

“Why I Allow Cell Phones in my Classes”

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In addition to my academic work and other writing, I teach children in the afternoon. And I let them use their cell phones during class.

Here’s why.

Setting the Stage

It seems to me that the three questions to ask regarding any policy are:

1. What are the benefits?
2. What are the drawbacks?
3. Is the trade-off worth it?

Just to be clear, what I let my students do is use their phones for anything except actually talking: text messaging, Facebook, Internet, etc. are all allowed, because these activities, unlike talking, do not interfere with other students. And the phones have to be set to “silent.” (“Vibrate” doesn’t quite do it. On a metal desk, a vibrating phone can practically be heard throughout the building.)

Having discussed this issue with dozens of school principals and other educators, I know people have strong gut reactions to cell-phone use, and they often have misleading intuitions. So in addition to my own experiences, I’m including an extensive list of research-based resources that provide insight into the benefits and drawbacks of cell phones, and, more generally, technology and multitasking.

Misunderstandings

Many of the perceived drawbacks of cell phone use come from misunderstandings, so I think it makes sense to start there.

Distractions and Multitasking

Many people intuitively think that students who text during class — or who otherwise multitask — must be learning less of what they are being taught. But the evidence is both complicated and mixed.

Just for example, Wierda et al. (2010) describe a well-known case of how adding a second task to a first can make it *easier* for people to do the first one well. Their particular task (also described in Arend et al. [2006] and elsewhere) is fairly well known. It involves watching a stream of digits and letters on a computer screen. The task is to identify the few letters among the many digits. People do a better job if they are also watching a moving gray dot, trying to notice when it turns red.

Certainly this doesn’t mean that doing two things at once is always beneficial. (For example, Strayer et al. [2011] show that talking on the phone while driving makes it harder for 97% of the population to avoid a collision in stop and go traffic.) But it also means that doing two things at once is not always detrimental.

Similarly, passive distraction — extra stimuli that people have to ignore — can make a task easier (as Friedrich et al. [2011] show directly).

Also, research suggests that multitasking difficulty increases with age (Clapp et al. 2011). So it's hard for older adults to appreciate when younger students can multitask successfully.

And for that matter, there's reason to think that children who grow up multitasking also develop brains that are better suited to it. Dr. Jay Giedd (Chief of the Unit on Brain Imaging in the Child Psychiatry Branch at the National Institute of Mental Health) notes that, "It's sobering to realize most humans that have lived and died have never read." His point is that multitasking is not necessarily more unnatural, or more difficult, than reading — at least for people who grow up with it.

And it seems that people who practice multitasking get better at it (Dux et al. 2009).

Bowman et al. (2010) have found that students who text-message while reading retain as much information as students who do not.

I think that these studies — and many more like them — demonstrate that our intuition can lead us astray when it comes to whether texting is distracting for students.

I've noticed similarly surprising results in my own classes. My classes for 11 year olds don't normally consist of lectures, but every so often I have to explain something to the entire class. Sometimes when I'm doing that I'll see a student texting. From time to time I'll stop suddenly and single out the child by name, asking, "what did I just say?" Almost without exception the student knows the answer.

Finally, as I describe below, I think that turning a cell phone off can be more distracting than keeping it on.

Common Courtesy

One complaint I frequently hear is that texting during class — or otherwise using a cell phone, or, really, any electronic device — is just plain rude. When someone's talking to you, you're supposed to listen, not do other things.

I think this is both right and wrong. Unlike the question of how distracting it is to text when someone's talking to you, the issue of manners is relative.

My upbringing has generally taught me to agree that undivided attention is a sign of respect. Anything less is rude.

But I also know people for whom a hand-written note is the only respectful way to communicate personally. A typed letter, for them, is a sign of a cold, pure-business approach. So is e-mail (to say nothing of texting). They may be right (in their communities), but they are also wrong (in mine). For that matter, I imagine folks a generation before them chastising the youth of the day for using slovenly ballpoint pens instead of a proper quill.

Similarly, my grandfather's upbringing taught him that wearing anything less than a jacket and tie is disrespectful. He would quite literally be ashamed if he knew that I taught wearing neither a jacket nor a necktie. And while he would be right (for him, at least), he would also be wrong.

I think that cell-phone use is similar. It is not inherently rude. It's only as rude as people think it is. And here we seem to have some combination of a generation gap and a culture clash.

I would hate for people to judge me as rude based on my e-mail or attire, just as I try not to judge them.

As I point out below, I think we owe the same respect to the next generation. Anything less is dismissive.

With all of this in mind, we can turn to the benefits and drawbacks of cell phones in the classroom, starting with the benefits.

The Benefits

The most obvious benefit of letting children use their cell phones is that they really want to. We know this from the efforts the students go through to keep them, and, often, to use them surreptitiously. (In typical 11-year-old behavior, students I've observed in other classrooms can be seen staring down at their hands, which are buried in their laps. When their teachers tell them to stop texting, the response is, "how did you know??") Other things being equal, I think letting children do what they like is better than not letting them do what they like.

