Restricting Mobile Device Use in Introductory Philosophy Classrooms[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Abstract: A restricted-use mobile device policy for introductory philosophy classrooms is presented and defended. The policy allows students to use devices only during open periods announced by the professor and is based on recent empirical findings on the effects of in-class mobile device use. These results suggest devices are generally detrimental to student learning, though they have targeted benefits for specific tasks. The policy is defended via a discussion of the ethical considerations surrounding device use, a discussion of the policy’s benefits, and responses to potential objections. Avenues for future research are suggested at the conclusion of the discussion.

Keywords: Classroom technology, introductory classes, mobile device use, teaching with technology

**Introduction**

Several recent studies suggest that student use of mobile devices (i.e., laptops, smartphones, and tablets) in class has a generally negative effect on student performance, whether or not such devices are connected to the Internet. Simultaneously, there is evidence suggesting that specific in-class activities benefit from mobile device use. Unfortunately, while there is a consensus that empirical findings on the effects of in-class device use should inform policies governing their use, there has not been significant scholarship outlining what such policies should look like. This lack of scholarship has led to three issues I consider relevant for the current discussion.

First, insofar as the subject has been treated in formal scholarship, the discussion has been narrowly focused. McCreary[[2]](#footnote-2) and Yamamoto,[[3]](#footnote-3) for example, address laptop use in law school. Spallek and von Bergman[[4]](#footnote-4) discuss mobile device use in dental school. Given that particular disciplines have unique aims best addressed in discipline specific contexts, this focus is largely appropriate. However, narrowing the focus of our discussion will be maximally beneficial for philosophers only if the literature explores the impact of mobile device use within the philosophy classroom.

To date, the literature on philosophy teaching has not addressed this issue outside of narrow concerns like the use of web-based assignments,[[5]](#footnote-5) or using computers to teach logic through computer programming.[[6]](#footnote-6) If we are to be scholars of philosophical teaching and learning, there must be scholarship with which we can engage. The absence peer-reviewed scholarship regarding best practices for how to incorporate seemingly ubiquitous devices like laptops, smartphones, and tablets hinders our ability to create beneficial learning environments for our students.

The second issue is that there has been no attempt in available literature to develop and defend a policy for introductory students. Given that introductory students, at least within philosophy, tend to be first year students acclimating to college and its attendant expectations, such students may be an audience in need of meaningful direction. For example, philosophy professors tend to be more precise in their expectations regarding citations with introductory students not because we believe that upper-level undergraduates are not subject to the same requirements, but rather because we believe that introductory students are in greater need of specific guidance. Developing a precise policy for introductory students may serve a similar role.

The final issue raised by extant scholarship on in-class device use is the focus on large lectures, rather than smaller classroom settings in which philosophy is typically taught. In addition to addressing disciplinary practices, authors like McCreary, Yamamoto, or Spallek and von Bergman may also be viewed as focusing their arguments even more narrowly, restricting their respective arguments’ appropriateness to not only the discipline, but also the mode of delivery (e.g., large lectures common in legal education). Similarly, studies by Aguilar-Roca, Williams, and O’Dowd;[[7]](#footnote-7) Fried;[[8]](#footnote-8) Kay & Lauricella;[[9]](#footnote-9) and Sana, Weston, and Cepeda[[10]](#footnote-10) present findings from large lectures. Such lectures, with their attendant graduate TAs, may be a staple of larger universities with robust graduate programs, but the bulk of instruction provided by philosophers seems to take place elsewhere in honors sections, liberal arts colleges, sections taught by graduate students, and so forth.

Thus, it is my goal to develop and defend a policy that addresses these shortcomings. Specifically, I shall defend a restricted mobile device policy for introductory philosophy classrooms, which I take to be the trinity of Introduction to Philosophy, Introduction to Ethics, and Introduction to Logic. Briefly, the policy disallows mobile devices except during specific open periods designated by the instructor. This policy aims to maximize the benefits mobile devices provide during specific activities while mitigating their negative effects during the remainder of class.

