CTE NOTEBOOK

"Managing Student Technology"

Inside This Issue

Reinert CTE Mission Statement
The mission of the Paul C. Reinert, S.J. Center for Teaching Excellence is to support Saint Louis University faculty and graduate students so that they can better serve the intellectual, spiritual, and social needs of all learners.

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Learning How to Teach in the Technology Cloud

Kenneth L. Parker
Department of Theological Studies

No doubt it had started years before, but I became aware of the problem in the spring of 2007. I had returned from my sabbatical and was teaching courses that were tried and tested. I had had great success with formats that were dialogical, incorporated Socratic interaction, and focused on teaching students how to read texts and write critical, analytical essays. But something had changed. Many students seemed less engaged and more distant. Interactions fell flat, and I found myself droning on in the absence of student driven questions and comments. At first I thought it was just the "personality" of the classes I taught—we all know that experience—but then I started noticing things.

Over half of my students had laptops on their desks and often seemed busy on the keyboard or with the cursor when there was no "content" to record, or meaningful interactions to summarize. Students who did not have laptops seemed focused on the screens around them and unaware of the direction of discussions or lectures. When we sat in a circle to listen to presentations or discuss a reading, out came the laptops and the whites of eyes turned a faint tint of glowing blue. But it really hit home when I invited our chair to come to a class and give a special presentation. I sat in the back of the room and watched.

From the Director

How Do Faculty Manage Technology in Their Classrooms?

Dr. Dan Finucane,
Department of Theology

Technological devices can be a mixed blessing in the classroom. As with any pedagogical tools I hope to steer use of them in my courses away from "gimmick and distraction" and toward "resources." I find most of my students use good sense, in having cell phones or other interruptive devices off during class time. I think minor forgetfulness is best handled in a low key manner. Probably one of the more controversial devices is the lap top. I find it can be appropriate for students to use this tool, and handle requests to do so on case by case basis. I will occasionally ask students to use the internet to clarify a point of information if they have a computer in class. This can also be done by the teacher in a smart classroom. Student presentations are often enhanced by the use of power point. I occasionally use this resource myself, as well as pre-selected items from You Tube or other internet sources to enhance classroom content. But I have to admit I find power point can also be used to present notes visually in a way that stifles discussion or creative thinking. The key, in my view, is for pedagogy to use electronic aids as resources to stimulate other engaging tools of learning, especially the human voice and mind.

Dr. Liz Fathman,
Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice

I use wikis in my classes to allow students to take notes in real time and with multiple users. I post lecture outlines on the wiki, and students "fill in the blanks" during class. I also count contributions to the wiki as class participation, so everyone has a chance to participate. Once a week I go back over the students' notes to check the accuracy. A benefit of this practice is that I can enforce my rule that if a student brings a laptop to class, they must be adding notes on the wiki. No notes, no laptop. That way they use laptops for educational purposes only.

Another way I use wikis is to send students to websites for further information WHILE CLASS IS GOING ON. What I'm trying to teach them by encouraging this behavior is that the Internet is a powerful research tool, if used appropriately. Most students use the Internet for socializing and entertainment; I want to encourage them to use it to get information and for research.

The final use of wikis in the classroom is course management. I can send messages to all the students. We can keep online records and updates to the class (syllabus changes, lists of class presentations, etc.). I can send them reminders about upcoming deadlines, and they can pose questions of me or other students all on the same website.

To my left a good and conscientious student, who decided that there would be little to record, started playing with screensavers. The changing screens attracted several students behind him, they seemed glued to the random images. Another student was checking her email and wrote a long reply. Behind a propped up book, a young man was busy texting away. But the one that really got me was the young woman who had her credit card out to buy music! I realized that I had lost control of my classroom and that wifi and blackberries had taken over.

Don't get me wrong, I am a great fan of the productive use of laptops in the classroom. In my graduate seminars, students check references in the middle of discussions, find a quote by pulling up a nineteenth century text on Google Books, and are able to correct a date or verify a factual issue in a matter of seconds. But even in those setting, graduate students are tempted to zone out if they lose interest. In one notorious case, a student was caught in the middle of a game of solitaire by his professor. We do our students no good if we ignore this problem. It is not an issue just for the individual, but also those around them who are distracted. Much is lost when technology gets in the way of participation in a learning experience. There are no perfect solutions but I would like to suggest a few things that might help:

(1) In the syllabus state explicitly the appropriate use of technology in your course, which could include the following requirements:

- Use of a "privacy screen" to limit distracting other students

- Ban the use of cell phones and all texting devices during your sessions

- Prohibit the use of wifi computer access during your classes (it is the rare undergraduate course for which this is essential)

- Define the appropriate use of wifi if access is permitted

- Establish consequences for violations and maintain a zero tolerance policy (points off participation grade, barring the devices from your room, etc.)

