More schools use cellphones as learning tools

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Although schools have traditionally banned or limited cell phones in the classroom, 73% of Advanced Placement and National Writing Project teachers said their students use phones in the classroom or to complete assignments, according to a Pew Research Center study.

At a school district outside Chicago, students participated in a French class by using cellphones to call classmates and speak with them in French.

And when school starts this fall at Mason High School near Cincinnati, students like Mrudu Datla will pack iPads and iPhones in their backpacks.

"(Using technology in everyday life is) not that new to us because we grew up with technology," Datla, a sophomore, said.

Although schools have traditionally banned or limited cellphones in the classroom, 73% of Advanced Placement and National Writing Project teachers said their students use phones in the classroom or to complete assignments, according to a Pew Research Center study released in February.

"Teachers are starting to take advantage of the opportunities of cellphones in the classroom," said George Fornero, superintendent of Township High School District 113, located outside Chicago, whose school system has begun allowing its students use cellphones.

Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, said this trend first emerged after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"The issue of security and red alerts on terrorism threats became an issue, and school systems began to relax the prohibition on cellphones in schools," he said.

Though many of these changing policies banned cellphone use except in emergencies, teachers are lifting the bans and incorporating phones into their curriculum.

Natalie Milman, a George Washington University education technology professor, said that although security was one factor, others were involved.

"As a parent, I can see parents pushing for it when you think of the shootings that happen," she said. "However, with youth, (having a phone) is a very natural part of their ecosystem. It doesn't make sense to close that opportunity for them when they go to school."
She said parents and teachers are realizing educational value of mobile phones, as new features have made these devices relevant to education. "Most people are now coming to school with a computer in their pocket," Domenech said.

During the past few years, some schools, such as Mason High, have implemented "bring your own tech" programs, allowing students to use their devices for schoolwork.

With mobile apps and the Internet at their fingertips, teachers and students are now using phones as clickers to answer questions, providing feedback on student progress, and also to document labs, collaborate on group projects and capture teachers’ notes, Milman said.

However, mobile devices have also created concerns.

"(Mobile devices) promote a certain kind of learning ... it's limited," Milman said. "It can be overused and used in ways that aren't educationally meaningful." For this reason, she said, it's important teachers to receive proper training.

Their use has also created worries about cheating, visiting inappropriate websites, sexting or overuse. Policies banning phones were in place to counter these problems, but Fornero said no-tolerance policies were difficult to enforce and distracted administrators from tackling larger issues.

"The kids taught us a lesson: They're still going to bring their phones anyway, so let's allow them to use them in a constructive way," he said.

Bringing cellphones into the classroom raises questions about students who don't own personal devices and schools without necessary infrastructure. Milman said a lot of inequities exist, favoring more affluent, suburban communities.

But Domenech said during his visits to schools around the country — even at schools in poorer areas — he saw that most students owned a mobile device. So far, BYOT programs have been schools' temporary solution, with most students owning mobile devices, to circumvent the digital divide.

Funding has been available for educational training, Milman said, but money for the necessary infrastructure — Wi-Fi access and technical support — has been harder to come by. Fornero said his school system received only local funding for improving its infrastructure.

However, according to Richard Culatta, director of the U.S. Dept. of Education's Office of Educational Technology, the federal government is looking to close that large divide. About 80% of schools in the country don't have the infrastructure to support digital learning, according to government data.

"That's hugely problematic as we look at engaging with fantastic digital resources for learning that are available," he said.
President Obama announced the ConnectED initiative on June 6, which aims to connect 99% of schools around the country to broadband Internet, and the Department of Education is working to prepare teachers to use technology.

While Domenech estimated only 25% of schools now allow phones, he expects that to increase significantly over the next few years. Milman said to address schools' concerns, administrators should establish clear policies with parents and students and consequences for violating them.

"There are schools around the world who are already using these," Milman said. "I think the schools that are not quite there should look to those schools and learn from them."

Contributing: Michael D. Clark, The Cincinnati Enquirer
Lift the Cell Phone Ban

Stop thinking classroom disruption. Start thinking powerful (and free) teaching tool.

By David Rapp

Cell phones could become the next big learning tool in the classroom. So why have schools been so slow to embrace them?

Without a doubt, cell phones can cause serious disruption in the classroom. From urgent text messages flying across the room to lessons interrupted by rap-song ringtones, these gadgets are responsible for nationwide frustration among educators. And, in extreme cases, students have used their cell phones to cheat on tests and harass other students, even during class time. While such disturbances are certainly a nuisance in school, not all teachers see cell phones as the enemy. In fact, for some, they’ve become a teaching solution.