This article advances the literature in two ways. First, it provides a broad-based foundation within formal, peer-reviewed literature for further discussion of issues surrounding mobile device use in philosophy classrooms. Second, it provides a specific policy for mobile device use within an introductory philosophy classroom, including discussion of empirical and ethical considerations that justify the policy.

Like authors who have discussed related policies in different contexts, it is my hope that this discussion will be applicable in some form beyond its intended scope; though I deal exclusively with introductory classrooms, it stands to reason that the considerations herein will become more applicable as courses become more similar to introductory philosophy classrooms. For example, parts of the policy or its justifications will likely be able to inform similar policies for upper level epistemology classrooms or large introductory lectures because of the overlap between those circumstances and the environment in an introductory classroom.

Also, it is worthwhile to note that though a number of informal sources exist discussing mobile device policies, they are typically general discussions that often lack significant grounding in formal literature. For example, a post[[11]](#footnote-11) on the widely read *Daily Nous* blog prompts discussion after referencing an article[[12]](#footnote-12) from the *Washington Post*’s *Post Everything* blog, which itself discusses the decision to ban laptops in the classroom following an experience in a graduate lecture given by a professor of health policy. Between the two posts, only one peer-reviewed article is mentioned (Sana et al.’s paper on multitasking, referenced throughout this discussion), and a review of both posts and their attendant comments paints a picture of decisions based on anecdotes and personal experience, encompassing a range of philosophy (and non-philosophy) courses at various levels.

Some informal posts do somewhat better. For example, a recent post on the Washington University Teaching Center’s blog presents a brief literature review[[13]](#footnote-13) discussing some of the advantages and disadvantages of laptop use, but provides no analysis of how such findings ought to be incorporated into classroom policies on mobile device use. Such lack of direction seems proper, given the wide range of disciplines likely to engage with a university-wide teaching center.

While such forums can be fruitful informal avenues of discussion and even sources of information, they serve a different purpose from formal literature and the debates that can occur within such literature. The plural of anecdote, as they say, is not data, and the conclusions that can be drawn and defended following a formal consideration of peer-reviewed literature may differ significantly from conclusions drawn in informal settings either in the nature of the conclusion itself or the justification for holding said conclusion.

**Ethical Considerations for Mobile Device Policies**

For the proposed policy to be justifiable, it must be sensitive to ethical considerations that we face as instructors. This includes adequately incorporating empirical findings from research into the effects of in-class device use. This section outlines ethical concerns that a mobile device policy should take into account.

The Utility of In-Class Mobile Device Use

Existing scholarship on in-class device use has focused almost exclusively on the positive and negative effects of such use. This is unsurprising, given that what we allow in class is the direct result of the utility of such allowance. On balance, mobile device use has been found to be generally detrimental to in-class performance, though specific benefits have been found when using devices to perform particular tasks. For example, students can use mobile devices to take notes,[[14]](#footnote-14) follow along with lecture slides,[[15]](#footnote-15) collaborate via platforms like Google Docs,[[16]](#footnote-16) utilize discipline-specific software,[[17]](#footnote-17) get clarification on minor issues via chat[[18]](#footnote-18) or web search,[[19]](#footnote-19) and view videos.[[20]](#footnote-20) Laptops have been shown to have a positive effect when incorporated into active learning projects,[[21]](#footnote-21) and their use in such contexts leads to further beneficial laptop use by students.[[22]](#footnote-22) Further, mobile devices can be effective tools for addressing ADA accommodations,[[23]](#footnote-23) though as I shall discuss below, such use may complicate one’s mobile device policy.

