

## LETTERS

### Why We Banned Use of Laptops and “Scribe Notes” in Our Classroom

*To the Editor.* Three pharmacist-lawyers collaborate to offer the course PPS 930: Legal, Ethical and Access Issues in Pharmacy to second-year doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) students at the University of Kentucky during the fall semester. This 4 semester-hour course was offered during 2009-2010 for the fourth consecutive year by this trio of instructors. Each instructor delivers about a third of the lectures and the 1 full-time faculty member in the group serves as the course coordinator, attending all class sessions, composing examinations and quizzes, and grading all examinations, quizzes, and term papers. Content of the course breaks down approximately as follows: Legal Issues, 60%; Ethical Issues, 20%; and Access Issues, 20%.

Each summer the instructors meet to plan the impending course offering. These discussions have been influenced by a November 2007 article in the *American Bar Association Journal* regarding use of laptop computers in law school classrooms: “Prof’s Kibosh Students’ Laptops: More Law Schools Are Banning Them as a Distraction – or Worse.”<sup>1</sup> This article focused the instructors’ attention on this particular PPS 930 course goal included in the syllabus:

A corollary goal that is pervasive throughout the course is to give the student experience in listening to professional communication and discerning points of relevance and importance. Bear in mind that this course is about establishing standards for behavior and having people conform their behavior to those standards. That’s the essence of law and ethics.<sup>2</sup>

Faculty colleagues have reported that when they sit in the rear of the classroom where use of laptops is permitted, they have seen students sending e-mail messages to one another, placing orders with Internet vendors, and doing all sorts of other non-class-related things. All the while the instructor is at the front of the room assuming the students are faithfully recording the information being presented. Banning use of laptops brings to mind a quotation from Diane Sawyer, the television news journalist: “I think the one lesson I have learned is that there is no substitute for paying attention.”<sup>3</sup>

The professional ramifications of these issues surface because this course is designated a professional practice course. All work in this course is expected to be the student’s own, including note taking.

Hearing the information, thinking about it, and recording your thoughts should all be done independently as will be expected when you are in practice. Use of ‘scribe notes’ is prohibited in this course; each student is to generate his or her own notes just as would be expected when interacting with a patient to collect information.<sup>2</sup>

A further reference to the professional nature of this course appears in this component of the syllabus:

Students should view their participation in this course as being equal in importance or akin to interacting with a patient. A pharmacist who has scheduled a session with a patient would be expected to honor the commitment by being there, by arriving punctually, and by eliminating any potential for distraction during the interaction. Your classmates and instructors, your present and future professional colleagues, are due at least the same level of respect.

The Course Coordinator and instructors reserve the right to exclude from the classroom students whose conduct or behaviors in the sole judgment of the instructors or Course Coordinator interfere with the learning environment for others. It should be noted that one example of such ‘interference with the learning environment for others’ during class is having one’s cell phone ring, while other examples would be engaging in disruptive or bothersome communication with others such as text messaging or email communication during class or clicking the keys on a laptop computer. You will be expected to provide your undivided attention to matters being discussed in class just as this would be expected in a professional interaction with a patient. In order to prevent that latter event, use of laptop computers is prohibited during class sessions in this course.<sup>2</sup>

The decision to ban use of laptops by students and “scribe notes” was not implemented without serious consideration that the policy runs directly contrary to the trend in American higher education. The policy flies in the face of people’s infatuation with information technology resources and may even open the instructors to being labeled Neanderthals or dinosaurs! More practically, it could be attributed to the fact that none of the 3 instructors can type, thereby creating a possible bias against students who enjoy an advantage by having that skill. It could be argued that permitting use of laptops gives an advantage to those students who can type over those who cannot. Nearly everyone can write.

This course has now been conducted twice with these policies in place and the students survived and even

did well. They were attentive and engaged in classroom discussion of issues. Course evaluations reveal the students' acceptance and even support for these course policies.

Joseph L. Fink III, BSPharm, JD  
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## REFERENCES

1. Chanen JS. Profs Kibosh students' laptops: more law schools are banning them as a distraction – or worse. *Am Bar Assoc J*. November 2007.
2. PPS 930: Legal, Ethical and Access Issues in Pharmacy Course Syllabus. College of Pharmacy, University of Kentucky.
3. Diane Sawyer quotes. ThinkExist.com [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i\\_think\\_the\\_one\\_lesson\\_i\\_have\\_learned\\_is\\_that/192401.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i_think_the_one_lesson_i_have_learned_is_that/192401.html) Accessed July 8, 2010.