Managing mobile in the classroom

What's the problem?

Students, and let's be honest, all of us, have daydreamed, doodled, or otherwise not paid full attention in class or meetings long before laptops were around. However, most instructors feel that laptop use is different. Why?

- Students can't learn unless they are paying attention or otherwise engaged in what they are learning. Laptops and cell phones compete with us for our students' attention in class.

- The presence of laptops creates a physical barrier between students and the instructor. The instructor usually can't see what the student is doing on the laptop.

- Laptops are a particularly strong distraction because they contain instant access to multiple sources of information and activity such as email, the Internet, games, calendars, etc.

- Such access encourages multitasking by students, which is even being called "continuous partial attention." This type of thinking is not conducive to deeper critical or reflective thought.

- Many believe behaviors such as texting are addictive.

What are the benefits?

Even with its distractions, let us not forget some of the numerous benefits of laptop and wireless technology and why they have become so common in universities.

- Laptops and computer technology have allowed us to automate routine tasks. Many students find it useful to take notes electronically and organize all their course materials in one place.

- Students with certain disabilities or who are English-language learners benefit greatly from using their laptops to take notes or from specialized software on their laptops.
• Laptops and wireless technologies allow students to immediately access information relevant to class topics.

• Laptops can be used for in-class group work, clicker questions, to work through interactive web resources, to contribute to class discussion boards, or even comment on a lecture back-channel such as a twitter feed.

Strategies for managing and using laptops in the classroom

The following ideas have come from VARIOUS faculty members and other online sources. If you have additional ideas to share, please let us know.

• Think through your own stance on laptop/phone use in class and share this with your students. As a society we are creating new manners for the use of technology and many believe it is part of our job to help shape and teach students these new rules.

• Create syllabus language and policies for laptop use and for cell phone use (depending upon your class, these may be separate policies).
  o Create consequences for violating the policies; giving weekly participation points, taking points off a final grade, asking students to leave the class, or having a separate "professionalism" grade that includes such behavior.
  o Ask students to collaboratively create a social contract at the beginning of class. Use this as the basis of your discipline and then encourage students to gently remind each other of the policies.
  o Create a "laptop zone" in the back of the room and/or ask student to leave cell phones at the door (some faculty members disagree with these policies)
  o Sample policy statement:

Use of Technology in the Classroom
Access to the Internet can be a valuable aid to the classroom learning environment. Students are encouraged to use laptops, smart phones, and other devices in order to explore concepts related to course discussions and topics. Students are discouraged from using technology in ways that distract from the learning community (e.g. Facebook, texting, work for other classes, etc.) and if found doing so, will be asked to leave the
classroom for the day and will not get credit for attendance that class period.

3. Students must respect the classroom environment. In class, all cell phones and electronic devices shall be turned off. Unless specifically directed by the instructor, students shall refrain from sending email and instant messages, or from engaging in other activities (reading non-course materials, engaging in private conversations and so on) that disrespect the classroom environment and learning conditions for others.

- Meet individually with students who routinely violate your policies. Point out why this is a problem and suggest ways to help them focus in class. For example, "How can we solve this? Why don't you try not bringing your laptop for a few weeks and see how it goes?"

- Consider what will be appropriate "screen up" time and "screen down" time in your class and share this explicitly with your students.

- Set aside time for "screen down" discussion, then allow time afterwards to take notes.

- Walk around the classroom as much as possible, look at your students' laptop screens.

- If laptops are not an integral part of your class, ask students to state what they will be using their laptop for in class and check up on them.

- Get feedback from students about laptop/phone use. What do they think is appropriate and why? Ask them to document their own attention during class and how it influences what they've learned.

- Create Policies or Advice for Students to help teach them appropriate technology use

- Allow only a few (rotating) students per class session to take notes to be shared with the entire class.

- If students wish to record classes, have them ask you in advance. For special needs requests, ask them to create a contract of how these recordings should be used.