Many of the drawbacks associated with in-class device use are the result of multitasking. Specifically, drawbacks tend to be the result of what might be termed off-task multitasking, or off-tasking. This is unsurprising, given that one study found that a majority of students sometimes, frequently, or very frequently performed personal web searches (71%), sent personal emails (59%), or checked Facebook (61%) during class.[[24]](#footnote-24) Additional studies found that approximately 17% of students are off-tasking at any given time,[[25]](#footnote-25) spend approximately 42% of their time off-tasking during class,[[26]](#footnote-26) and spend more time using devices for off-task behavior than on-task behavior.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Off-tasking with mobile devices has been shown to directly correlate with poorer classroom performance.[[28]](#footnote-28) Additionally, students find lectures less clear and believe they understand material less well.[[29]](#footnote-29) These negative effects are especially acute with respect to students’ ability to answer complex, knowledge application-style questions[[30]](#footnote-30) and result in a decrease in student performance of about 5%, or half a letter grade.[[31]](#footnote-31) These effects come despite the fact that, though experience multitasking does not correlate with successful off-tasking,[[32]](#footnote-32) students believe they are less likely to be affected by off-tasking’s negative effects as time passes.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Finally, the negative effects of multitasking, especially off-tasking, extend beyond the student engaged in such behavior. Most students are distracted by others’ device use,[[34]](#footnote-34) and, as Sana, Weston, and Cepeda have found, students distracted by others’ device use ultimately perform worse than their multitasking colleagues, perhaps because the multitasking student is better able to time off-task events for moments of perceived unimportance.[[35]](#footnote-35)

As stated at the beginning of this section, we allow or disallow certain items in class largely because of the utility they provide. Our sensitivity to the utility provided by mobile devices means at least two things for our present purposes.

First, we should acknowledge both the generally negative effect mobile devices have on student performance as well as the benefit such devices have on specific tasks like collaborative projects and active learning.

Second, we should seek to develop a policy that allows us to capture the benefits of mobile devices while avoiding the costs. This may occur in one of several ways. We may find there are other tools that preserve most of the benefits while eliminating the associated costs (e.g., requiring a pen and paper for notes). Alternatively, there may be circumstances where the positive impact of mobile devices can be maximized. In other words, it is not enough to concentrate on only the negative general effect mobile devices have, since we need not commit ourselves to an all-or-nothing policy.

Respect for Student Autonomy

Though introductory students tend to be first year students new to the college experience, they are at least nominally adults and deserve to be treated as such. First year students may lack the maturity and experience possessed by graduate and advanced undergraduate students, but we nonetheless have a duty to respect our students’ choices, insofar as these choices do not wrong others.

Furthermore, it is our responsibility as instructors to inculcate good scholastic habits in our students. This task is more difficult when we remove our students’ abilities to make decisions for themselves, substituting helicopter parenting with ‘helicopter professoring’. As McCreary rightly notes, we have a duty to avoid paternalism and create a supportive environment where we foster students’ abilities to self-direct in beneficial ways.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Respect for Others

Our respect for students and their choices, for good or ill, must be balanced with the effect those choices have on other members of the classroom community. As noted previously, there is evidence to suggest that the negative effects of mobile device use are greater when one is distracted by another’s use, especially if one is not using a mobile device oneself. As Yamamoto notes, it is crucial to recognize that those who are distracted in this manner are not at fault for their distraction.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Essentially, multitasking students not only harm those distracted by their actions, they also cause more harm to others than they do themselves. Whether this harm is caused to a fellow classmate who misses a key point or a professor who stumbles through an important concept is, in a sense, unimportant; the key point is that causing such harm represents, perhaps unintentionally, a lack of respect towards members of the classroom community toward which we have a duty of care.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Attention to the Causes of Multitasking and Our Role in Encouraging or Discouraging Behavior

Developing an effective policy requires us to have an understanding of the causes of on-task and off-task multitasking. Students multitask for a number of reasons.

Unsurprisingly, on-tasking is typically the result of the perceived benefits of such behavior. Students follow along with electronic copies of slides or take notes electronically because they believe that some benefit is conferred.[[39]](#footnote-39) This perceived benefit may not result in an actual benefit, however. For example, though many students take notes electronically because of the perceived benefit, studies on the efficacy of electronic note taking are decidedly mixed, with some studies suggesting a benefit,[[40]](#footnote-40) while others suggest either no benefit[[41]](#footnote-41) or an actual cost[[42]](#footnote-42) to such techniques. Regardless of the actual benefit (or lack thereof), if students believe a strategy provides a benefit, they will generally act accordingly.

