The Laptop as an Alibi: Use Patterns of Unfocused Interaction

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English abstract

Based on a qualitative study of laptop-equipped university students, this article investigates the laptop’s role in educational practice. Goffman’s framework on unfocused interaction was used to develop and analyze three use patterns: screen peeking, online tics and screensaver fear. These patterns advance our understanding of laptop use, unfocused interaction and the role of the laptop in the studied situations. The laptop introduces an interpretative flexibility that allows a greater range of different behaviors relative to the dominant involvement.

Keywords: Laptop, observations, students, involvement, Goffman.
1. Introduction

Most of the studies related to laptops and education have focused on the effect on learning outcome, the faculty’s administrative consequences and financial issues related to laptop initiatives (Fried 2007; Fisher et al. 2004; Young 2006). Several articles highlight the need for further research on the laptops’ affect on the social interaction in educational settings, both consequence of the upright screen and the layout of the traditional classroom where the content of the screen is visible to students seated further back in the classroom. For instance, both Barkhuus (2005) and Fried (2007) comment on the visibility of screen content and the need for further research on its visual interference for both users and those seated nearby. Hence, this article investigates three screen-related patterns of interaction in relation to the laptop. These patterns involve what Goffman refers to as unfocused interaction, in other words, the non-written or spoken interaction, and the related interactional consequences. It may be described as the interaction in-between the more regular one, that of talking and writing. It is important to capture since it may inform our understanding of how the laptop in use affects how users direct their attention and interaction.

The analysis of the empirical account relies on Goffman’s framework on unfocused interaction and involvement. According to Goffman (1963), individuals strive to find an involvement in every situation they are part of, in other words, something meaningful to direct their attention towards. Additionally, most situations have a typical involvement, that is, a dominant involvement for that particular situation. During lectures and group work, students and teachers rely on the unfocused interaction, that is, glances, body position and other body idioms to read others and signal their own involvement. Such unfocused interaction is ephemeral as it leaves few traces in the form of text or something else of a more tangible nature. Still, it is important to capture since it may inform our understanding of how the laptop in use affects what students involve themselves with in a given situation.

Thus, Goffman’s framework on unfocused interaction is important when investigating the laptop-related use patterns and their effect on the students’ direction of involvement, as well as if and how it affects the dominant involvement of that particular situation. If the laptop introduces a visual interference it is important to see how future laptop initiatives can relate to such a consequence. For digital literacy research it is important when smart phones and tablets are also part of not only school initiated activities, but our everyday social interaction. To be digitally literate may be, with the ubiquitous presence of mobile IT, to be aware of the effects on social interaction?

Accordingly, this article answers the following research question: How does laptop use affect the unfocused interaction and involvement within an educational setting? Additionally, how can such knowledge help us to understand the role of the laptop in educational settings?

The next section (Section 2) introduces Goffman’s view of unfocused interaction, involvement and related notions. Section 3 contains a description of the methodology and material collection methods used. Section 4 presents the use patterns with the descriptions and analysis of the studied setting. The article ends with a discussion (Section 6) about the results of combining the interaction order with a study of laptops.

2. Unfocused Interaction and Involvement

Goffman’s work on the Interaction Order focuses on Face-to-face behavior in general. Within this order unfocused interaction is, according to Manning (2005), as well as Burns (1992), in particular
about the interaction people “read” through body idiom or body gloss and perceived involvement. Through our body idiom – a conventionalized form of non-verbal interaction – people gather information about other individuals by judging against conventional standards (Burns, 1992). By interacting with the world, we give evidence of interactions with objects as well as subjects, and the orderliness behind these interactions are, according to Goffman, an Interaction Order (Goffman, 1983 p. 13; Jones & Rodney, 2004; Tonnelat, 2007; Tholander, 2003).

