

Lectures vs. Laptops

By IAN AYRES

NEW HAVEN — Something alarming happened in my contract law class. I asked that laptop computers be used only for note taking, and my students went ballistic.

and Minesweeper are everywhere now in university classes. At Yale, where classrooms are wired to the Internet, students can also surf the Web, send e-mail or even trade stock. Soon the wireless Internet will make this possible at all schools.

Not all students do this sort of thing. But the abusive use of laptops is getting to be increasingly prevalent. Students toggle between windows during any part of the class they deem to be boring — often when their fellow students are asking questions or answering them. Seeing the person in the next seat playing a video game while you are trying to puzzle out a law question is demoralizing. And students who surf are not fully present to ask or answer questions themselves.

Admittedly, students can mentally check out of class in other ways — for instance, by daydreaming or doodling. But not all activities are equally addictive. I should know. I may be the only law professor to have asked for cybersitter filtering software to keep me from surfing the Web too much at my office.

Still, I was surprised at how brazenly my own students resisted my laptop restrictions, both in class discussion and in a virtual chat room (which, perversely, they could post to during their other classes). They argued that they were multitasking, staying productive during dead or badly taught portions of class. They

said classroom surfing reduces sleepiness, increases their willingness to attend class, allows them to research legal questions being discussed, and so on. They said the professor has an incentive to teach more effectively when he or she must compete against other more interesting claims on students' attention.

Their arguments could apply equally well to the opera hall, the jury box or the church pew. Will the lure of technological stimulation someday overwhelm current mores about paying attention in those places, too? At least, we should try to stem the tide in the classroom. Few students say on their admissions applications, after all, that they intend classroom to be a central part of their educational experience.

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