

Russell Williams on Classroom Technology

During my time as Teaching and Learning Center Fellow, one of the topics I've been most focussed on concerns technology and the classroom. While I'm interested in how instructors can make the most of the latest tools, resources and techniques, I've been particularly thinking practically about how colleagues can manage the use of electronic devices – laptops and smartphones – in the classroom. Talking with fellow professors it seems that many of us, though we fully recognise the importance of technology within the connected world and understand the importance of digital literacy within the context of a Liberal Arts education, are unsure of how best to manage device use in their classrooms. Anecdotally, it seems many colleagues have stories about how devices can lead to student distraction. Other profs, too, have had some interesting ideas about how technology can be harnessed to enhance learning.

So, where to start? I thought it would be helpful to compile some pointers that I've picked up while working with the Teaching and Learning Center that colleagues concerned about devices in the classroom might find interesting or helpful.

- **Be clear about your classroom policy about laptops and smartphones from the start of the semester.** Once students have started checking their handsets and clicking their way through seminars, it can be very hard to stop them. In some of my classes, specifically where intensive writing is a key component, I've decided not to allow any smartphone or laptop use (except when a student is allowed specific accommodations) in class. This even includes me leaving my smartphone in my office. Students seem to appreciate this, even if it takes a couple of class sessions for them to feel comfortable not reaching for their handset every ten minutes. Colleagues I've spoken to prefer not to impose a classroom policy in this way and instead choose to **develop a policy of acceptable device use in collaboration with their students**. Other colleagues prefer to **schedule clear timeslots in their class** where laptop and phone use is permitted or **encourage all laptop users in their classes to sit together** to try and minimise distraction for students preferring to remain offline.
- Although I make extensive use of technology for administration and, increasingly for research and teaching projects, I often feel a little like a Luddite or a reactionary when I'm asking a student to put their smartphone away. After leading a workshop with colleague Tomer Libal (Computer Science), I was heartened to discover that **students frequently value the moments of disconnection, discussion and deep thinking that the classroom environment can encourage**. Rather than mourning the separation from their 'phone, many students like it when a classroom serves as a sanctuary from the bombardment via messages, emails and push notifications their attention receives in everyday life.
- If you are thinking about harnessing electronic devices in the classroom, then be very clear what you want to get out of the experiment: using technology for the sake of technology (or just because it has the WOW factor) is generally a bad idea. **Be sure to set clear pedagogical goals**. In one of my classes, for example, where students collaborate on writing and editing, I encourage them to make use Google Docs since it allows them to work together in a visible way that leaves a clear trail of changes made.
- While it can be exciting and interesting to showcase new tools with students, **don't underestimate the time it can take to get classroom activities up and running**. In my experience, new technologies, even relatively simple tools, can take time to bed in. Students might need to sign-up, wait for authentication emails and get up to speed

with a new interface – this can very easily led to the disappearance of one (or more!) class periods.

- It's worth also thinking about the **ethical dimension** of using free tools provided by large technology companies. While these are convenient, it's worth considering, perhaps as part of an in-class discussion, what are the implications of your private information, data and work being hosted off-campus? Are there any less problematic alternatives?
- One thing I've come to realise after talking and debating with colleagues from all disciplines - **we are never going to get consensus among profs** about this issue. Some colleagues take a very liberal approach (anything goes!) while some completely reject the use of technology in the classroom. Naturally it depends on the type of learning environment the teacher is looking to create and, of course, what works best for the students.
- In the course of thinking about teaching technology I've come across some **simple tools** that can be accessed via laptop and smartphone that are quick to get up-and-running and can be useful pedagogical tools. You might like to give some of them a try:
 - www.todaysmeet.com - a simple text tool that lets students share short messages on-screen. Useful and fun for quick brainstorming.
 - www.coggle.it - can be used for simple, collaborative mind maps. Why not get students to log-on via their smartphones and join in with a brainstorm on the big classroom screen.
 - www.polleverywhere.com - quick, participative polls to gauge student understanding

Let me know how you get on!