According to Goffman (1963), the expected activity of a particular situation is the dominant involvement. In a church, we expect certain activities from weddings that we do not expect from funerals even though the physical location is the same. The dominant involvement is the activity that persons within the situation are expected to focus on or in some way, at least, relate to. As such, the dominant involvement is supposed to be the group’s main focus, which attracts most of the person’s attention. A side involvement is typically described as an activity that can be carried out in an abstract fashion while at the same time focusing on dominant involvement. Typical examples of side-involvements are knitting and smoking, hence activities that it is possible to do simultaneously with other activities.

A subordinate involvement is characterized by activities that are carried out in a muted fashion and only for as long as the student’s complete attention is not required for the dominant involvement. The definition of dominant and subordinate involvement and the relationship between them, is always dependent on an understanding of the circumstances and will differ between various contexts.

During normal conditions the dominant involvement of a particular situation is also equal to what Goffman calls the individual’s main involvement (Wasson, 2006; Williams, 2007). The main involvement is the involvement that the individual is focusing most of her attention on, which typically is the dominant involvement of the situation. However, Goffman also discuss subordinate involvements as a threat to the individual’s focus on the dominant involvement. Thus, there is always a possibility of turning the subordinate involvement into the individual’s main involvement, which is then detached from the dominant involvement of the situation. A subordinate involvement can therefore grow into the main involvement for a particular person (or group of persons) and will compete with the dominant involvement of the situation.

2.1. Going Away

Loosing oneself in the laptop during a lecture was not possible in the 1960s when Goffman wrote his Behavior in Public Places. Still, loosing oneself in imaginary worlds was an option:

“While outwardly participating in an activity within a social situation, an individual can allow his attention to turn from what he and everyone else considers the real or serious world, and give himself up for a time to a play like world in which he alone participates” (Goffman, 1963, p 69)

The person may demonstrate her absence from the scene in various ways including the faraway gaze or by other body idioms or side involvements such as picking one’s nose or humming (Manning, 2005; Goffman, 1963). However, this is a con game, getting away with going away involves strategies to conceal it from the others involved in the situation.
2.2. Substitute Companion and Minimal Main Involvement

In certain situations, such as at the central station while waiting for the train, the main involvement, 'waiting' may not be enough in order to make the person feel at ease. In situations like that, a newspaper may be just the right level of involvement since it may effortlessly be ended when the waiting is over. According to Goffman (1963), such an involvement may be seen as a person's minimal main involvement, minimal since it is just the right level of involvement to make the individual person feel at ease. Alternatively, while eating alone at a fast food restaurant, it may feel awkward to be seen as being too involved in eating. Goffman (1963) offers the notion of substitute companion as an explanation to the common habit of offering newspapers at fast food restaurants, or a more modern variant. The newspaper becomes the subordinate involvement to which the eater may divert her attention while finishing her meal.

2.3 Involvement shields

According to Goffman, we sometimes do not want to get involved with others at all; still there are few places where one may be truly alone. One solution to the “problem of involvement” is to shield off involvement or to conceal improper involvement and give the impression of proper ones. Goffman writes about Involvement Shields, barriers of perception that hinder other participants in noticing what is going on “behind the scenes”.

These shields may be physical, like headphones, or spatial, like a group activity room where students may study undisturbed. Goffman also reports on portable involvement shields, although they are no longer in use. Referencing Turner’s “A History of Courting” (1954) he draws parallels to women’s use of fans while in public presence. While fans during the 18th century were officially used to protect one from the sun, they were also used to conceal flirting, blushing and gazing that was not considered appropriate for a woman at that time (Wasson 2006).