Though on-tasking can be explained by a straightforward appeal to perceived benefits, off-tasking is caused by a number of factors, including past experiences with devices in a non-academic setting;[[43]](#footnote-43) poor self-regulation;[[44]](#footnote-44) and the existence of unconscious, automatic habits.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Students also off-task because of the temporality of their actions’ costs and benefits. We regularly discount the effects of far off events when compared to more immediate events. Thus, we regularly choose immediate rewards, even if they carry greater future costs.[[46]](#footnote-46) The rewards of off-tasking are often immediate, unlike the perceived benefits of avoiding in-class distraction.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Finally, students regularly off-task out of boredom.[[48]](#footnote-48) While boredom is not a factor that affects only students’ use of mobile devices, it raises an important point about such policies. We cannot expect students to be fully engaged in class if we do not make class engaging. This is not a call for classes to become rock concerts; there are some topics in every subject, ours included, that are as important as they are dry. When faced with a choice between being informative versus being entertaining, we have an obligation to choose the former.

It is important to note, when developing a mobile device policy, that professors have the ability to influence many of the factors listed above. If students engage in on-tasking out of a sense of perceived benefit, we may wish to create an environment where students are more likely to perceive actual benefits and act accordingly, while simultaneously discouraging behaviors that seem beneficial, but are not. If multitasking is the result of habitual actions or poor self-control, we may wish to create an environment where it is easier for students to control themselves or inculcate beneficial habits. If off-tasking follows from discounting future costs relative to proximate benefits, we may wish to make some negative effects more immediate. These possibilities share an important commonality. Whatever policy is developed, it should allow us as instructors to help students develop beneficial habits and break harmful habits.

The Community Subject to the Policy

A consistent theme throughout these ethical considerations is the idea that each classroom constitutes its own learning community. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that the policies governing each classroom will differ based on factors like discipline, level, and learning environment. This is why my discussion centers on a mobile device policy for introductory philosophy classrooms, as opposed to other environments that may wish to implement a mobile device policy.

Sensitivity to one’s community also explains why policies developed elsewhere may not be imported wholesale to the introductory philosophy classroom. For example, the difference between McCreary’s and Yamamoto’s law students or Spallek and von Bergmann’s dental students and introductory philosophy students are enormous and often used to justify their respective policies. McCreary’s justification, for example, rests in part on the difference in maturity between first year undergraduates and second year law students.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Even so, these policies draw out two important considerations for every learning community. First, any device policy must be in the best interest of students and their education, rather than a matter of professorial preference. They are a means of preparing students for their futures, which may differ significantly from our pasts.[[50]](#footnote-50) Second, it is our responsibility to create an environment of respect. If the negative effects of device use are disrespectful, our policy should be sensitive to this fact.[[51]](#footnote-51)

**A Restricted Use Mobile Device Policy**

The policy I defend is straightforward. Phones may not be used at any time during class; they should be silenced and put away. Tablets and laptops are similarly prohibited, except during open laptop periods during specific tasks, like group writing projects. The instructor should announce to students when laptops are permitted and when they should be put away. During open periods, students are encouraged to remain on task and avoid off-task behavior like checking Facebook or completing work for other courses. Students caught using mobile devices during closed periods receive an escalating penalty (e.g., a warning for a first offense and a grade reduction for subsequent offenses).

I should state explicitly that this policy is intended to govern mobile device use regardless of whether the devices are connected to the Internet or not. As I discussed above, many of the positive and negative effects of device use do not depend on the device being connected to Wi-Fi or mobile data; students may use devices to take notes, play games, and distract one another whether there is a network connection or not.

This policy addresses competing pressures students and faculty face when deciding whether and how to integrate mobile devices into the classroom. The practicalities of the college classroom unfortunately make fully satisfying the previously discussed ethical concerns impossible; this policy involves tradeoffs. In this section, I outline the benefits of the proposed policy and consider potential objections.

