

Do Cell Phones Belong in the Classroom?

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MAY 18, 2012



Mobile devices are ubiquitous in American high schools, and their use is harder to regulate than old-fashioned note passing. But here's why teachers should be paying closer attention.



Two U.S. high school students compete in the LG Mobile Worldcup Texting Championship. According to a Pew study, American teenage girls send an average of 100 messages a day. (Reuters)

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If you were to drop in on most any American high school these days, what would you see? Cell phones. Lots of them. Virtually all students have one, and it's typical to see them tapping away or listening to music through their ear buds -- not just in the hallways during the five minutes between classes, but also in the classroom, at every opportunity the teacher gives them.

Most schools allow students to have cell phones for safety -- a reaction to the Littleton, Colorado, high school shooting incident of 1999. Apart from emergency situations, most schools don't officially allow students to use cell phones during class time. However, when the teacher is busy helping out another student or writing on the board, out come the phones as students send instant messages to friends, listen to music, or watch videos on the Internet. Eventually, the teacher notices and warns them that their phones will be confiscated. The phones disappear with reluctant obedience -- until the next opportunity arises to surreptitiously pull them out again.

At a time when middle-class homes are filled with computers and mobile devices, schools are grappling with the question of how much technology to bring into the classroom. A recent *Washington Post* article profiled two private schools in the Washington, D.C., area -- one (the Flint School) that surrounds kids with gadgets and another (a Waldorf School) that doesn't even teach students to use computers. Most schools fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

But whatever a school's approach to technology, cell phones seem to be nearly ubiquitous. An April 2010 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and the University of Michigan found that in schools that permitted students to have cell phones, 71 percent of students sent or received text messages on their cell phones in class. In the majority of

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schools -- those that allow students to have phones in school but not use them in the classroom - the percentage was almost as high: 65%. Even in schools that ban cell phones entirely, the percentage was still a shocking 58%.

Many teachers have given in and allowed their students to listen to music through their earbuds while they're doing individual class work (reading or conducting research). "I concentrate better on my schoolwork when I'm listening to music," is the rationalization from many students. Many teachers seem to accept this reasoning, little knowing about the data on multitasking and its deleterious effects on concentration and the ability to think clearly. Two years ago, for example, Peter Bregman wrote in the Harvard Business Review Blog Network that multitasking can reduce productivity by as much as 40%, increase stress and cause a 10-point fall in IQ.

But thinking clearly doesn't seem to be one of the principal objectives in our high schools -- for the teachers or the administrative staff, much less for the students themselves. After all, this is a generation that is used to being entertained. Attention spans are short. During a block period -- which is two regular 40-minute periods back-to-back -- some teachers cajole their students to do some work during the first hour, and then promise them time to do whatever they want at the end, just to keep them from disturbing others.

In some cases, schools have actually embraced cell phones and incorporated them into their teaching. The educational benefits of cell phones have been argued as follows by various education writers:

- They give students a chance to collaborate with each other, or connect with peers in other countries. (Marc Prensky)

- They can be used for high-tech alternatives to boring classroom lectures, letting kids take part in interactive assignments like classroom polls. (Kevin Thomas)
- They can serve as notepads or as an alarm for setting study reminders. (Lisa Nielsen)
- They can be recording devices, letting students record impressions during field trips and create audio podcasts and blog posts. (Liz Kolb)

However, none of these supposed advantages can overcome one very basic disadvantage: Cell phones distract students from schoolwork and class activities. Half of teens send 50 or more text messages a day.

According to the Pew study, "Older teen girls ages 14-17... average 100 messages a day." It's naïve to imagine that students armed with cell phones won't be quietly typing away under their desks, sending messages or surfing the Internet. And this activity is much harder to regulate than traditional note-passing.

So what's the solution? Do teachers simply need to crack down harder, to impose harsher penalties against extracurricular texting and Internet surfing? Or are the cell phones themselves a symptom of a larger problem?

An observer walking into an American school might notice the noise -- not only the talking and shouts among students during their hourly migrations between classrooms, but in the classrooms as well. Silence in class is an all-too-rare phenomenon. If the teacher isn't talking or an instructional video isn't playing, there's likely to be the incessant talking of students among themselves. All in all, there is lots of *Sturm and Drang*, not enough contemplative thinking and learning.



There may not be one right way of educating. The Waldorf School philosophy of pen and paper, blackboards and chalk, can work fine for


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some students. But computers in the classroom can also work. Why?  clear either way is that students must be taught to love learning -- to embrace the process of finding answers. In a recent *New York Times* article titled "A Silicon Valley School That Doesn't Compute," Paul Thomas, a former teacher and an associate professor of education at Furman University was quoted as saying, "Teaching is a human experience.  Technology is a distraction when we need literacy, nurnacy, and **critical** thinking."


Many high school students have grown unaccustomed to reading anything longer than a 140-character tweet. And at a time when calculators are available on every cell phone, they've grown more dependent than ever on letting machines solve even the simplest of problems. What students lose in such a dependency is an ability to respond quickly on their feet -- in  boardroom presentation, for example -- as well as a keen common sense about math and science. There's no *thinking* going on.

So, how should schools cope with the short attention spans and the need for entertainment among many students? The solution is cultural: Teachers, parents, and administrators need to agree that there is no substitute for sustained cognitive thinking, inductive and deductive reasoning, or detailed analysis and problem solving.

And students need more than just discipline in the classroom. They also need to be inspired to learn about the wonders of life, of humanity, of nature, of our planet, of the cosmos. School policies outlawing cell phones are clearly not enough -- the effective teacher must connect with his or her students in order to hold their attention. There must be a magnetism, a bond between them, a sparking of a brotherhood in the battle for knowledge -- a quest to figure things out, to understand, and to marvel and rejoice in that insight.




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All of this may seem easier said than done, and the most idealistic teachers often find themselves running up against unimaginative curricula and restrictive policies. But the incessant cell phone use going on in  classrooms must serve as a challenge, forcing us to remember what education is really about. The teacher's goal must be to instill an insatiable desire to learn. Because both inside and outside the classroom, there's so much to do and so little time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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