

Laptop revolution: New class design saves schools money, space

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Universities around the country are struggling with shrinking budgets, even as they need to cater to the needs of an increasing number of students. New research from North Carolina State University shows that one way to cut down on costs, and simultaneously improve the learning experience, is to have students use the technology they already bring into the classroom.

Specifically, the NC State researchers launched a pilot project to gauge the impact of a classroom design that provides [wireless Internet access](#) and power outlets to facilitate the use of students' [laptop](#) computers. The project revolved around writing classes being taught in the classroom, which required that students bring their laptops to class - obviating the need for the class to use computer labs.

"The cost of setting up a classroom like this is minimal, compared to setting up new computer classrooms, which is essential given budget constraints and the limited availability of new space - you're converting existing classrooms rather than creating new computer labs," says Dr. Susan Miller-Cochran, co-author of the study and associate professor of English at NC State. "Basically, this is an economical way to create a sustainable space for teaching writing that can be scaled up or down according to need.

"And, of course, all of this is predicated on the idea that computer use should be incorporated into introductory writing courses," Miller-Cochran says. "We think it should be because this is the medium today's

students use to write, and because computer literacy is a key component of a college education."

However, Miller-Cochran stresses the need to ensure that all students can take advantage of the wireless classrooms. "You need to bear in mind that there are going to be students who do not have their own laptops, or who lose or break their laptops over the course of a semester," Miller-Cochran says. "One solution is to provide a fleet of laptops that students can sign out."

Despite concerns that students would become distracted - checking their Facebook accounts during class, for example - the researchers found that students using their own laptops in the pilot project classroom tended to be more focused, perhaps because of their familiarity with the equipment they were using. "We also found that the students were more likely to take their work with them," Miller-Cochran says. "For example, [students](#) could pick their laptops up and continue to write in the lounge outside the classroom."

The pilot project was launched in fall 2008, and was composed of 28 class sections taught over three semesters. The researchers hope to increase the number of classrooms with similar capabilities in the near future.

The research, "Teaching Writing in Blended Learning/Space(s)," will be presented by study co-author and NC State doctoral student Dawn Shepherd at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Louisville, March 18.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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