

Trust Disabled Students and Their Technology

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

There's a perennial debate about whether students should be allowed to use technology in class. It arises every time a new study on the study habits of students and their attention spans appears or every time an op-ed writer rediscovers an old study. The anti-technology argument usually is this: Study A says students don't learn as well when they use tech in class, so I'm banning all tech from my class.

I wouldn't care what particular professors do at their schools except that these blanket bans negatively affect disabled students. I imagine myself as a student in the teachers' classrooms, and I cringe—the students who have to suffer through these bans do not have it easy. And the teachers who put them in place either don't realize it or don't care.

Banning Tech Isn't New

Socrates (as set forth by Plato in the *Phaedrus*) railed against newfangled technology. Socrates believed that the technology of writing down words as practiced by his students—students taking notes of his speeches—would weaken those students' ability to use their memories. He decries the practice of writing: "Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them."

These days, the student technology that haunts teachers is laptops. Teachers argue that laptops distract students or that they take poor notes with their laptops. And there's (supposedly) research to prove it: The most common study teachers point to when banning laptops says that handwritten words are better for student engagement and note-taking than typed words on laptops. It is literally titled "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking" (2014). The study has come up over and over in the years since—almost every three months or so—when a teacher publishes a column in a newspaper or a particularly fiery blog post about banning laptops in the classroom.

Whether you ignore your students' laptop use or ban it altogether, you don't have to think about how your students interact with technology. If you ban tech, you don't improve your teaching or your students' learning. You don't think about the effect on the individuals in your class. When it comes to pedagogy, blanket rules are rarely a good idea, especially when that rule runs right up against the needs—and rights—of disabled students.

Disability and Tech

Let me get personal for a second: I'm a disabled mother of two disabled children, who are in elementary school. They have already attended multiple elementary schools as we try to find the best education situation for them. Over the years, I've gone from being a disability

rights scholar to a disability rights scholar and activist to a person who not only worries about how her disabilities will affect her own life but also how the disabilities of those she loves most will affect their lives, too.

In other words, I've become a mom.

I've gained another perspective on what it means to be disabled in this country. Because being a child in the United States—and perhaps everywhere—is to be nearly completely powerless. Adults don't believe you, they don't listen to you—they don't give your words much credibility at all.

When being young intersects with being disabled, everything regarding credibility is worse. A school principal once told me my son wasn't being bullied—instead, he was having fantasies. I felt rage and powerlessness simultaneously. We took him out of that school. What else could we do? The people in power didn't believe my disabled kid.

But the stakes for a first grader or even a fifth grader are still pretty low. But what happens when we're talking about high school or even college? What happens when the kid who isn't believed is trying to make the grades to get into graduate school or to keep her grades up enough to maintain her financial aid package? Who's going to believe the disabled kid over the decorated professor? That's what I worry about when I see

academics debate over what college students should and should not be doing with tech in class. Those debates disregard the well-being of disabled students.

Tech Bans Harm Disabled Students

As I've written before, "Professors who ban laptops either overlook or don't care about the effect that such bans have on disabled students." Here's the problem: "When faced with a laptop ban, a student who needs to type suddenly must seek accommodations from the professor—a task that is daunting.... And students who have permission to type in laptop-ban courses are forced to out themselves as disabled to their fellow students."

At least one leading professor in the debate flat-out stated that she does not care that disabled students' privacy must be sacrificed for her laptop ban: She insists in an op-ed that "students with learning disabilities may use electronics in order to participate in class," but she recognizes that such use "does reveal that any student using electronics has a learning disability." *The New York Times* published this op-ed, giving these dangerous words influence and the authority.

Disabled students are entitled to privacy. Imagine being one of only two or three students with a laptop in a lecture hall of a hundred where laptops are banned. Imagine the hostility other students might feel toward you, that you are getting special treatment. You are forced to choose between outing yourself as disabled

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on curricula, learning spaces, pedagogy, assessment, teachers and policy. Readers can expect to gain a deeper understanding of black girls' and women's experiences in a variety of different contexts.

Black girls are frequently marginalized in the area of math ability. That conversation usually generates from standardized assessments, both national and state. Joseph says those test scores are often presented without narrative about the conditions and context. The book will challenge those ideas.

Joseph says it's not a step-by-step book that shows people how to educate black girls in math. It's about concepts, theory and guiding principles. She looks forward to sharing the book's content not only in academia, but also with teachers, parents and even church groups.

"People who are interested in creating programs, intervention projects and what I call structural transformation can read the book and get ideas about how to inform those things," says Joseph. "I define structural transformation as a disruption or even a dismantling of processes and structures that exist that basically seek to erase black girls or to make them invisible.

"This is my life's work," she adds. "I want an average black girl in seventh grade math class to feel the impact of my work." 


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and managing the hostility of your classmates or leaving your laptop at home. That's a double bind that no student should encounter.

Trust Students

I remember what it was like in school, when professors always believed I wasn't paying attention, because I was scribbling in my notebook or doodling. Professors would try to catch me, embarrass me—and I hated them. I could sense their mistrust of their students and their own doubt of their teaching abilities. When I became a professor, I swore I would never humiliate students.

I worry about my children as they grow. I teach them tools that will help them succeed. When they encounter teachers who throw boulders in their way—and, unsurprisingly, we already have—I teach them to stand up for themselves. But I also teach them to ask for help. Because no professor should have the power to make or break a disabled student's ability to learn.

Do the right thing by *all* of your students. Don't ban a crucial piece of accessible tech. 

Women on the Move, *continued from page 10*


- **Dr. Stelfanie Williams** moves from president of Vance-Granville Community College NC to VP for Durham and regional affairs at Duke University NC.

- **Courtney L. Young** becomes university librarian at Colgate University NY.

- **Dr. Mellissia Zanjani** moves from VP for institutional advancement at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown PA to VP for institutional advancement at Lincoln University PA. 

NCCWSL 2018 Considers #MeToo, *continued from page 11*

like saying "everything will be OK," because they can't know that it will be.

All in all, the NCCWSL continues to be a conference that offers both empowerment and the space to have tough and open conversations about what young women will encounter on campus and their future jobs. I would encourage you, reader, to send your women student leaders to the NCCWSL next year, which will not only benefit them but will also make your campus better. 

Women Writers Share Their Wisdom, *continued from page 12*

and emotion emerge. Sometimes, that's all it is—a pool-side journal entry. But very frequently, after laps, after lunch, I find the words have gathered their own momentum, and the rest of the day lays itself at the foot of a new story, and I, obedient to the muse, acquiesce.


Happy writing, *WIHE* readers! 

PROFILE: A Pioneering Woman, *continued from page 13*

female, "that disparity really hit me."

Another challenge was the way others perceived her. During a conversation, a trustee at a previous job actually "patted" her on the head.

"I did have a good relationship with him," she says, "but I realized he wasn't taking me as seriously as he would a man."

Her advice for young women wondering if they want to take on leadership roles is to "take advantage of the opportunities. Be open and explore it." 

Congrats, Dr. Faust!

Dr. Drew Gilpin Faust, renowned historian and soon-to-be former president of Harvard University MA, will receive the 2018 John W. Kluge Prize for Achievement in the Study of Humanity in September 2018. The prize is \$1 million and honors "individuals whose outstanding scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has shaped public affairs and civil society." Congrats, Dr. Faust!

Source: *Women in Academia Report* 