Benefits of the Policy

*Benefit: The policy respects the effects of mobile device use on others.*

Given the findings, discussed above, that device use has a disproportionate effect on non-users, who are not at fault, a policy that favors non-users is only fair. When crafting policies and similar procedures, we often do so in a way that favors the faultless over those who are at fault.

Furthermore, when device use is permitted, this policy provides an even playing field. During collaborative assignments, for example, the active learning that accompanies device use will likely result in a significant decrease in off-tasking.[[52]](#footnote-52) The nature of open period activities are such that students are likely to take advantage of mobile technology, increasing the probability that all students will be using mobile devices. If one cause of distraction is the fact that one is not using one’s own device, allowing use only during periods where students are highly likely to use their own device addresses this concern.

*Benefit: The policy maximizes benefits while minimizing costs.*

The proposed policy creates an environment where the benefits of device use are maximized, while minimizing negative effects. This is accomplished in three ways.

First, a professor who announces an open period presumably breaks from standard policy because of a clear benefit offered by mobile devices. For example, my Introduction to Ethics course includes an activity designed to motivate both the fact/value distinction and moral nihlism where students are asked to provide all of the relevant facts of the Lincoln assassination. Since it is unlikely that students have a deep enough understanding of Lincoln’s assassination to provide a complete description absent a web search, they are allowed access to online resources like Google and Wikipedia. By allowing this access, the “complete” descriptions provided by students become more impactful after I point out that no group has included claims like “Lincoln’s assassination was bad” or “It was wrong for Booth to shoot Lincoln.” Such omissions seem to carry more weight when students have more resources at their disposal, which in turn better motivates our discussion of the relevant concepts.

In such cases, it seems reasonable that the benefits of mobile devices have been maximized, while their costs have been minimized. The benefits gained by students (e.g., understanding key concepts) are the direct result of device use, and the active nature of the activity minimizes the risk that students will engage in off-tasking that distracts themselves or others. As the professor, I can attend to the tone of discussions, bringing the class back together as groups begin to veer off task. Thus, there is a clear benefit with a limited risk of negative effects.

Second, periods where devices are not permitted are periods where alternative tools exist, realizing benefits that either could be gained via device use or are not clearly provided by mobile devices. For example, students frequently use laptops to follow lecture slides, but laptops are not the only way students may do so; instructors may provide handouts that allow students to follow along without a laptop. Similarly, some students take notes electronically, though, as noted above, the efficacy of such strategies is inconclusive. Given the lack of a clear benefit provided by electronic note-taking and the clear drawbacks of device use generally, there is no compelling reason to permit their use as a note-taking tool. Thus, disallowing device use in such cases means that the benefits of each activity can be preserved without the attendant distraction of off-task device use.

Finally, the policy provides an avenue for direct negative feedback that can counter the immediate rewards of off-tasking. By instituting a penalty like grade reduction, students who are tempted to off-task need not weigh distant impacts on exam performance or essay quality against the immediate benefits of off-tasking; the choice is between a small, immediate benefit and a large, immediate penalty. Given these options, students would be less likely to engage in off-task behavior.

The policy’s goal of utility maximization is in keeping with many who have studied mobile device use both generally[[53]](#footnote-53) and in their specific discipline.[[54]](#footnote-54) Generally, outright bans are not encouraged in discussions of device use in other disciplines in part because of the specific advantages offered by mobile devices. The policy maximizes circumstances where devices can be used productively while remaining sensitive to situations where mobile devices interfere with learning.

*Benefit: The policy creates a community of learners preparing for their future.*

The proposed policy recognizes important features of the community to which it applies. Introductory students are typically first year students, and such students are often in the process of developing their sense of self. This includes preferences regarding academic mobile device use.[[55]](#footnote-55) Students typically arrive with what Aagard calls a non-academic relationship with computers;[[56]](#footnote-56) many students are used to devices as non-academic tools and have not cultivated habits allowing their effective use in classroom settings.