Cell Phone Solution

between the alarms, calls, and text-messaging, it’s easy to see why some classrooms have implemented a no-cell phone policy. But educators know that with students, cell phone use in inevitable, so why not use the devices for good? Many schools in Asia and the United Kingdom—where they’ve been using high-speed 3G, or third-generation, cellular networks years longer than the United States—have already turned cell phones into teaching tools. Recently, several school districts in North America have done the same. At the Craik School in Saskatchewan, Canada, such an experiment turned into an integral part of the curriculum.

Craik’s program started with a discussion in the staff room between the school’s principal, Gord Taylor, and teacher Carla Dolman. Many of the children had received cell phones for Christmas,
and the phones had become a distraction. “So we tossed out the idea of rather than looking at them as an evil thing,” says Taylor, “that we look at them as a tool for learning.” They realized that the text message and alarm functions would be useful for reminding students of homework assignments and tests, for example. They decided to run a pilot project with eighth and ninth graders.

Testing the Waters

initially, only about 40 percent of the class had cell phones, but kids who had them were willing to share. The text message function was mainly used at first, but as Dolman became more familiar with the myriad functions, it became clear that these gadgets had a lot more classroom potential. Video and sound recording came into play, and the phones’ Bluetooth networking capabilities allowed for easy information sharing. Dolman found they worked perfectly for her classes’ “lit circles,” in which the students divide into smaller groups to discuss different aspects of a particular book. Previously, she found it difficult to monitor each of the different groups simultaneously. But kids who had video functions on their phones could record their discussions then Bluetooth it to Dolman’s phone, and she could watch each individual discussion, without missing a moment.

Dolman says such problems like class disruption were minimal. “It’s a stereotype of teenagers—that you can’t trust them with a cell phone. Our experience was that if you give them the opportunity to use them, and you give them guidelines to go with that use, you won’t have problems.”

Principal Taylor agrees. “The one thing we really stressed with the kids was the whole idea of appropriate use,” he says. “They make darn sure that the volume is turned off. A lot of adults need to learn that.”

As for the kids, they loved using the phones for class work, but parents in the district have had mixed reactions, says Taylor. “Some thought we were crazy, and were very strongly opposed to it, and some embraced the idea initially. As time went on, about 90 percent came to say it was a good idea. They didn’t see it as a gadget, or as a replacement for learning, they saw it as a tool for learning.”
Taylor’s colleagues have been more enthusiastic. “In our school division there are about 90 principals and about 600 teachers, and I would say that out of the principals, there were about 15 to 20 that really were gung-ho and wanted to know what we were doing.” The rest, Taylor says, thought the program was innovative and at least worth a try. “There were no negative thoughts on it whatsoever.”

**Learning Curves**
Taylor sees the cell phone as a necessary tool to teach to kids. “We would be burying our heads in the sand if we said that cell phones were not a part of everyday life,” he says. “I don’t know a businessman out there who doesn’t carry a cell phone. I don’t know a lawyer or accountant out there who doesn’t carry a cell phone. Why wouldn’t we have them in schools?”

Given the example of the Craik School, why haven’t more American teachers embraced cell phone use in the classroom? In fact, few U.S. schools are even considering their use. Liz Kolb, author of the recently released book *Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Education* (ISTE, 2008), says that Americans have traditionally seen cell phones as nothing more than a social toy. “We hear stories about students using cell phones in negative ways, like posting videos of teachers to YouTube, or cheating via text messaging,” she says.

Many teachers simply don’t know the teaching potential cell phones have, Kolb says. “There are some teachers who have never sent a text message, so the fear of their students knowing more than them about a tool in the classroom is often very inhibiting.” Professional development, Kolb says, is a necessity for normalizing the idea of classroom cell phones.

**Corporate Help**
Matt Cook, a math and science teacher in the Keller Independent School District, near Fort Worth, Texas, knows his cell phone inside and out. He’s used it to document results in his classroom. In fact, his familiarity with cell phone tech sparked his imagination, and led him to get in touch with Verizon and AT&T, as well as software company GoKnow, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. All three companies have agreed to donate technology to the district for a pilot program to use cell phones in fifth-grade classrooms. (Other cell phone companies are certainly interested in classroom possibilities. Qualcomm has a similar program in the works called K-Nect.)

“I firmly believe that to prepare kids for their future, we need to start speaking the language of kids,” says Cook. “They’re using this stuff anyway—let’s teach them how to use it productively.”

