“I See You Not:” Student Computer Use in the Law School Classroom

[Boon or Bane?]

It is becoming an accepted tautology that law student learning can be advanced by using lap top computers and their equivalent – tablets, notebooks, I-Pads, etc. - in the classroom. Questions have arisen about the implications of this use – does it further the educational mission, distract from it or act as a neutral channel allowing for greater efficiency in note-taking? Is electronic note-taking a superior platform that should become an increasing part of the legal education culture? These questions are not easily answered, if only because a teacher does not often see what occurs behind the raised lap-top screen. So we decided to ask Elon Law School students how using computers affected their educational mission. We surveyed all three classes of students, 1Ls, 2Ls and 3Ls, to try to get their perceptions on this issue and create data by which to draw some reasoned inferences.

The Survey of Elon Law School Students

The questionnaire was offered to a student body of slightly more than 300 law students through a mechanism called Survey Monkey. The survey methodology involved asking several different types of questions. There were background questions, inquiries about computer use in class and questions about costs (distractions) and benefits, particularly relating to the impact of being able to connect to the Internet – and email – in class.

The Survey Data

109 students responded to the survey. Approximately one-third of the respondants were in their first year of law school, one-third in their second year and one-third in their last year. The students averaged 3.7 years of work experience prior to entering law school, with one-third of the students having some form of law-related experience. Significantly, 100 percent of the students owned their own computers – 80 percent had personal computers, and 20 percent had Apple computers (macs).

The results of the survey were both predictable and somewhat surprising. Overall, nearly all – more than 95 percent - of students used computers in class. About 80 percent of the students used a computer frequently. More than 95 percent used computers for note-taking at least occasionally. More than half of the responding students use computers at least 80 percent of the time during class.

Now that the survey established – and probably not surprising – that the majority of students rely on computers during a class, are these electronic tools helpful? More than 80 percent of the students believe it is useful.

Significantly, a similarly high percentage, more than 80 percent, of the responding students say they take notes differently with computers, and that the differences
constitute an improvement. When asked what their style of note-taking is on computers, students replied as follows: 5.8 percent said they were transcribers; 47.7 percent said they paraphrased; 24.4 percent said they processed the proceedings; 11.6 percent said they were writing; and 5.8 percent chose the category “other.”

Several of the questions focused on non-course use of computers by students during class time. About 90 percent of the students said they at least occasionally used the Internet during class for non-class-related purposes; about 50 percent of the students said they did so frequently. When asked, about 40 percent of the students stated they checked Facebook during class occasionally; less than one-percent conceded they did so frequently. Thirty percent of the students acknowledged using computers for instant messaging or online chats during class; but again, fewer than one-percent said they did so frequently. About half of the respondents said they occasionally read news online during class; but yet again, fewer than one percent said they did so frequently.

Email was another focal point of the survey, and the responses were revealing. About 75 percent of the students conceded occasionally reading or sending emails during class; about one-third said they did so frequently or always.

While the questions did not focus on why students would use the computers for non-class-related purposes, several volunteered that they would use the computers for alternative uses when they were bored.

Students regularly used computers for exam-taking, with 90 percent saying they did so in law school. Respondents queried about exam use said they did so because they believed it allowed them to compose better exam answers.

Some professors do not permit lap tops or computing equipment in classes. Inquiries were addressed to how students would handle such an edict, and most students – 85 percent – replied that it would be difficult to give up all computer use during class. Moreover, more than 40 percent stated that to leave the computer closed for the duration of the class would be impossible.

The questions followed up on the responses in this area, especially given that many of the students were “born digital,” having experienced computer use all of their lives (and conversely, not experiencing typewriter use), and were simply accustomed to learning with a lap top or equivalent. The follow-up questions focused on whether the deprivation was significant because of the non-class-related use, or the advantages of note-taking. Nearly half of the students replied that it would be easy to give up non-class-related use of the computers during class, but a substantial number – 17 percent – said it would be very difficult or impossible to do so.

Where do these questions lead us? How can we make sense of these responses? We tried to assess which types of students, and types of computer use practices, had any relationship, if at all, with a student’s law school grade point average (G.P.A.). For
example, we discovered that the longer a student had worked prior to entering law school, the more positive the effect on the student’s G.P.A. \( r=.36; p<.0005 \). Interestingly, it did not matter regarding a student’s G.P.A. whether the prior work experience was law-related or not. Also, at least in this group of respondents, a student’s age was positively correlated to the student’s G.P.A., with older generally better. \( r=.4; p<.0001 \)

Perhaps the most sought after data involved the inquires about the non-class-related use. The student replies indicated that the frequency of non-class-related use was negatively correlated with G.P.A. \( r = .28; p<.01 \). But, importantly, the correlation depended on the type of non-class-related use. Both Facebook use and instant messaging (IM’ing) were negatively correlated with a student’s G.P.A. \( r=.29; p<.005 \) for Facebook use; \( r=.25; p<.02 \) for IM use). Sending or reading email in class or reading the news, however, does not have a statistically significant negative correlation with a student’s G.P.A.

Also, like second-hand smoke, it is not only the users who are affected. Nearly all of the respondents reported observing other students at least occasionally use the Internet during class – and a substantial minority, approximately 40 percent, say that others’ use is sometimes a distraction. 10 percent of the observing students report that others’ use is frequently a distraction.

**Analysis**

As both professors and students know, the use of lap top computers and their equivalent have become a permanent fixture in the legal education firmament. Yet, as both know, the use of electronic equipment can both advance and detract from the educational process. Computer distractions can negatively impact the learning process of student users and observers – sucking away from moments in time when learning is at a premium and designed to occur. If students saw the costs of such distractions, they might be less likely to engage in such practices.

Of course, this survey pointed out another critical dimension of the use of computers in the classroom – computers with Internet access provide an easy avenue to another venue, such as Facebook, IM’ing and email. These competitive venues can be addicting and provide difficult habits to break. Ignoring the reality that some students – and professors - are addicted to their smart phones, the Internet, Facebook and the like does not add value to the classroom and educational experience, but rather places it at greater risk. On the other hand, if students are bored, the “market’” system suggests it should be up to the professor to show students that engagement in the classroom experience is much more valuable than any alternative computer use. Further, in “the old days,” students would doodle and daydream, which arguably the functional equivalent of computer useage.

**Conclusion**
Lap top computers and their equivalent – tablets, notebooks, I-Pads, etc. – are here to stay in legal education. Understanding their impact on a class, however, and preparing for the likely impact with intentionality, can add value to the learning process. Some students will be multi-taskers, accomplishing several things at once, and some will be using their lap tops for non-class-related activities at any given time. Steering these students in the right direction to maximize learning, and helping students minimize distractions, has become part of the professor’s task in the 21st Century. This is especially true for students who have a form of dependency or addiction to electronic usage that is clearly not beneficial to the student, and perhaps detrimental to other student observers as well. Instead of just banning lap tops or ignoring them, it is time to take a more nuanced approach to computer use in the classroom.

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