



Cell Phone: Friend or Foe of Learning?

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The following is part of an [On Course Ambassadors'](#) listserv discussion about cell phones in the classroom. It began with the following request for suggestions:

I am so tired of watching students ruin their chances of passing my math course because of their addiction to their phones. I'm also tired of being the cell phone "police." Does anyone have a technique that works in their classroom?

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The best idea I've heard so far came from an English teacher at my college. She tells her students, "If I see you texting in class, I will mark you absent for the day." I'm thinking of switching to this policy in my classes. This, combined with my attendance policy, might finally be enough of a deterrent to have an effect. --*Martha Whitty, Trinity Washington University*

One day last year I asked my students to get their cell phones out and change the setting so that the phone would make a sound when they received a call or a text. Then, after promising I would not touch the phones, I told them to place their phones at the top edge of their desks, and I began to teach. When the first phone rang, I placed a hash mark on the board. At the end of 10 minutes, I had 23 marks on the board (20 students in the class) and my point was made. I asked them to turn their phones back to silent, made a big deal over the few who actually turned the power OFF, and we moved forward. When they oozed back into texting a couple of weeks later, I reminded them of that lesson, and suggested that I would henceforth expect them to check their phones with me at the beginning of class - they could see their phones on MY desk but not touch them until class was over. That took care of it. --*Gail Kiley, University of Cincinnati*

I take advantage of the cell phone technology - it really can be used as a tool for success. My students covet their phones. They talk, brag, and dream about options they have on their phones. So I let them do this.... I show them how to use the calendars in their phone effectively and have them teach others. We use the timer functions. We use the texting features for test review. Contacts for a buddy in class and their instructors' numbers. And the camera feature for anything from scavenger hunts, struggling student behavior, to taking pictures of 'acts of kindness.' The students are very quick to come up with their own ideas for themselves and others for taking advantage of their phones other than texting and chatting. It really has become great fun and an incredible learning tool. The ways you can use their phones (and yours) in class are really limitless. Of course, there will be the student(s) without a phone - this is the best so everyone gets to pair up. Bottom line - I was too stressed trying to beat them, so I figured out how to learn with them. --*Diane O'Hearn, Greenfield Community College*

Another effective way to use cell phones in class is to poll them - they text their response to you and it automatically shows the results on your classroom screen - they love it! Open a free account with www.polleverywhere.com and use the technology! --*MaryAnn McGuirk, North Lake College*

Have ad hoc quizzes/tests/activities/questions that rely on not just assessing the substantive aspects but heavily reliant on attention skills. If a student still gets a good grade in these assessment techniques, it means that that student has the skills for effective multitasking! Thus, you shouldn't worry about it. I think you should worry about those whose grades are affected by it and how you can make them realize that their inattentiveness (or attempts at multitasking) is contributing to poor performance in your class. --*Maxwell N. Kwenda, Cameron University*

I solved this problem successfully by including this topic on the first day of class when we reviewed the syllabus. Some of the "Classroom Guidelines" are non-negotiable, but I allow them to "negotiate" how to handle [texting in class]. They all know it is a problem. I told them texting was not allowed and then gave them the power to decide what the consequences would be if I saw it happening. We brainstormed ideas and they quickly agreed on: First time it happens, they will get a warning from me; second time, they are asked to leave the class for the rest of the period. It worked beautifully - I have never had to ask a student to leave, although I have had to give occasional warnings. One student shared that another professor made everyone put their phones in a basket when they came to class and retrieve them at the end of class -- they HATED that! --*Shari Pergricht, Harper College*

I have a policy in my syllabus about cell phones in class. If a cell goes off during class for a call or text, thereby disrupting our

educations, the offending owner will beg forgiveness from his or her colleagues by buying a dozen donuts or a pizza for the next time the class meets. Whenever it happens, I'll also bring in a box of donuts or order a 2nd pizza so that everyone can have a snack. I never have to enforce the rule because the students do it. --*Rick Dollieslager, Thomas Nelson Community College*

In my syllabus I tell students that the cell phone policy is "off." I have a syllabus test they take home to complete and one of the questions is about cell phones, so I know they have read the policy. They get 4 points per day for active participation in activities in the classroom. My syllabus states if they don't have it off they will be asked to leave and will lose participation points for the day. It does state if there is an emergency they are expecting a phone call they need to tell me before class and then have it on vibrate. I caught someone texting under the table the second day of class and I quietly asked her to leave. No one has had it happen again. --*Barbara Stockton, Jackson Community College*

I, too, have the same problem with cell phones, but am perhaps at an even greater disadvantage because I am in a wheelchair and am too low down to see much of the cell phone usage I suspect is going on. I do have one cell phone strategy that does work, however. If a student's cell phone goes off while I am giving a test, that student has to leave the class immediately, receives a grade of 0 on the test, and is unable to make it up. I have this stated on my syllabus, and can therefore be backed up by my administration. I do love the policy about telling students they must leave class for the rest of the class period if I see their cell phones out, because I count absence by the hour, and they are only allowed 4 hours of absence per semester in a 4 unit class. I plan to incorporate that policy in my syllabus next semester. If my students anticipate the need to be contacted during class, I tell them to give their babysitters or children's schools the phone number for college security, and I provide that number on my syllabus. I tell them that security will dispatch an officer to the classroom if there is some sort of emergency. That takes care of all of the "what if there is an emergency" excuses. --*Anne Rees, Antelope Valley College*

