

Brandeis University
Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences
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MEMORANDUM

To: Arts and Sciences Faculty

From: Adam B. Jaffe, Dean of Arts and Sciences, for The Committee for the Support of Teaching

Re: Students' Use of Cell Phones and Laptops in Class

Date: March 17, 2011

A number of faculty have, in recent months, expressed frustration about unproductive and distracting behavior by students in class, involving use of cell phones and laptops for non-class related purposes. This issue has been reviewed by the CST and we make the following suggestions.

We discussed the possibility of a campus-wide policy on these issues, or even technological solutions in which, for example, wireless connectivity could be disabled in a classroom. Our conclusion is that these all-purpose solutions are not feasible or desirable. Some faculty want their students to be using technology in class. More generally, we agreed that if students are engaged in behavior that is judged inappropriate from a pedagogical perspective, faculty should address that issue via communication with their students, rather than by calling in outside forces to control the undesirable behavior.

For this reason, our recommendation is that faculty address explicitly their expectations regarding students' use of technology in the classroom, using both syllabus language and verbal discussion early in the semester. **Faculty who wish to prohibit the use of cellphones or laptops, or restrict their usage to specified purposes, can and should do so.** Students on the Committee and others consulted by the Committee were unanimous in their view that students would respond appropriately to clearly expressed faculty expectations.

It is the consensus of the Committee members that course syllabi should clearly state policy with respect to the use of cell phones and laptops in class; that faculty should verbally review these policies near the start of the semester; and that faculty should then enforce the stated policies throughout the semester. Based on internal discussions and review of policies published by others, below are some suggestions of language you might want to consider using. They are mutually inconsistent, so no one would use all of them; they are presented solely to give some ideas.

- I come to class to help you learn, and I assume that you are here because you want to learn. Using a cell phone or laptop to talk, text, email or surf the web on non-course related matters is disrespectful to me and to your fellow students.

- Use of cell phones in class, for talking, texting or reading/writing email is prohibited. If you wish to leave your cell phone on in “Silent” mode because of an ongoing emergency situation that you may need to respond to, please speak to me at the start of class to let me know.
- Use of cell phones in class is prohibited. If you wish to place or receive a call you must leave the room.
- Use of cell phones in class, for talking, texting or reading/writing email is prohibited. If I or one of the TAs observes you using a cell phone during class, it will be confiscated for the duration of the class and your class participation grade for the semester will be reduced.
- I find that students using laptop computers in class is distracting to me and other students, in part because the temptation to take “just a second” to check email or web updates is hard to resist. If you feel that your learning will be hampered by not having access to your laptop for note-taking or other legitimate purposes, please speak to me. Otherwise, keep your laptop turned off and stowed away during class.
- Students using laptops during class for non-class related work is disrespectful to me and distracting to other students. You will notice that the TAs generally sit in the back of the room during class. I have instructed them to make a note of any students using laptops for non-course-related functions, and your class participation grade for the semester will be reduced as a result of such notations.
- Use of laptops during class for note-taking or web research related to the course can be helpful to learning. But if you are the kind of person who cannot resist the temptation to take a peek at email or other websites, you should just keep your laptop off and stowed away. If it looks to me like you are distracted, I will ask you to turn the screen around so that I and the rest of the class can see what you were looking at.

Some other considerations:

- Students with certain disabilities may need to use technology in class, and this must be accommodated. Generally, it is not a good idea to deal with this with a specific exception for students with disabilities, because this may force them to “out” themselves. Language of the kind shown above, in which a student who wishes to use a phone or laptop should speak with you about it beforehand, allows you to accommodate students with legitimate needs without forcing them to identify the nature of that need.
- If you always remain in the same location in the classroom, students may feel that they can surf the web and you won’t notice. Moving around the seminar table, or up and down the aisles of the lecture hall, will make them less complacent in this

regard. It is also just good pedagogical practice, because it reduces monotony and creates a sense of your being part of the group rather than a talking head up front.

- As noted above, follow-through is important. Think in advance about how restrictive you want to be and communicate that up front. If students violate the rules you have laid out there must be consequences. Otherwise you will undermine not only your technology policy but your credibility more generally.
- Many students find others' laptop and phone use distracting and annoying. They will appreciate your taking a stand on this, as long as your position is clearly thought out and communicated early on.