Banning Laptops in Class

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College professors say laptops are an easy distraction, sparking a debate over who's responsible for ensuring students pay attention.

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"Could you repeat the question?"

That's the most common response law professor David Cole gets when he calls on disengaged students during class at Georgetown University. The question, Cole says, "is usually asked while the student glances up from the laptop screen that otherwise occupies his or her field of vision."

The laptop--the favorite in-class tool for college and university students across the country—is coming unplugged.

When used responsibly—for taking notes or quickly accessing research—a laptop provides valuable educational support. But when used irresponsibly—for watching YouTube, surfing the web, emailing, IM-ing, playing games, checking sports scores, and shopping for shoes instead of engaging in class — laptops become the scourge of professors, some of whom are now banning them.

"I was happy to compete with Minesweeper and solitaire," said University of Michigan law professor Don Herzog, but not "the entire internet." Herzog banned all laptops from his classes for a day, and was so "stunned by how much better the class was," that he has vowed to make the embargo permanent in the fall.

Professor Herzog is not alone in his class action. At Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, professors have nixed classroom laptops as well. At the University of Chicago Law School, classroom Wi-Fi was recently cut in response to an "epidemic" of web browsing. And at UCLA School of Law, when the meandering minds of the country's future lawyers need to be jolted back from cyberspace to the Socratic method, professors can activate a "kill switch" to disable classroom Wi-Fi.

Many students disdain their professors' attempts at online mind control, saying if classes weren't so boring, they wouldn't look for so many distractions. Ann Althouse, a professor from the University of Wisconsin Law School agrees with the students. "The idea that we're going to

somehow save these students from being distracted is a bit absurd," she said. "Especially in law school, I'm on the side of individual responsibility and freedom."

Tell us what you think: Should students be busted down for booting up in class? Should professors be responsible for making lectures and classes interesting enough to hold students' attention? Do students have a responsibility to pay attention?

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