

Using laptops in class harms academic performance, study warns

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Researchers say students who use computers score half a grade lower than those who write notes

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At times, it can seem as if the march of technology in higher education is unstoppable. But using a laptop in class can significantly damage students' academic performance, a study warns.

The paper, based on an analysis of the grades of about 5,600 students at a private US liberal arts college, found that using a laptop appeared to harm the grades of male and low-performing students most significantly.

The two US academics who conducted the research found that students who used laptops, typically in "laptop required" or "laptop optional" classes, scored between 0.27 and 0.38 grade points lower on a four-point grade point average scale than those who took notes using pen and paper.

When converted to an alphabetical scale, the results meant that laptop-using students were scoring roughly half a grade lower – proving the difference between, for example, a B+ (3.3) and an A- (3.7), or a C+ (2.3) and a B- (2.7).

Authors Richard Patterson, assistant professor of economics at the United States Military Academy at West Point, near New York, and Robert Patterson, associate professor of finance at Westminster College, in Utah, conclude that use of laptops in class “significantly worsens academic performance”. Their findings, [published in the journal *Economics of Education Review*](#) last month, emerged as academics increasingly permit or even encourage students to use laptops in lectures or the classroom.

While the authors were unable to definitively say why laptop use caused a “significant negative effect in grades”, the authors believe that classroom “cyber-slacking” plays a major role in lower achievement, with wi-fi-enabled computers [providing numerous distractions](#) for students.

“Students believe that laptops will improve their productivity but the opposite occurs,” Richard Patterson told *Times Higher Education*. He explained that this was “either due to the superiority of pen and paper, the unforeseen influence of distractions, or some other unseen factor”.

Other students are probably aware that using a laptop will limit their productivity “but choose to do so anyway, perhaps due to self-control problems”, he added.

Dr Patterson said that his findings had pushed him to examine the laptop policies for his own classes at West Point.

“My new classroom policy is that laptops and tablets are not allowed,” he said. “I only allow a student to use a laptop or tablet in the classroom if he or she can make a strong case that his or her learning will be improved by doing so.”

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