3. Data Collection & Analysis

The empirical work for this article focused on the laptop as part of the students’ everyday practice and particularly non-verbal interaction. The table below offers a timeline of the different data collection methods utilized in this study, including material from interviews and non-participant and participant observations. The general student reactions when informed about the study have been positive. There has been student critique about the low utilization of IT during their education, especially since the observed university programs have been IT-related. The categorizations of the three patterns presented below are results of different empirical observations and they all revolve around screen interaction. During the observation phase the focus was on recurring use patterns. When recognized as such, a descriptive name and text was assigned to each pattern. Each pattern was then saturated with additional observations as well as validated in interviews and workshops. The use patterns presented here revolve around the laptop, the user and the others present. In particular, they are about the non-verbal or written interaction. As such they required an analytical framework that recognized non-written and non-verbal social interaction. Hence, Goffman’s framework on unfocused interaction provided a useful perspective.
Observations within the classroom were made with the written consent of both students and lecturers. At all times during participant observations the students were informed of the project, its goals and purpose, to: “…observe and describe the pedagogical possibilities with students’ IT-use in educational settings”. However, the observations in the open and shared areas at the university were generally conducted covertly, in the sense that the students were not informed that they were being observed.

It is important to note that the focus of this study has never been about evaluating the students’ performance or making moral judgments about different behavior. Still, observing and recording the students’ different behaviors carries a great responsibility, because there is a risk of both discrediting individual students’ behavior and of undermining their trust in a setting where they already are under scrutiny. In order to take this responsibility seriously, all the material, except for photos, have been anonymized. Also, all the results have been presented, analyzed and discussed in a series of workshops with different groups of students to check the relevancy from a student perspective.

4. Use patterns of Unfocused Interaction

In the following section, the studied setting and local laptop practice is introduced. This is followed by the empirical findings presented as three common unfocused use patterns; screen peeking, online tics and screensaver fear.

The study took place at a university mainly offering Master’s programs, all with an orientation towards IT. The department is located on four floors with lecture halls, café-like areas and group rooms. On each floor, there is a kitchen, shared by the faculty and the students, with dishwashers, microwave ovens and free coffee. The shared infrastructure (kitchen, printers, open areas, etc.) is characteristic of the department’s vision to be like a workplace. All the students at the university are required to possess a laptop to conduct their studies. In interviews, the students argue that the practices relating to the laptops at the department are undeveloped. The department introduced the laptop initiative, but pedagogically few initiatives have been introduced to integrate the laptops and utilize them efficiently within the educational activities. So, while the students, as a group, ask for more structured and experimental utilization, for now, it is up to the individual students and lecturers to experiment with different ways of utilizing the technology.

While carrying out observations in the open areas and during lectures, different laptop patterns become evident. Besides listening to the lecturer, the most common activities are flicking between the lecturers’ slides, following up the lecture theme on Wikipedia or other websites relating to the lecture and taking notes. Occasionally, students send Instant Message and visit Facebook. However,
these patterns are volatile and in a very direct way connected to the activity, relevance and culture of the present situation. In between lectures, it is common for the students to sit together in smaller groups, as illustrated in Picture 1. The students are often seated on the same side of the table in order to access each other’s screens.

![Picture 1: Students during group work sitting on the same side of the table.](image)

### 4.1. Screen Peeking

The laptop’s screen and its upright position make it either a barrier or an attraction for perception, depending on the position of the viewer. While conducting participant observations of students during project work, the upright screen was found to play an important role. While working on a school project in a traditional conference room where the students face each other during project meetings and group work, the screen acts as a perceptual barrier. The students on the opposite side of the table cannot see the screen and thus cannot utilize it as an interactional recourse. A student’s only clue to the content of the screen is the other students’ body idioms, facial expressions, keyboard and mouse behavior and verbal comments about it. Hence, from the opposite position, it works as an efficient involvement shield. In interviews the students state that they sometimes feel left out and not totally part of the situation when faced with the backside of laptops as seen in Picture 2.

![Picture 2: Students during group work sitting on opposite sides of the table.](image)

They may feel threatened by the unseen content on the screen, and are not sure whether the student on the opposite side of the table is taking notes, surfing the web or making funny remarks about
their clothing style via instant messaging. Not having access to other people’s screens seems to be equal to not having access to the whole situation. As a result, two students working together at the same table, often sit beside each other instead of sitting face-to-face. This way the screen is available as a source of communication between the two students.