The policy allows students to begin exploring the benefits of mobile technology through targeted activities while preventing students from giving in to off-task temptation when non-academic habits are likely to assert themselves. Thus, the policy not only fosters effective habits, it also creates a community of respect for fellow students by discouraging distractive device use.

Potential Objections and Replies

*Objection:* Rather than ban mobile devices completely for large periods of time, one could institute a laptop-free zone, where students who wish to avoid mobile devices and students who wish to use devices could do so without users distracting non-users.[[57]](#footnote-57)

*Reply:* Laptop-free zones, like those proposed by McCreary,[[58]](#footnote-58) typically divide the room into spaces where laptops may be used freely and areas where laptops are both prohibited and unable to be seen by students in said sections. For example, McCreary banned laptops from the first two rows of her lecture, while Aguilar-Roca, Williams, and O’Dowd banned mobile devices in the rightmost third of their lecture hall.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Unfortunately, there is no empirical research on the efficacy of such zones in smaller classrooms. If such data existed and could be compared to the policy I consider here, the objection might be settled neatly. Despite the absence of such data, however, I believe the balance of evidence suggests that an open period policy will be more beneficial than a zoned policy in smaller classrooms like the typical introductory classroom. This is for two reasons that are part and parcel of any zoned policy.

First, separating students into laptop permitted and laptop free zones does not eliminate a device’s ability to distract those students around a particular device. As research discussed above suggests, most students are unable to avoid the temptation to go off task. This is especially important when considering the fraction of students that could be distracted by any one user’s off-task behavior. For example, suppose that off-task use would be distracting to the four students nearest to a computer screen. In a large lecture of 250 students, this particular instance of off-tasking would distract about 1.5% of the students. But in a smaller classroom of about 30 students, such behavior would impact about 13% of the students. In short, allowing laptops in all circumstances, even in a portion of the room, is an invitation for distraction. Given the sizes of most philosophy classrooms, any particular instance of distraction is liable to impact a greater fraction of the class than it would in a large lecture.

The ability for devices, even in a zoned classroom, to have a disproportionate effect on student distraction is closely related to the second reason I doubt zoned policies are a better alternative. Students with unrestricted access to mobile devices perform worse academically, even if they are segregated according to whether they use a device. In Aguilar-Roca, et al.’s study of laptop free zones, paper note takers outperformed their predicted exam scores, while electronic note takers underperformed, leading to a statistically significant difference in final grade distribution between device users and non-users.[[60]](#footnote-60)

*Objection:* Suppose a student qualifies for accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), guaranteeing the ability to use a device in class. If devices are generally prohibited, the student’s disability will be exposed in a way that is unethical, illegal, or both.

*Reply:* There are a number of invisible disabilities for which the ADA grants similarly expository accommodations. For example, students with PTSD may qualify for service animals. However, such accommodations would not require the allowance of pets generally, even though this restriction would clearly identify a student as having an otherwise invisible disability. Mobile devices may be viewed similarly when it is in the student’s best interest to have a device but in the class’s best interest to prohibit them generally. Exposure in such circumstances is relevantly similar to exposure that results from allowing service animals.

However, if we grant that a particular accommodation exposing a student’s disability is unethical or illegal, the proper response would be to suspend the policy for that particular class. We regularly suspend policies when circumstances warrant, but it does not follow from such cases that the policy in question should not generally apply. For example, a small class taught in a large lecture hall might benefit from a general policy requiring all students to sit near the front. But if there is a student in a wheelchair who must sit in the rear of the hall because of the room’s design, it seems obvious that the policy in question should be suspended for this class; doing otherwise would unfairly single out the student requiring an accommodation. However, the general policy of requiring students to sit near the front remains practical for most cases, and nothing about these particular circumstances changes that fact.

