

Supporting Focused Attention in the Classroom

The following “best practices” have been suggested by colleagues as ways to help sustain more focused student attention during class, across a range of instructor policies about students’ use of laptops or devices in the classroom.

If you discourage or disallow the use of laptops or devices, these methods may help to relieve student anxiety by supporting their notetaking during class and also by ensuring that important points are recorded and available for their review. Please be reminded that if the university-level Office of Disability Services has granted a student an accommodation that includes using a laptop or device, you must allow it.

If you generally allow the use of laptops or devices in the classroom, some of these methods may be useful for encouraging students to engage more actively with the discussion in the classroom, rather than merely transcribing it verbatim or becoming distracted by the internet and other uses of their devices.

Sharing slides, outlines, videos, or notes

- * Posting slides, outlines, or worksheets for taking notes (“guided notes”) before class
- * Posting slides after class or after TA review sessions
- * Creating short videos for students to watch before class, like a “flipped” classroom
- * Posting short review videos after each week’s classes
- * Asking TAs to create a unified set of notes to share with all students

Class recordings and group office hours

- * Making class recordings available (contact lawav@columbia.edu)
- * Making yourself or TAs more available for questions, via “open” or group office hours

Dynamic classrooms

- * Calling on more students, in more rapid succession (the “popcorn” method)
- * Varying the nature of interactions, e.g., “think-pair-share” or group work

Supporting listening, reflection, and notetaking

- * Guiding notetaking through verbal cues (“the key point here is...”)
- * Allowing pauses for thoughtful notetaking
- * Allowing a mini-break for reflection and notetaking after a classroom exercise
- * Setting ground rules such as “no typing when a fellow student is talking”
- * Allowing more liberal use of devices during specified periods (“digital breaks”)

Setting expectations

- * Stating your policy about laptops or devices in the syllabus
- * Sharing why you have adopted the policy, recognizing the tradeoffs
- * Highlighting how you and your TAs intend to support notetaking and learning