A contradicting example is the observation of students sitting around a table shifting their laptops to-and-fro. During participant observations with students, this behavior was discussed. The students stated that they sometimes feel uncomfortable when someone else looks at their screen, as they are not in control of the screen’s visibility. Then, to be in control of the visibility, they reposition the screen and the laptop and may also decrease the brightness to minimize the screen’s visibility. If a student feels responsible for the dominant involvement when conducting group work, for instance, finishing a project report, while still spending time on Facebook, the person is likely to respond to the curious eyes of others with a protecting screen maneuver.

I want to highlight two aspects from this pattern. Firstly how students, when they want to, share their screens and how easily this is done both in the classroom and in other situations. At the same time, it is important to note that the visibility of one’s screen is sometimes sensitive and sometimes does not matter at all. In addition, the second aspect is the amplifying effect. As visible in Picture (3) below, the screens are not easy to keep private during a lecture. Thus, the content on the screen attracts attention and as a result, screen peeking helps to spread content between the students. When the laptop is the medium, it may involve the whole class in a very short time. Thus, the laptop in use introduces a screen-sharing pattern where screen peeking is one example and sharing via Instant Messaging, is another.

![Picture 3: Students during a lecture where the screen’s visibility is illustrated.](image)

### 4.2 Online tics

The availability of online services open up a broader range of activities in any given situation, thus the introduction of the laptop opens up a broader action space. A student comments on the availability as follows:
I feel that even now when I have had it for such a long time in lectures, I still drift away into cyberspace too easily. So now I don’t open the laptop as often as before. Because when I turn it on I suddenly turn towards my usual sites, more or less consciously, and then you are lost in cyberspace again. At the same time, the days are long, after three to four hours of seminars it feels good to do it once in a while, you can’t really concentrate for that long... It’s both positive and negative. But you need to have that switch yourself, when you lose your self too much it is time to put it down. (Respondent 3)

This more or less conscious behavior is brought up in interviews and observed during non-participant observations. It is something that happens at home, during group work and during lectures. As one student (Respondent 4) said, while at home in the evening, he finds himself in front of the computer, without directly being sure of why he went there in the first place. When trying to remember, he said it started with something that he wanted to check on the web. However, when he opened the lid of the laptop, it automatically turned from hibernation (sleep mode) and displayed the open window of his web browser: the “Quick links menu”, visited pages and additional open documents were also visible. Out of habit, these links or already open pages were followed to check for recent updates. Then he turned to his e-mail inbox. When returning from this detour, the primary reason for going online was forgotten.

The term “online tics” is used here to describe the pattern triggered in relation to the laptop, information on the screen and online services. It is the more or less conscious behavior that a person, out of habit, initiates when in proximity of the laptop. The students’ own explanations of this behavior, when confronted with the idea of online tics during interviews, are two-fold. On the one hand it is habitual, easy and without friction to switch from the project report to other services. On the other hand it is amplified by traces of previous interaction on the screen, such as open browser tabs, e-mail services and so on. Thus, the avid use of the laptop in different situations during the day has created a habit of hourly visits to different online services. This has resulted in a sort of auto involvement in visiting these pages whenever possible.

4.3 Screensaver fear

In the open areas at the department, a recurring observation was made during the non-participant observations, relating to the appearance of the screensaver. In the café-like setting, repeatedly, once the screensaver started, the user immediately took it away. Below follows a transcript of one of several observations:

The student has placed himself and the laptop at a table in the café-like, open area, just a few meters from the coffee machine. The observer is sitting at an opposite table covering the area with a view of the student sitting only a few meters away. The student (Student 1) stares at the screen, moves the mouse in order to surf the web and the local newspaper website. A fellow student approaches (Student 2). He stops just a meter from Student 1 and says “Hi”. They start to talk about the weekend and what they did. During the talk, Student 1’s gaze seems to be focused on Student 2 rather than on the laptop. They have talked for several minutes when the computer activates the screensaver and the screen goes black. Student 1 turns his head towards the screen and with his hand touching the track pad. In doing so, he takes out the screensaver. The browser is again visible. He then turns his focus back to Student 2. A few minutes later Student 2 walks away and Student 1 again turns his focus back to the laptop.