*Objection:* Allowing any device unfairly privileges students with mobile devices. For example, the benefits of open periods may depend on internet access, and students may either lack a device with Wi-Fi or be forced to use cellular data networks, which can be prohibitively expensive. Thus, allowing mobile devices specifically when they will provide a pedagogical benefit puts students who are unable to use such devices at an unfair disadvantage.[[61]](#footnote-61)

*Reply:* Much like the preceding objection, I grant that there may be individual circumstances where suspension of the policy is warranted. If the number of students who own mobile devices is high enough that a particular activity could not successfully be completed, this would be reason enough to not engage in that particular activity. For example, if there are not enough device-owning students to complete the Lincoln’s assassination activity discussed earlier without having a group that cannot access online resources, the instructor should not use that particular activity. Furthermore, if the number of device-owning students is sufficiently low as to make most activities impractical or significantly disadvantage a class of students, there may be good reason to suspend the policy or adopt an alternative in such cases.

Ultimately, I find objections of this sort unpersuasive for two reasons. First, we may find ways to modify activities such that all students are able to take advantage of the benefits offered by mobile devices. For example, if a quarter of the students in a class lack mobile devices, we might modify a one-person exercise so that it is completed by groups of two or three. Second, like the ADA case discussed above, individual circumstances that might warrant modification or suspension of the policy do not impact the advisability of such policies generally. Mobile devices are nearly ubiquitous at most colleges and universities, with many sponsoring laptop programs guaranteeing that all students have access to such devices.

If an instructor creating a policy for their class finds themselves in a different situation, they may wish to adjust accordingly; the necessity of such adjustments are endorsed throughout this manuscript. But when considering a policy that will be as broadly applicable as possible in an introductory philosophy classroom, it seems reasonable that the default be an assumption that there will be near-universal access to mobile devices.

*Objection:* Some students benefit from legitimate device use in contexts where the policy would prohibit them. As has been noted,[[62]](#footnote-62) the negative effects the policy would have on these students must be taken into account. Though it would be fair to penalize students acting inappropriately, preventing a benefit students would otherwise gain merely because they are members of a particular group (i.e., device users) would be unfair.

*Response:*  The duty to avoid penalizing individuals for group membership is *prima facie* at best. This duty can be overridden here for five reasons.

First, if we take responsible device use to be never or rarely engaging in off-tasking, the number of such users is small. Recall that only 27% of Kay and Lauricella’s subjects never or rarely performed off-task web searches,[[63]](#footnote-63) while 32.6% of Barry et al.’s subjects never or rarely checked email.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Second, banning devices only after off-task use inappropriately casts the professor as policeman. The degree of vigilance required for the proposed policy is minimal. Asking instructors to note when devices are used off-task, however, is not. If we must be on the lookout for off-tasking, our attention is diverted from our ultimate responsibility to provide quality instruction. Additionally, the philosophy classroom is frequently a community of individuals on the same team, trying to answer common questions. If the professor is always on the lookout, the feeling of being on the same side may break down.

Third, the standard classroom layout would make enforcement prohibitively difficult. Instructors at the front of such rooms are unable to view student screens. If banning off-task students requires us to do the impossible, such a strategy must be abandoned.

Fourth, the distractive effect mobile devices have on non-users would not be removed. Thus, allowing device use on the grounds that preemptive bans are unfair would penalize non-users. So, we would be faced with a dilemma. Either users or non-users must be penalized. Because effective analogue tools like pen and paper are available and significantly reduce distraction, the ultimate utility of favoring device users will be outweighed by favoring non-users.

Finally, this objection depends on the claim that students use devices in order to gain educational benefits. However, the literature suggests that this is not always obviously the case. For example, electronic note taking appears to be more of a matter of convenience than of learning enhancement.[[65]](#footnote-65) Though the study in question’s qualitative responses were relatively small (*n*=25), 44% of respondents stated that they took electronic notes out of convenience, while 28% did so because they believed it enhanced their learning. Indeed, most introductory students are unlikely to have established electronic note taking strategies. Though 95% of high school students regularly use mobile devices in the classroom,[[66]](#footnote-66) a minority use these devices for note taking.[[67]](#footnote-67)

*Objection:* Respecting student autonomy requires respecting their decisions, even if those decisions are ultimately detrimental to their learning. Students should either be allowed to use mobile devices in class or having meaningful input on how and when they can be used.

