Beyond Texting:

Using Cell Phones in the Classroom

By Nickolas Erickson-Guy and Kristine Gullen

As technology literacy grows and the desire to engage students at higher levels increases, educators are rethinking the use of cell phones in the classroom. So how do we move the conversation from banning these powerful tools to using them to promote student engagement and achievement?

Flash back. It’s 1985. The teacher posts a writing prompt on the chalkboard as an opening activity. Students sit at their desks, journals open. The teacher walks around the room, encouraging students—especially those who are staring at a blank page, struggling to write a sentence or even a couple of words in their journal.

Move ahead 20 minutes. Same class period and same kids. Students are taking turns reading aloud from a novel. A piece of paper being passed between two students catches the teacher’s attention. She intercepts a note that is two pages long. Two pages! The teacher confiscates the note, which is correspondence between two students who less than 30 minutes earlier had trouble writing a simple sentence in response to a writing prompt.

Can we create instructional strategies that tap into this same level of engagement and willingness to communicate in writing?

Fast forward to 2013. Students still pass notes, but they do so with a technological twist: they use cell phones to text message their friends. Many can send a message without removing their phones from their pockets. Amazing.

And educators are just as frustrated with this “note passing” now as they were in 1985.

Nickolas Erickson-Guy is a student at Central Michigan University.
Email: ericktnm@cmich.edu

Kristine Gullen is a consultant in the School Quality and Learning Services Departments at Oakland Schools in Waterford, Michigan.
E-mail: Kristine.Gullen@oakland.k12.mi.us
Building the Case

Many kids and adults have embraced text messaging as a favorite form of communication. Yet using cell phones to communicate in the classroom—as an instructional or formative assessment tool—is still not universally accepted.

When we were facilitating a professional learning session with a group of secondary school teachers, we asked everyone to get out their cell phones or hand-held computers and share a favorite app, online video, or text message with a colleague or two.

The room began to buzz. Heads together, more than 100 teachers watched, shared, dragged each other to view something a colleague had cued up on a phone. Even those who did not have phones were engaged and involved.

After 10 minutes of sharing, we posted chart paper around the room and asked teachers to write down the websites or apps they had shared. The level of engagement by some of the most reluctant adult learners in the room was impressive.

When teachers returned to their seats, we guided them to a multiple-choice question from www.polleverywhere.com: “How many times a day do you personally use your cell phone? Make sure you include texting, apps, GPS, and don’t forget phone calls.” Response options were: Never, 1–4 times, 5–19 times, and 20+ times. The participants responded to the question on their cell phones.

Next, we asked the teachers, “In the past year, how many times have you had your students use cell phones as part of your classroom instruction?”

The results, which participants watched develop on screen, highlighted a disconnect between personal use of cell phones and instructional use (Figure 1).

We then asked participants to respond to an open-ended question: “What are your concerns with using cellphones in class?” The group watched as the live message board quickly filled with their responses, including “cheating,” “talking to friends instead of listening in class,” “using profanity,” “they are against school policy,” and “not everyone has one.”

When responses slowed, we copied and pasted the stream of words in a word cloud created on Wordle (www.wordle.net). The size of the word correlates to how often it was used. (See Figure 2.)

The Challenge

Many of the concerns teachers expressed are actually old behaviors carried out using a new tool, as Thomas and Orthober point out in their 2011 American Secondary Education article, “Using Text-Messaging in the Secondary Classroom.”

The intensity by which technology brings these behaviors and communications into the world is startling. Instead of an embarrassing moment or unflattering comment being shared with a small handful of peers, it may be forwarded almost instantly to millions on the Internet.

Consequently, the number of students involved in an issue can be exponentially larger and the time teachers and administrators must spend in response can cause frustration and lost time on classroom instruction. These are legitimate concerns. Yet there is no denying the engagement of adults and students when they use cell phones.

So how can we responsibly use this new tool instructionally? Can we create instructional strategies that safely tap into this same level of engagement and willingness to communicate about classroom content?

Phones in the Classroom

We asked participants how they might use something we had done during the session to engage students in their classroom with the content they teach. Teachers began to talk with colleagues about using cell phones to answer bell work or as a quick formative assessment; some shared multi-faceted ideas.

Here’s one English teacher’s suggestion:

After students finish reading the first chapter of a novel, the teacher asks them to respond to an open-ended question on polleverywhere.com: “What words or phrases would you use to depict the main character in the story?” After students respond, she copies their responses into Wordle to create a word cloud as a way of bringing their brainstorming to life.

She then asks students to read Chapter 2 of the story for homework. The following day, the class revisits their Wordle word cloud. Students compare their initial impressions of the character to their new perception.

The students then answer another online poll question: “Was the characterization contained in the Wordle from the previous day

1. completely accurate?
2. somewhat accurate?
3. somewhat inaccurate?
4. completely inaccurate?”

When the bar graph reflecting results finishes forming, students are asked to turn to a neighbor and reflect on this new data. The pairs explore how their opinions changed or stayed the same and whether their perceptions were similar or different from the class as a whole.
Once cell phones are in the classroom, educator William Ferriter suggests keeping phones visible by having students place them on the right corner of their desks when they sit down. Some classrooms provide a 4" x 6" rectangle of rubber mat on each desk to help prevent the phone from slipping off.

Other considerations are to turn off cell phones until they are used, access only the sites directed by the teacher, and provide a list of approved sites for research.

Figure 2 Word Cloud of Teachers’ Concerns about Cell Phones in the Classroom

Ground Rules

Incorporating use of cell phones and hand-held communication devices into instruction requires thoughtful consideration and clear rules, expectations, and boundaries.

After cell phone use is approved, you must set ground rules. Reviewing classroom and building expectations and making the explicit connection to how they apply to cell phone usage is pivotal, according to Nielsen and Webb in Teaching Generation Text: Using Cell Phones to Enhance Learning.

For example, many schools have an expectation to “respect yourself and others.” Connecting this expectation to electronic communications devices is vital. A dialogue about what is appropriate and respectful use as far as videos, pictures, and texts—and what is not appropriate such as putdowns and profanity—is also important. Be clear.

Embracing Technology

Classroom distractions, cheating, and side conversations are timeless classroom issues. Combining these with the speed and scale that technology can transfer a communication out into the world can cause great concern. Students need to learn about appropriate etiquette and ways to be safe and responsible while using cell phones and other technologies.

With all the conversation in districts about how to engage and motivate today’s students, the answer may be in the palms of our hands. To meet students where they are, it’s time for us to step back. Just like the collaborative writing strategies that make the most of students’ interest in passing notes, it’s time to find ways to start using—even embracing—these incredibly powerful, engaging hand-held devices for teaching and learning.