The screensaver was originally implemented to stop screen-content from burning into the screen. Today the risk of screen burning is considerably smaller, and so the screensaver has taken on new
roles. The screensaver may protect the information on the screen through a password and from other people sneak peeking when there is no one in front of the computer.

Depending on the situation there are many possible interpretations. From a cognitive perspective the screensaver or the turning off of the screen may be interpreted as movement and as such it draws attention to the eye, but it does not explain why the student in the paragraph above also made the screensaver go away, when it could have been left as it was. In interviews, students claim that being in front of the laptop makes them feel online, on the go and up to date. This creates a feeling of being part of something bigger, which may also explain their choice to sit in an open café-like area. In that sense, the screen is their window to the online world and the screensaver becomes a disconnecting curtain. The screensaver may be interpreted as a barrier of perception between the user, screen and online services. In line with this, students say that it is sometimes enough to sit in front of the laptop to feel like working. Other students’ comments may increase the feeling. Comments to students sitting in the open areas, such as this, are common: “Here you are, struggling with your thesis”. During participant observations it seemed the laptop had a connotation towards work rather than entertainment, to such an extent that time spent with the laptop was sometimes equal to work time. The screensaver then becomes a curtain between the involvement and the person.

5. Effects of Use Patterns on Unfocused Interaction

This section will further develop use patterns and conceptualize them in terms of a few general effects. In the introduction the question was phrased as follow: How does the laptop affect unfocused interaction and involvement in an educational setting? Additionally, how can such knowledge help us to understand the role of the laptop in educational settings?

5.1. Analyzing use patterns

The students talk about the laptop as being work-related, and in interviews most of the respondents say they also associate someone in front of a laptop with someone working. While it is an excellent tool for work, the laptop is also a resource for great entertainment, but from the opposite side of the screen it is hard to know which. Because of the work-related interpretation and because of the screen barrier, it introduces what is here termed as interpretative flexibility that allows a range of different behaviors relative to the dominant involvement. The interpretative flexibility of what a particular user is doing affects other participants’ interpretations and what subordinate, main and dominant involvement connotes in a particular situation. That is, it becomes hard to discern a user’s particular involvement due to the screen barrier.

The online tics, the habitual craving for news, updates and other media content available online, may sometimes become activities in their own right; they may become minimal main involvements. Both for the laptoper and for the other person the laptop offers just enough involvements to make the laptoper feel at ease. Thus, by positioning oneself in one of the open areas with the laptop in front, the laptoper makes a temporal spatial claim and minimal main involvement. Then, the activities of surfing, interacting and communicating, become the main involvements supported both from the laptop and the others present that endorse the activity. They endorse the activity due to the interpretative flexibility and the connotation of somebody in front of a laptop as working.

In lecture-like settings the laptop’s vertical alignment of the screen (together with screen peeking) may trigger an amplifying effect, where the alternative activity spreads to other students. Thus, if
the laptop from one perspective is used as an involvement shield and hides the screen content, it is also an involvement attraction, advertises the screen content and acts rather like a personal billboard or physical social medium. In a sense, the screen becomes an extension of the user as a material body idiom used to express oneself. Goffman’s term *away* is here related to situations, such as the one described above, where the student is involved with unaligned services on the screen. Getting away with going away becomes a strategy that is visible in the screen peeking observation. It shows the students’ awareness and the deliberate choice to keep the screen clear from curious eyes, not only because of a focus on subordinate involvements, but also because they have the choice to do so. Still, they have the possibility to share the content on their screens when they want to.

