Harnessing the Power of the Cellphone in Class

First Person

By Curtis White

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Sometimes I watch my students in the hallways before class starts and marvel at the computing power (they call them 'smartphones') they hold in their hands. They use this power to text and share pictures and thoughts on social media. Then they stuff all that power in their pockets. In my small, private school, we have an "off and away" policy for cellphones in the classroom, which is supposed to eliminate the distractions. But it is not a perfect system, and students are still tempted to use their phones.

Article Tools

Perhaps you've had thoughts like mine: How can I get those supercomputers to work *for* their learning instead of being a nuisance? Why should I make them hide their mobile devices or fear they will get in trouble for using them? I'm just not satisfied with "off and away"! These questions have grown into a desire to find new ways to leverage my students' mobile devices into learning tools.

After sharing this passion with my administration two years ago, I was given the go-ahead to explore incorporating cellphones, laptops, and tablets in my classroom. I knew there would be challenges; not every student owns a device, and phones vary widely from flip phones to smartphones. We've been figuring out a balance through literature, trial and error, and conversations with students. After two years of exploring, I have emerged with a love for the new affordances a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy offers.

Now, my high school students' use of technology has become almost invisible as we leverage the tools in our pockets to create, collaborate, analyze, and synthesize together. During a recent class, my students used an e-version of a text that we were studying and worked in small groups to create a literature analysis on a shared, cloud-based text document. A couple of students were on laptops; most were on their smartphones. We've continued to rely on that document to guide our understanding, discussions, and synthesis of the passage.

This form of parallel editing, with all students contributing at once, makes more room for classroom discussion and exploration. It feels like we can do twice as much work in the same amount of time.

So, what is the best way to make something like this happen in the classroom?

Finding Common Ground

It is true that you risk some students going down rabbit holes unrelated to the lesson or not paying attention. But cellphones are also a tool they are comfortable with, one with so much potential to help them engage. Cellphones can be used to change the way students gather information, communicate with the teacher, reflect on, construct, or demonstrate their learning, and collaborate with each other.

The Pedagogy Wheel, developed by educator Allan Carrington, aligns different phone apps with Bloom's taxonomy . The New Media Consortium's New Horizon Project shows teachers how to keep looking forward on the newest technology with yearly reports, such as envisioning what augmented reality might look like in the classroom.

With my school's permission, I started using PollEverywhere as a tool for collecting student responses to pre-assessment questions or conversation prompts. I now feel more comfortable letting my students use their phones to independently read electronic texts online and love to watch how the tools empower rich collaboration.

Planning Is Key

The simple presence of cellphones or the internet does not create deep learning. It is the framing of the learning environment that creates space for students' growth. For the lesson plan you are exploring, you should have segmented text that needs in-depth analysis and discussion. Careful thinking about the kinds of analysis questions that will help students focus their attention is also crucial.

When trying to use Web 2.0 tools in a BYOD environment in the classroom, technical issues can quickly become a hindrance. In my approach, I created a shared folder with all students through Google Docs for easy access to many documents. This is time-consuming to set up, and students may need to download an app prior to the lesson in order to use the shared document, but it saves class time in the long run.

For educators who teach in environments less open to cellphones in the classroom, clear communication with leaders in the building is also key. If your school doesn't have an acceptable-use policy for technology, you may need to develop one. Talk with parents about the educational value of collaboration through technology and the ways you'll ensure positive use of cellphones.

Finally, discuss with your students what the appropriate behaviors are for learning when mobile devices are out and active, as well as how their behaviors may affect others. In my school, we are strict about not accessing social media, texting, or imaging apps during class. It can be a struggle for some students, which is why working in small groups can be helpful. In some cases, you may need to take a device away for a short time if it is being used as a distraction.

Be Prepared for Glitches

Flexibility and persistence are keys to success. Be gracious with students who need an email sent again. Have a backup plan for when the internet doesn't work well enough (or at all). Be ready to have students share devices in groups or pairs when a phone dies or when a student may not have their own smart phone. Identify the one or two students who know more than you and let them help lead the classroom. Have your school's internet-technology personnel available for the first time that you try things out.

Keep It Short and Sweet

Small screens are good for pushing buttons or for short texts, but not great for extended essays. I recommend using something like Google Pages or a table in Google Docs with pre-formatted cells to help categorize and break apart the analysis. Students seem quite willing to create text and analysis that are around the size of a few tweets, but not a few pages.

Push for 'Best,' Not 'Good Enough'

My students are happy to see their work on the screen just because it looks so formal and complete. When small groups work on a single shared document all at once (using their phones through a cloud-based editor), it is amazing how quickly an analysis document is created, saving time for deeper discussions to take place. Remember to ask questions like, "How can we make this better?" or "What is missing here?" or "Who can echo what Jason just shared?" to aid in students' thinking.

As teachers, we want to use every tool available to create an environment that helps students leverage the many

learning techniques technology has to offer. We don't need to use cellphones all the time in class; they won't always help students learn effectively. But we also shouldn't be afraid of them. This is what it means to be an educator: to develop the best techniques to help the most students grow the deepest understanding they can of the world around them. What's growing in your classroom?

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