(2) Reserve the right to ban all devices from your classroom if there is widespread abuse of the privileges granted

(3) Require students to sign an "appropriate use of technology" agreement that is returned to you

(4) Eliminate laptop use during general discussions and presentations by peers, or any other learning experience where note taking is not essential

(5) Make a clear opening statement at the beginning of the semester about your expectations, and frame it in positive ways, emphasizing the value of human interaction unmediated by digital technology and the importance of engaging the printed page.

I am not a neo-luddite. The technology cloud has transformed my research and writing in extraordinary ways. But I am passionate about the importance of the classroom as a learning environment. When students are distracted by the technology cloud, learning is impeded. We must provide leadership in this rapidly changing environment. Guiding our students toward an appropriate use of these devices is becoming part of our work. We must take the task seriously. It may well come as a revelation to many of our students that at times, the best thing to do with a computer is to turn it off. If we can teach them that, we may have taught them one of the most important lessons in life. ➡

Dr. Mark Ruff,
Department of History

This year, I was asked to teach the large lecture sections of History A111 and A112, required survey courses that are part of the core curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences. These lectures typically contain between 120 and 200 students and take place in large lecture halls with banked seating. Before I started the semester, colleagues had informed me that maintaining discipline in such an impersonal setting can pose challenges for even the most experienced professors in the department.

As a result, I imposed a policy that banned all use of electronic devices - cell phones, cameras, etc. Students wishing to use a laptop had to consult with me beforehand and agree to use these computers only for taking notes: any students using laptops for IMing or websurfing would suffer a penalty in their grade and have their laptop privileges suspended.

The result was largely positive, but still imperfect. Most students complied with the laptop policy, although I had to reprimand several students after class for using laptops for other purposes. Some students reported to me that classmates in the back rows were spending considerable amounts of time IMing with friends and disrupting the flow of the lectures. It is simply not always possible in a circular, tiered and darkened auditorium to detect students using their cell phones to send IMs.

A possible solution - having the TAs in the class sit in the back tiers, varying their seating, in the hopes that their presence will act as a deterence for potential violators.

Dr. Emmanual Uwalaka,
Department of Political Science

One policy I have in my classes is to prevent the disruptive use of cell phones. I have on my syllabus that during class, cell phones must be turned off or to vibrate mode.

I do, however, give students the option to step outside the classroom, if there were a need to respond to a call. Rarely do I see students step outside to answer calls.

Some students bring their laptops to take lecture notes. I do not have a problem with this. However, I had a problem with a student last semester and another one this semester. The problem was that these students were not paying attention during the lectures. They were either busy with text messages or looking at pictures. When a student with a laptop refrains from looking at me during a lecture, I tend to ask him/her questions on the lecture. Most of the time, the student will look at me and say, "I am sorry, do you mean me?" I would say, "I asked you a question." The student would ask, "I am sorry, what is the question?" This was a frequent occurrence last semester with my first student. One can understand that the time I use to correct the inattentiveness of such a student in class is not only disruptive for the entire class but irritating to the instructor. We did talk in my office. Student performance was better for the rest of the semester. ➴

ITS and Reinert CTE Form Blackboard Users Group
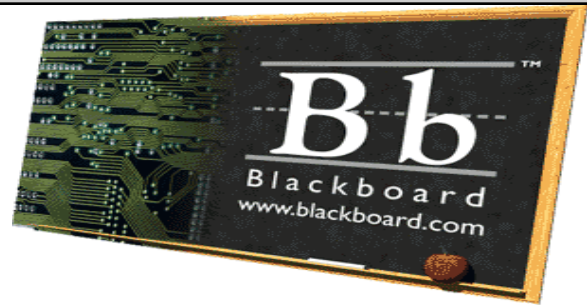
Information Technology Services and the Reinert CTE invite faculty and staff to participate in a Blackboard CE users group with the following goals:

- **To provide a mechanism for faculty and staff to provide input on the Blackboard system, and other new LMS systems**

- **To share teaching strategies and techniques for using Blackboard CE**

- **To help the users community develop a common set of best practices**

Meetings will be held monthly, with the first one held on both ends of campus.

For more information, please contact Sandy Gambill at Gambill@slu.edu

MAY EVENT

Keynote Speaker:

Hemla Singaravelu, PhD.,

Associate Professor of

Counseling and Family Therapy

at Saint Louis University and co-editor of:

A Handbook for Counseling International Students in the United States

The handbook will be available for purchase and signing after the event.

The event will also feature a panel of international students discussing their experiences.

For more information or to register, contact the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence at 977-3944 or visit the website at

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