

Cell Phones as Instructional Tools

Many students come to school with multimedia, network-enabled cell phones—so put that technology to good use in the classroom.

Mr. Rogers, Chanté had her cell phone on in class and she was text messaging. I caught her red-handed and took the phone—here it is!” My reaction to this scenario two years ago would have been to take the phone and be just as disappointed in the student’s behavior as the teacher was. What changed my mind since then? Reality set in. The truth of the matter is, Chanté was just passing notes in class... 21st century style.

As a middle level administrator and the father of a cell phone-toting seventh grader, I have quickly learned that most middle level students have cell phones. In fact, a recent study conducted by Harris Interactive (2008) found that 17 million teenagers—four out of five—carry cell phones. If 80% of students are carrying cell phones, schools are fighting a losing battle to keep them out of the classroom.

Twenty-first century learners, digital natives, or Generation D: whatever you choose to call them, they are here to stay and ready to learn differently. Students are communicating and collaborating using multimedia devices. Schools should be turning the perceived obstacles into opportunities to learn.

Multimedia Made Easier

Last year, I had a unique opportunity to help teach a seventh-grade pre-algebra class. It was probably the most rewarding (and humbling)

experience that I have ever had as an administrator, especially because my subject of expertise is science. The class had an interesting mix of personalities and academic abilities. Just like many schools, Passage Middle School gives quarterly assessments to determine what students have learned. The leadership team decided to give all students at Passage



the math assessment on the same day. The assessment required the use of a calculator, and we didn’t have enough calculators, so I let one of the students use the calculator function on my smartphone. He thought it was cool and mentioned that he had a calculator on his phone but had never used it. The other students chimed in on the conversation, and I discovered that 19 of the 22 students in the class owned cell phones. That teachable moment got Passage started with using cell phones in the class-

room. As a result of my experience, I’m able to offer some suggestions on how teachers can begin implementing cell phone use with their students.

Create excitement and generate guidelines. Explain to students that you would like to do some activities that will allow them to use their cell phones in class. Survey the class to determine how many have cell phones of their own and what features they have available.

It is extremely important to teach students

By Kipp D. Rogers

Kipp D. Rogers (kipp.rogers@nn.k12.va.us) is the principal of Passage Middle School in Newport News, VA.

Resources

Chacha <http://chacha.com>

Edublog <http://edublog.org>

Gabcast <http://gabcast.com>

Google SMS www.google.com/intl/en_us/mobile/default/sms.html

From Toy to Tool: Audioblogging With Cell Phones [Electronic version].
L. Kolb. [2006]. *Learning and Leading with Technology*, 34(3), 16–20.
Retrieved October 26, 2008, from www.sitemaker.umich.edu/kolb_504/files/kolb_toytotool.pdf

acceptable use early. Have the class come up with cell phone usage norms, and direct students toward rules that permit cell phone use in class for instructional purposes only. On days that they are not being used in a lesson, consider having a cell phone amnesty box in front of the class to discourage inappropriate use. The class policy should address etiquette, manners, safety, and privacy. Enforce a culture of safe and appropriate use of cell phones in your class by posting the acceptable use policy as you would regular classroom rules.

Solicit “buy-in” and plan. Send a letter home to explain what you are doing and to request parents’ permission for their children to use the cell phones in class. Also, determine whether students are able to send or receive text messages or access the Internet with their phones. A sample letter that you can send home is on my wiki, <http://cellphonelessonplans.wetpaint.com>. Once the informational letters are returned, create and send home an acceptable-use agreement that spells out the guidelines that the class set. Ensure that students and their parents sign the agreement.

Create a class blog. *Blog* is a contraction of the term *Web log*. In simple terms, a blog is a Web site where you can publish things on an

ongoing basis. It’s a great tool to use to publish many of the things that your students produce with the cell phones. Edublog.com is a popular, free blogging site that many educators use for instructional purposes.

Access for everyone. Your students will probably be very excited to be able to use cell phones in class. Inevitably a few of your students will not have cell phones, so have students work in groups of two or three. Cell phone features will also vary, so take this into consideration when assigning student groups to avoid creating social and academic gaps. Establish one student as the cell phone captain for the activity and rotate the captain as you would in any other cooperative learning activity.

You can ask local cell phone service providers to donate a few used cell phones that have been traded in by their customers. Students will not be able to make calls or text with the borrowed phones; however, they will be able to use many of the other features.

Begin with simple activities. I believe one of the easiest cell phone functions to use is the calculator. The first activity I used with my students incorporated the calculator function and M&M’s candy for a statistics lesson that teaches frequency and percentages. This activity could have been extended by having students create a graph of the distribution of candy, take a picture of it, upload the picture to a blog site, and add an audio summary.

Brainstorming Uses

Many seasoned educators are considered digital immigrants or, at the very least, pilgrims. Either way, the digital natives can come up with many more uses for cell phones in the classroom than digital immigrants or digital pilgrims. Have your students brainstorm ways to use cell phones for instructional purposes write them on the class board, take pictures of the board to archive the session, and upload the pictures to the class blog. Once you start

with a simple activity, your students will certainly have ideas and suggestions for other creative activities.

For example, students who are studying angles in a math class could take their cell phones outside and use the camera to take pictures of different types of angles. When they return, they could use the voice recording function to summarize or compare the angles in the pictures. The pictures could then be uploaded to the class blog directly from their cell phones. The students could then visit the blog and add more text or audio. (Students can also audio blog from their cell phones using Gabcast.com.)

In a middle level science class, students could use Google SMS (short message system) to track local weather for a week and compare it to the weather in another country. Students would simply do a search by texting *weather* and a zip code to the number for Google, which is 466453. In two seconds, the weather for that zip code will be sent to students' cell phones. Students could also take pictures of cloud formations using the camera and create a 30-second weather report describing the weather and cloud formation using the video camera function. They could upload all of the gathered information to the class blog to create an end product, such as a photo story.

In English class, students can use the voice recorder to conduct interviews, summarize short stories, or do a prewriting activity. In addition to Google SMS, Chacha.com is a great resource to begin general research. Students can text any question and receive an answer within just a few minutes. This is a great resource when doing a KWL (What I know, What I want to know, and What I learned) activity.

Use the calculator to determine averages, the stop watch to calculate speed, the calendar to replace the agenda, or the MP3 player to listen to notes. The possibilities of cell phone use in the classroom are almost endless.

Increasing Engagement

No matter which cell phone function you decide to use with your students, I am certain the students' level of enthusiasm and interest will increase. Students today live, learn, and play in a society that is saturated in multimedia. Students are becoming more and more accustomed to learning by collaboration, and cell phones are another instructional tool that facilitates collaboration. In fact, the word *classroom* is almost antiquated. "Collaboration" is probably more appropriate. Give cell phones a chance to boost collaboration at your school. **PL**

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REFERENCE

- Harris Interactive. (2008, September 12). *A generation unplugged: Research report summary for media*. Retrieved October 26, 2008, from www.harrisinteractive.com/News/MediaAccess/2008/Hi_TeenMobileStudy_ResearchReport.pdf

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