Just like the newspaper was offered as a substitute to a lunch companion, the laptop may have the same role in the studied setting. Additionally, it dissolves some of the barriers of perception and opens up for interaction with distant companions via instant messaging and Facebook, etc. The screen is the mediator or portal to situations outside the physical present and the screensaver becomes a barrier between the user and the outside world. Hence, the interpretative flexibility and the dissolution of the school barrier lie behind screensaver fear, seeing how the screensaver, even in a subtle way, reintroduces a barrier of perception.

6. The Laptop as an Alibi

The laptop enables a wide range of activities that would otherwise not be part of a situation – as such, it broadens the action space. In short, the laptop may become an involvement in its own right. Also, it introduces an interpretative flexibility that opens up for a range of different interpretations of students’ laptop activities. The laptop’s connotation to work is important here since a person in front of a laptop is perceived to be working. Thus, the laptop as part of the situation vouches for patterns such as online tics, fuels screen peeking and gives rise to screensaver fear. The laptop acts, in conjunction with the student and situation, as an alibi. With the laptop as a companion, the number of possible involvements in a given situation increases. Hence, in those situations where the laptop functions as an alibi, the laptoper can move between different activities with different alignments towards the dominant involvement. As such, it may challenge the dominant involvement through the amplification of subordinate ones. Still, this may not be a negative consequence or an argument against laptops within education. It is merely a way to describe the screen-related, unfocused interactional patterns and effects of the laptop in a situation with a dominant involvement that is defined rather narrowly.

What are the laptop and its alibi-role if not a negative consequence of the educational setting? Is it a consequence of the studied practice, the lecture tradition as such, with its narrow definition of the dominant involvement? From one perspective, it is easy to challenge the dominant involvement since the appropriate one, listening to the lecturer, is rather narrow. From another perspective, the laptop may free a student who was held hostage by a bad lecture; the student can create an alternative personal experience that better suits her specific needs in a specific situation. As such, it is empowering in favor of the student. Consequently, by introducing laptops or similar technologies, a more liberal view of involvement may be developed. It is here argued that the laptop’s role as an alibi may change the interaction order and increase the acceptance for activities with varying degrees of connection towards the dominant involvement. It is too soon to tell if this also means a wider acceptance of unfocused interaction, such as glancing at a smart phone outside the studied situation.

To utilize these changed patterns of unfocused interaction in favor of learning is to convey digital literacy in practice. With guidance, the student may develop a personal learning situation that offers
increased meaning in educational settings such as lectures. Thus, increased acceptance of different involvements where the interaction order is inclusive and open for a range of different activities may nurture a more valuable learning situation. By adopting online services and focusing use patterns towards learning rather than entertainment, the student could benefit from such change. By acknowledging the laptop’s role as an alibi and by recognizing the increased acceptance of a wider set of involvements, the faculty could, together with the students, design an interaction order with a learning intention, as compared with today, where such a possibility is largely left unexplored. By acknowledging the laptop’s presence and the students’ willingness to adapt their behavior, the studied setting is a design space ready to be filled. Additionally, when technology becomes an extension of our bodily idioms, the material, human and digital perform together as a laptoper, a human-laptop hybrid. This is an important perspective for future research within the digital literacy area beyond the dichotomy of humans and technology.

7. Conclusion

With increased investment in mobile technologies in educational institutions, it is crucial to research and describe some of the implications. This article describes three use patterns and explains them through Goffman’s framework on unfocused interaction. By identifying three different use patterns performed in the studied environment and connecting them to the analytical handles of Goffman, the effect of the laptop in use was developed as the role of an alibi and an increased acceptance of a wider view of involvements in a given situation. The use patterns, here named screen peeking, online-tics and screensaver fear, are themselves contributions, as they say something general about laptop use. However, when combined with the role of the alibi, other central effects such as the increased interpretative flexibility and the change in barriers of perception become visible. The studied setting is, according to the students, undeveloped regarding IT as a form of learning support. This is of course a factor that has to be taken into account when evaluating these findings. The question for further research is how to nurture an interaction order that is designed with a learning intention, as a goal, rather than as a coincidence.

References


