**9-21-22 Guiding Students to Develop a Clear Understanding of Their Cell Phone Use**

**CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

Guiding Students to Develop a Clear Understanding of Their Cell Phone Use

Banning cell phones from classrooms can backfire, but teachers can help students think critically about this addictive technology.

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April 14, 2022



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Are you reading this on your phone right now? If the answer is yes, you understand the dilemma that cell phones pose in our classes. Technology use is ubiquitous. Our students are immersed in a technological world, and we need to learn ways to control the use of phones in class.

The old paradigm of banning phones doesn’t work—it just leads to more behavioral challenges in our classroom. Instead, here are some ideas for how to readjust our thinking about cell phones in the classroom.

**OLD HABITS: THE BATTLE FOR STUDENT ATTENTION**

Recently, I was facilitating a professional development session on student-centered, equity-focused practices. A teacher told me that cell phones aren’t an issue in her room because her students know that she doesn’t tolerate them. The real problem, she said, is that we aren’t tough enough on kids.

I encounter this perspective a lot in my work: If we set firm guidelines, students should be expected to follow them. It can be natural for teachers to reflexively punish students when they find themselves competing with the world of the internet in pocket-sized dopamine dispensers. Even teachers who know better too often engage in punitive measures: confiscation or calling home.

It can also be tempting for schools to consider large-scale phone bans. However, school leaders must remember that punitive measures aren’t without their own consequences. Cell phone bans are not attractive to parents who like to know that they can reach their children in an emergency. The threat of individual confiscation doesn’t solve the problem, either: Cell phones merely disappear into pockets, where they still cause [ambient distraction](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/691462). Further, the act of confiscation opens the door for noncompliance and unnecessary conflict, which degrades teacher-student relationships while increasing stress and anxiety levels.

**RESTORATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGIES: FACE TIME OVER FACETIME**

If the prime objective of school is to optimize the environment for student learning, we are better off fostering the most nurturing conditions that address unmet needs and support skills that students lack. This means treating students with empathy and providing respectful, humane solutions to problems like cell phones, even when that entails rewriting our playbooks. Here are some strategies that value student agency over compliance.

1. Cocreate cell phone–free spaces with students through community agreements. Address the issue directly, firmly, and consistently. Discussions about classroom norms take time and skillful facilitation, but they can be done when they prioritize reflection.

Each September I show my students a video [like this one](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRl8EIhrQjQ) to spark thinking about their relationships with their cell phones, [survey students](https://www.edutopia.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Student%20Survey%20Questions.pdf) about their technology use, and provide [self-help strategies](https://www.humanetech.com/take-control) for when students recognize the need to limit the amount of time they are spending on their phones.

2. Educate students about the effects of cell phone use on learning in classes. Find ways that you can connect the study of cell phones to your content area. For mathematics, you can examine the eye-opening statistics related to cell phone use. Include the historical rise and effect of different technologies on societies and human geography in a social studies class. Exploring the biochemistry of pleasure/reward feedback loops can enrich a science investigation. I’ve known several English teachers who have experimented with developing writing skills by giving a diary assignment where students chronicle a cell phone hiatus or document their usage of and relationship with technology. The results have been transformative.

3. Engage in schoolwide information campaigns. Helping students see why cell phones are addictive takes away the shame and blame. They are designed to dominate your attention. Your school could plan a special showing of the documentary [*The Social Dilemma*](https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/) and hold an open forum about the risks of social networking. [The Center for Humane Technology’s Youth Toolkit](https://www.humanetech.com/youth) can empower student leaders to discuss these issues with their peers.

4. Develop realistic classroom-based strategies that match your teaching style. Creative classroom techniques can also go a long way. Some teachers offer [cell phone charging stations](https://www.mudandinkteaching.org/news/2017/11/22/a-cell-phone-policy-that-actually-works?fbclid=IwAR01bAnN2ILgUmaLRi1Ik6DuxAnhdIvSh-zcg0yGI-GkBe3CknLitVyGCFM), with phones placed in airplane mode as a precondition. Others provide envelopes with Velcro to provide a physical distraction inhibitor.

5. Use cell phones in your lesson planning. Cell phones don’t have only a negative impact on student learning. Gamify and increase the interactivity of your lessons. Using polls can be a great way to provide the immediate feedback of a push notification. Have your TikTok star students go live on Flipgrid. Integrate badges and streaks to make criteria for success visible and goals attainable.

During a recent professional learning session, I asked teachers to watch [this video](https://www.vox.com/2018/2/27/17053758/phone-addictive-design-google-apple) and discuss how they might apply cell phone and social media design principles to their instructional design. [Here’s what we came up with](https://www.edutopia.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Teaching%20in%20a%20digital%20age%20%282%29.pdf).

**MINDSET EVOLUTION**

The toothpaste is out of the tube—today’s generation is irreversibly enmeshed in technology, so educators must evolve. Instead of thinking of cell phone use as a lack of respect, consider impulse control a lagging skill that needs support to develop. The strategies listed above work best when used together, and they require time, effort, and collaboration.

I’m convinced that the best way out is through and that innovative teacher-leaders will adapt schools to be able to leverage technology in healthy, productive ways that benefit learning. It starts with caring adults putting relationships and children’s developmental needs first.