A second benefit comes from the social aspect of texting. One of the reasons we have organized classes — as opposed to one-on-one tutoring in person or over the internet — is so the children can share an experience and otherwise interact with each other. And one of the ways children now do exactly that is by texting. I see texting as similar to whispering to the person next to you, with the added benefit that most children know how to text quietly, while their whispers are usually louder than they think.

A third benefit really belongs in a different category: The students can use their phones for classwork. Some people think this is a drawback, because for them looking something up on-line is cheating. But using a calculator in place of a slide-rule was once considered cheating, too. I think that there might be times when taking a cell phone away for a test is a good idea (just like children still learn to add and subtract), but in general giving children access to knowledge at school seems like a good idea to me.

Many more benefits of having cell phones in the classroom come from avoiding the negative impact of taking them away. Two that come to mind are these:

The children often think that their messages are important. When we take away their phones, or when we tell them they can't use their phones, they are often left wondering what important message they are missing. I remember an 11-year-old waiting for a text from someone she described as her ex-boyfriend. Just because I don't think that the message was important doesn't mean that her whole life at the moment wasn't focused on whether he would write her, and, if he did, what he would say.

By comparison, if a loved one of mine were in the hospital undergoing dangerous surgery, I would keep my phone on even if I were lecturing. If the phone rang, I would take the call during my own lecture. And I'm sure everyone would understand.

I don't see it as my place to tell students what to feel passionately about.

Letting this student keep her phone on, in this case, let her relax because she didn't have to wonder whether she was missing an important message, a message that might even demand an immediate reply. And I showed her that I respected her feelings.

More generally, letting students keep their phones on to get messages that are important to them helps them focus on class and creates a welcoming environment.

The same reasoning applies even for more mundane messages, I think.

I can imagine someone coming into my class and placing an envelope in front of me, face down, so I don't know who it's from. "This just came in the mail for you," I'm told.

The envelope would be distracting. Who's it from? What does it say? Is it good news? Etc.

A cell phone that's turned off is like a closed envelope. You know you have a message, but you don't know what it is.

Finally, taking cell phones away from students creates (unnecessarily, in my opinion) an antagonistic relationship between the teacher and the students.

So, as I see it, a policy of allowing cell phones in the classroom:

1. is fun.
2. creates an environment that's appropriate for the students' natural way of being in the world.
3. makes the classroom experience more social.
4. gives students access to knowledge.
5. validates who the students are.
6. can help students focus on the class.
7. improves the relationship between student and teacher.

All of these seem like good things to me.

The Drawbacks

So what are the drawbacks?

In my experience, most of the perceived drawbacks — as I described above — are not as bad as they seem. But even so, I see a price to be paid for allowing cell phones in the classroom.

For one thing, the teacher may not like it. Just as we don't want to tell children they are wrong to think that texting during a conversation is polite, we don't want to tell teachers (or even other students) that they are wrong to think that it's impolite. The teacher is allowed to feel uncomfortable when students text during a class. And it's harder for teachers to do a good job when they're uncomfortable.

Another potential pitfall — and I've experienced this — is that the phones can get out of hand. One way this happens is when children forget to silence them, so I have buzzing and ringing during class. I would probably have some of this anyway — anyone who's been to a concert knows that it's nearly impossible to get everyone to turn off their phones — but certainly I have more of it because I let the students keep their phones on.

A third drawback is more subtle. To the extent that most classes don't allow cell phones, allowing a cell phone in one may send the subtle message that the class isn't as serious as the ones that prohibit cell-phone use. (This particularly vexing objection is part of a larger pattern that may make teachers imitate widespread but bad practices in order to appear legitimate.)

Finally, even though it seems that texting is less of a barrier to focusing on the class than it appears, that doesn't mean that using a cell phone doesn't still distract the students, at least a little. Foerde et al. (2006) report that even when students seem not to suffer any learning deficit from multitasking, they may be less able to apply their knowledge to new situations, for instance.

So the drawbacks to cell phones in classrooms that I see are that they may:

1. make the teacher uncomfortable.
2. create noise.
3. make the class seem less serious.

4. hinder learning in ways that aren't yet clear.

The Trade-off

It seems to me that all of the potential drawbacks of having cell-phones in classrooms can be overcome, while the same is not true for what we lose by denying children access to their cell phones.

Most teachers can learn to accommodate children's behavior once they understand it better. Children can be reminded to silence their phones. Other cues can help the students take class seriously. And material can be reinforced to overcome any barriers presented by the cell phones.

By contrast, it's much more difficult to compensate for the ways in which children feel cut off without their phones, for the anxiety they feel when they wonder but don't know what awaits them, and for the lack of validation of who they are and what they feel.

Finally, when we prohibit cell phones, we run the risk of becoming like the old fogies who banned ballpoint pens and calculators.

So I allow cell phones in my classrooms, and my experience has been that the classes are much better for it.

What do you think?

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