for all sorts of reasons. The data suggests that students seem to make the right choice for themselves."

Colker, who is also an expert in disability law, pointed out that placing a ban on laptops in the classroom forces those students that have to use laptops because of a disability to reveal themselves to classmates and their professors when they then have to get an exception to use their laptop.

Past research indicated that students were likely to abuse the ability of using a laptop in class. A study from 2012 found that second-year students spent over 40 percent of their time in class using their laptop to goof off. A 2013 study found that second- and third-year students were much more likely to use their laptop for nonacademic reasons than first-year students.

Some professors ban laptops because they want students participating in class discussion instead of typing on their laptop. Other professors follow research claiming that taking notes by hand helps students retain the most information. Another concern that other professors experience, and one that Colker dealt with herself, is that a student goofing around will be a distraction to those around them. Colker noticed three years ago while looking through a recording of her class that a student was watching a cooking show during class. Her greatest concern was for the other students sitting around the student.

This led to Colker implementing a policy requiring students that wanted to use a laptop for class to pledge in writing not to use their laptop for nonclass purposes. She made sure to share the research with her students on how taking notes by hand tends to lead to better class performance.

The incident also led Colker to hold her own study using her spring 2016 constitutional law class. Of the class, 25 requested permission to use a laptop while 32 students elected to take notes by hand. Colker assumed the students using a laptop would perform worse than the other students but they did not. Colker even took into account a student's academic credentials like undergraduate grades and Law School Admission Test scores but the results were the same. The use of a laptop did not predict how well a student did in class.

The students that opted not to use a laptop explained that they knew they would be distracted by the internet. The students that chose to use a laptop stated they wanted access to online course materials during class so they could easily make study outlines while typing their notes. Each of her students knew what was best for them in getting the most out of the class and was responsible enough to make the best choice for themselves.

Colker's article states, "In law, we are always teaching our students that answers are murky, there are two sides to most issues, and one needs to assess facts with care. A professor's reflexive 'no-laptop' policy fails to hold us to these high standards."

Do you think law students are grown up enough to make a decision on how to take notes in class? Share your thoughts with us in the comments below.

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