

Do Laptops and Tablets Undermine our Ability to Learn?

The hidden cost of digital devices in the classroom

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When I was growing up, I thought my dad could fix anything. His toolbox in the garage held a hammer, drill, and pliers, assorted screwdrivers, wrenches, vise grips, and files, along with a range of drill bits, nails, nuts, bolts, and screws, all neatly arranged in separate compartments. One lesson I learned was to use the right tool for the job.

But now, dazzled by the latest technology, people are using the same electronic device for almost everything. Certainly, there's a gain in convenience, but too often a corresponding loss in effectiveness. If all you have is a hammer, suddenly everything looks like a nail.

Today's [parents](#) and educators feel compelled to pay big money to equip their children with the latest laptop or tablet. Some well-meaning high school and college administrators now provide tablets to all entering students, believing that these new tools will help them achieve greater academic success. But will they? They just might be undermining it.

Learning requires focused attention while digital devices come with built-in distractions. I remember sitting in the second row of a graduate counseling class. The professor must have thought the students in the front row were taking notes on their laptops, but I could see them surfing the Internet, checking their [Facebook](#) pages, even watching a hockey game.

And even if students *are* actually taking notes on these electronic devices, they don't learn as well. According to a recent Princeton University study, students who take notes on laptops don't remember nearly as much as those taking notes in longhand (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014).

Our electronic devices give us new tools but we still need to choose the right tool for the job. In class, the right tools just might be pencil and paper.

Reference

Mueller, P. A. & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological Science*, 25, 1159-1168.