The GoKnow software turns the students’ smartphones into computers, allowing students to use word processors, spreadsheets, and art programs, among others, on their cell phones. For example, every child learns the concept of the water cycle: how water moves on, above, and below Earth’s surface through the processes of evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and so
on. With GoKnow’s cell-based applications, a student could draw a concept map showing the relationship between the processes, create an animation illustrating how it all looks, and write up a text report on what they’ve learned—all centralized on a desktop-like interface on the smartphone’s screen.

At the end of the day, the students can upload all their work online. “The kids sync their phone up to the server. The parents can look at the work they’ve done, and the teachers can make annotations and grade the work, all online,” says Cook.

Elliot Soloway, founder of GoKnow, sees the key to popularizing cell phone use in classrooms is to make it easy to integrate into a school’s existing curriculum. GoKnow’s software has been engineered to make the process as easy as possible, he says. “We can do this in eight minutes with a teacher. Sit down with your paper-and-pencil lesson, and we’re going to show you how to transform that lesson into a cell phone–based lesson you can integrate with your existing curriculum.”

Soloway says that if the Keller program is successful, smartphones could become a part of the curriculum in neighboring districts. “We’ve talked to other districts in Texas that are watching,” he says. If cell phones in classrooms do catch on, the schools would, in effect, be getting low-cost computers into their students’ hands.

Dolman thinks that the possibilities for cell phones will only increase as kids become more familiar with the technology. “The more we discover what we can do with them, the more valuable they are. If you can harness what students are interested in, you have massive amounts of potential. And if you can get that into the classroom, you’re set.”
The Pros and Cons of having Cell Phones in High Schools

Informational Article

A recent survey indicated that 68% of students in grades 6-12 bring cell phones with them to school on a regular basis. Most high schools set some sort of policies regarding the use of cell phones on their premises. Some ban phones altogether.

While there are problems with the use of a cell phone in school, many advantages to having one available exist. Schools need to weigh all factors involved in use of cell phones in order to make wise and appropriate decisions. Parents and students should decide together on the wisdom of taking the cell phone to school. This is a partial listing of advantages and disadvantages of cell phone use in high schools.

The first one is students may need to make arrangements for after-school activities. They may want to go to the library or stay after school to consult with a teacher about an assignment they don't understand. They can use a cell phone to text or leave a voice mail explaining what they are doing so parents can better coordinate with them.

It must be seen that the main reason by parents to let their children continue to use cell phones is because of safety purposes. If they have the phones, it is easier to reach them and even know where they are. It is also beneficial during emergency situations when the child can either call for help or be located in case he or she is gone missing.

It is good that most of the phones in the market today have what is known as GPS capability for locating somebody through the cell in case of he or she is lost or missing. These are some of the quite logical reasons why a child should be let be with a phone.

A camera equipped phone can be used to take pictures and video related to school projects or develop photo essays. Camera phones can be used to record school events and field trips. They can prove quite useful for assignments involving photographs, particularly anything going to the web. Just snap a shot with your picture phone and use it for your web classes, which are becoming more and more important these days. This is especially useful given that cell phone cameras are getting better and better with time.

Cell phones can be a distraction in the classroom. Students whose minds wander during a lecture or discussion may find the temptation of texting instead of listening hard to resist. They are also potentially a distraction to the class if the student forgets to set their phone to vibrate rather than ring during calls. Even the vibration can be distracting, and it does not take much for a teacher to lose their momentum.

Besides, picture phones and other applications such as calculator in particular can be used to cheat on tests and quizzes. Take a picture of the test, send it to your buddy, and get a text back
with the answer. Or send it to someone who wants to know what's on the test. The calculator function can be used to cheat on math tests. The risk of potential cheating on academics is one of the main reasons why students are not allowed to bring handphone in school.

Cell phones allow students to communicate not just with students in other classes, but also other schools and even adults that are not in the school environment. There is the potential for social disagreements, and even communication with an adult who is not approved by parents. It can lead to students having episodes of being upset while a teacher is trying to conduct lessons. Banning cell phones won't eliminate social break ups or disagreements, but it can reduce opportunities for these kinds of issues.

Some students like to create bomb threats by calling emergency numbers on their phones. They may try it in restrooms when no one is nearby. They might do so between classes. Which means, that will put a delay for all the classes at school, before an emergency team arrives. Once the students are accused for the threat, they could get arrested and suspended.

With the prevalence of cell phones in high schools, it is important for students, parents, teachers, and administrators to carefully consider how and when they should be used. Policies need to take into account the advantages and disadvantages of cell phones in various situations.

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