Laptops Found More Likely to Distract 2Ls and 3Ls in Class

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Law school upperclassmen are far more likely than their first-year counterparts to spend classroom time checking Facebook, playing solitaire, scanning sports scores or otherwise goofing around on their laptop computers, according to recent research.

Classroom observers found that among the 2Ls and 3Ls equipped with laptops, 87 percent used the devices for non-academic purposes for more than five minutes per class; 58 percent were distracted by their computer screens at least half the time.

By contrast, a mere 4 percent of the 1Ls observed during a civil-procedure course were "strongly distracted" by their computers, and 44 percent were never distracted.

The findings come from St. John's University School of Law professor Jeff Sovern's article in the latest edition University of Louisville Law Review: "Law Student Laptop Use During Class For Non-Class Purposes: Temptation v. Incentives."

"I was surprised and disappointed at how many upper-year students tune out," Sovern said. "Those arguing that law school should be only two years may find support in the findings that many upper year students are not engaged during doctrinal classes. But the study sheds no light on the value of small seminars or skills courses."

Sovern placed observers at the rear of six classrooms during fall 2010 to record when students were distracted by their laptops. The observers also noted what was happening in class at the time.

First-year students are well aware that their grades will affect their eligibility for law review and to land summer law firm jobs and other types of internships and career opportunities, Sovern wrote—all compelling reasons to pay attention.

"Upper-year students know all this and perhaps feel freer to ignore what is happening in the classroom, because they understand that their grades are less significant and the cost of not mastering the material is lower," the article reads.

Fresh law students also might be more excited to learn and interested in the classroom material than are 2Ls and 3Ls, who perhaps have grown bored, Sovern wrote.
The observers tried to determine whether the level of distractedness changed according to what was happening in class. They found that both 1Ls and upper-level students were most distracted when the professor was answering student questions—perhaps because students perceived that the material would not show up on any exams, Sovern theorized.

As a result, Sovern said, he now takes fewer student questions during class and has added extra sessions specifically to answer questions.

Students were also more likely to tune out during policy discussions.

All students tended to pay closer attention when the professor was stating a rule or reading from text, the observers found.

Sovern said he got interested in student laptop use after reading Malcolm Gladwell’s book, The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference, in which Sesame Street producers described testing show segments to ensure they would hold the interest of preschoolers.

"Though it is not flattering to law students to compare them with preschoolers, I thought that we could use the same basic idea of watching when law students tuned out to make law teaching more effective," he said.

His article acknowledges possible methodological problems, including the relatively narrow sample of students who were observed; the inability of observers to accurately record every student’s web surfing, to determine whether they were doing something related to class; and the fact that students might have caught on to why they were being watched.

But he wasn’t the first to look at how laptops affect instruction. A 2012 study conducted by a doctoral candidate at Saint Louis University found that 2Ls tended to be the worst offenders when it came to using their laptops for non-academic purposes in class, followed by 1Ls and 3Ls, respectively.

The year before that, Temple University James E. Beasley School of Law professor Kristen Murray published an article defending the use of laptops in the classroom, based largely on a survey of 1Ls who said that laptop use can enhance learning.

Sovern’s article stops short of calling for a universal ban on laptops in the classroom, but says that such a ban may be in order for upper-level classes.

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