*Reply*: Autonomy is this policy’s least-realized moral consideration. Guaranteeing many of the policy’s benefits requires trading off autonomy for a particular benefit. For example, in order to guarantee that users do not distract non-users, students who would otherwise use mobile devices must be required to put them away. This level of paternalism is justified for three reasons.

First, the classroom just is a paternalistic environment. Professors regularly set policies without student input. For example, professors may have policies on whether and how classes may be recorded. To say that only certain devices are permitted only at certain times is not outside the bounds of what professors regularly do when setting policies for their classrooms.

Second, as Aagard has noted, many of the negative effects of device use are the result of habits built up over time.[[68]](#footnote-68) If we have a duty to inculcate productive habits in our students, we must first break harmful habits. One effective strategy for doing so is to put students in an environment where acting on the established habit is impossible. This removes individual autonomy, but is ultimately in the individual’s best interest and allows the harmful habit to be replaced by a beneficial one. Allowing device use only in particular circumstances achieves the same result. Habitual Facebook checkers no longer have that option, except during open periods, and can begin establishing more productive in-class habits. Further, students are merely discouraged from off-task use during open periods, out of respect for student autonomy.

Third, the policy respects autonomy in the sense that it allows some device use, which students seem to prefer for activities like student collaboration.[[69]](#footnote-69) While a professor may be within her rights to totally ban mobile devices, it would be heavy-handed to do so, in light of the benefits of device use for particular activities and student preference for using devices in those contexts. Additionally, allowing device use in certain contexts is certainly less paternalistic than some suggested measures, such Levine’s suggestion that we require the installation of spyware on student devices to monitor their device use.[[70]](#footnote-70)

**Conclusion and Future Directions**

This essay presented and defended a restricted use mobile device policy for introductory philosophy classrooms that is sensitive to recent research suggesting a generally deleterious effect on student learning coupled with particular benefits when devices are used in specific circumstances like group active learning projects. The policy attempts to capture as many benefits associated with device use as possible while mitigating negative effects. It is also sensitive to ethical concerns surrounding such policies and attempts to satisfy these considerations as much as possible, though some tradeoffs are required. In such cases, the policy trades off in regularly accepted ways or in ways that maximize benefits while minimizing harms.

Much of the policy’s justification is based on the growing corpus of empirical research surrounding in-class device use, but there remain important aspects of the policy that would benefit from additional empirical and armchair research. I note three such areas here.

First, as noted above, there has been no meaningful study of device-free zones in smaller classroom settings, nor has there been meaningful study of mobile device use in philosophy classrooms generally. Extant research has focused on large lectures, but the introductory philosophy classroom is a different setting with its own set of pedagogical and logistical challenges. The proposed policy is based, in part, on doubts that strategies like laptop free zones could be successful in smaller classrooms, but this is certainly a question deserving further empirical study.

Second, there has been little research into student attitudes towards mobile device policies. Insofar as research has been done in this area, it concerns what policies students believe will be effective in preventing distraction[[71]](#footnote-71) or whether students are broadly in favor or opposed to a particular policy.[[72]](#footnote-72) More detailed research on student attitudes towards such policy aspects as permissibility, convenience, and preference would give instructors further insight into crafting policies for their own classrooms.

Finally, there is relatively little literature that discusses note taking strategies students bring with them to college, especially with respect to electronic note taking. Where data exists, it studies such strategies either too broadly or too narrowly. For example, student mobile device surveys by Pearson Education[[73]](#footnote-73) study *all* high school students, rather than college bound students, while other studies[[74]](#footnote-74) focus on Advanced Placement and National Writing Program students. Neither group adequately captures incoming college first years likely to make up the bulk of an introductory philosophy class. Since a portion of the argument presented above rests on claims regarding student experience with electronic note taking, data on this issue would have a meaningful impact on the argument.

Ultimately, this discussion presents and defends a plausible mobile device policy for an introductory college classroom. Though it is hoped that many of the points made within are applicable outside of the policy’s intended scope, it should at least provide a meaningful starting point when planning how to use mobile devices in one’s introductory classroom.

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