Chapter 5

Decriminalizing Cell Phones: Before and After the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss cell phones in the classroom before and after the pandemic. The author discusses the problematic history of cell phones in the classroom, and how teachers have struggled and fought against them, many times outright banning cell phones. Instead of this approach, the case is made for the need for students to learn how to use them, and why they are so useful in the classroom for both formative assessment and feedback. Next, this chapter discusses how the author leveraged cell phones during the period of crisis instruction at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. The author was able to launch and successfully complete a unit that combined social justice themes, graphic novels, and podcasting — all of which utilizing cell phones. Finally, specific tools, resources, and strategies are shared and discussed that were used during this time, with recommendations for the future of education no matter how it may look.

INTRODUCTION

A Problematic History

There is a connection between the way teachers conceptualize their role in managing student behavior and their perspective on the purpose and function of cellular phones in the classroom. From the first cell phone that crossed the threshold into the classroom, safely stowed in a pocket, teachers have been asking the question of
what to do with these devices. Teachers are creative creatures by nature: this has produced some unique contraptions to help remove them from the idle hands (or hands wishing to be idle) of their students.

One of these contraptions was an outlet rental scheme. They were popularized in about 2014. There was be a power-strip or three plugged into outlets around the room where students could plug in, leaving their phones on the wall, and twenty-five cents in a jar. When this was done for charity, I thought it was a great idea, though a few of my colleagues charged students for outright profit. Teachers had discovered that giving students a charging station would help students keep their phones off their desks and out of reach. This gave students a “choice” about what to do with their phones – but the message was clear: they were unwanted.

In schools where cell phones have become illegal in classrooms, students are positioned as offenders and law breakers. Mupinga (2017) found that many schools are switching to Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) or Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT). This is a system that lessens the technology gap but does not hold the school systems accountable for one-to-one devices. Even with these initiatives, high schools still have policies to deter their use in the classroom. While many schools had these listed on their websites, Mupinga (2017) surmised that the schools that were silent on their policies might be so out of fear of seeming unprogressive in an age where cell phones are normalized in society (p.71). In their study, a small sampling of 27 high schools, 66% had policies that no cell phones were to be seen during school hours and students must always keep them in their lockers. My own school district in Georgia, despite being BYOD, has policies restricting cell phones in individual classrooms.

My district is one of the largest public-school systems in the country and serves over one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand students across twenty clusters. Every school’s front door proudly displays the BYOD sticker, while most classrooms in my county use restrictive systems of management to keep them sometimes literally locked away under lock and key. In classrooms like these, cell phones are only thought of in terms of behavior management and policies on the syllabus. I have worked in two different high schools in our district over the last five years, but the rhetoric involving cell phones in the classroom has remained the same – “lock them up.”

Like most Americans, when teachers see a rule being broken, they institutionalize and incarcerate. According to Wendy and Sawyer (2018), the United States incarcerates six-hundred-and-ninety-eight Americans for every one-hundred-thousand citizens. This is the highest rate in the world. If twenty-three states were countries, they would have higher incarceration rates than any other country on the planet. America solves problems by putting them behind bars. This is no different for children. Fabelo et al. (2011) found that sixty percent of students between grades seven and twelve were suspended or expelled at least once with significant increases in repeating grades,
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