I allow students to take pictures of the board to save them time in note taking, and they may use their calculators to tally up their grades in class when I hand back their papers. --*Nancilyn M. Burruss, El Camino College*

Just as food for thought, here is an article entitled, "Okay class, there's an app for that" about a junior high school in our area and their use of mobile technology in the classroom. We will be getting some of these students in a few years! Click [HERE](#) for the article. --*Susan Cauti, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology*

Here's something I've tried with a writing class that meets once a week in a computer lab. They invariably open up their Facebook and email accounts, and then minimize them when I come by to see what they are working on. Rather than fight it, I told them that if they get to work on their assignments right away, there will be a five minute break half way through the period for them to check their email and Facebook. Then I will announce the time to get back to work. They jumped right into the assignment and worked right up to the break. When I announced the break, some were so into their work that they kept going. Most quickly opened their Facebook, took care of business and went right back to their assignments on their own. There were only a couple students who had to be told the break was over. I was pleasantly surprised at how well they handled it. --*James P. Kain, Neumann University*

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After publishing the suggestions above in the [On Course Newsletter](#), I received the following additional ideas. Clearly this topic struck a nerve for many educators.

In my syllabus, I state that the WHOLE class begins with 30 extra credit points----but if anyone texts or if a phone rings during class, then the points are lost for the WHOLE class. The next time either texting or a phone rings---there is a pop quiz of about 20 points- for the WHOLE CLASS---next time----40 points---then 80---etc. The most pop quizzes my classes had was 2. The students monitor each other. If anyone is concerned about the pop quizzes---there are usually 1-2 questions based on the homework reading for the day....it is also a good check if students are keeping up with the work!
Bev Van Citters, Citrus College

I told one student [using a cell phone] to leave. He was shocked and asked why. I said "just leave." He got the idea, no problem since in that class, I and will continue this practice in all classes. *Dina Monat, Suffolk Community College*

I tell my students that text messaging during class is absolutely not acceptable. I tell them, "All I know is, I can't see your hands, you're looking down at your crotch, and you're smiling. There will be none of that in my classroom!" It gets a great laugh, and good cooperation. If I catch them texting in class, I take the attendance sheet over to them and ask them to erase their name. All of this is clearly spelled out in the Syllabus, of course. *Kristin L. Roush, Central New Mexico Community College*

I have a very simple policy regarding cell phones. If a cell phone goes off during class or I catch somebody texting they get to teach the class for 5 minutes. I warn them ahead of time that two things happen when they come in front of the class, time stops and they will have trouble even remembering their names i.e., their brains will turn to jello. They have the choice of reviewing the past 15 minutes of lecture or going ahead for the next five. I have yet to have a student make it the full five minutes. This gets the teacher out of being the heavy and is an entertaining break for other students. This is especially effective in my freshman classes. Students actually become the enforcers of the rule instead of me. Cell use has virtually ceased in my classes.

Craig Conley, New Mexico Highlands University

Often times in class discussions, someone will ask a question connected to a reading or assignment that I may not have the answer to. Instead of me going to my smart cart and looking for an answer, I'll ask someone to break out their phones and Google it. It is usually faster, and the students seem to be more engaged as they wait for a response. **Fredric Ball, Southwestern College**

In the Associate Degree Nursing program we have now included a signature sheet which states: "I understand there will be no cell phones or cameras taken into the clinical setting. If there is a need to reach me on an urgent basis, I understand I can call the school of nursing and a message will be sent to my faculty. I also understand it is the decision of my faculty to allow me to utilize his/her phone or beeper number for urgent messages. If I'm caught with a cell phone or camera, I understand there will be consequences, including but not limited to failure of this course. I also acknowledge I cannot take other electronic devices that might record or take pictures of the client into the clinical setting. I have read and understood this policy and agree to following the requirements. I also understand the consequences and accept them if I do not follow the requirements." Now in the math department it may be more of a nuisance, but in nursing it is a HIPPA violation if a student utilizes the phone/camera/ or other recording device and just accidentally includes a picture of client in the distance. The students are no longer allowed to even take pictures of themselves at the clinical site for fear the background may include a client. There is zero tolerance for this. But, it has to be taken further to the class room for math tests and other tests to prevent cheating. So, the type of calculator allowed is the elementary type with basic functions. All handbags, backpacks, are in the front of the room and only # two pencil and scan tron are allowed. It is disturbing that the methods must be applied but, security of the material and the clients is at risk. Hope this helps you get hold of the class. **Nancy K. Reid, San Jacinto College**

Silent or "ringing," I find cell phones to be incredibly disruptive in the classroom—both for myself and for my students. My policy (as stated in my syllabus) is that your cell phone must be turned off, and if I see it, hear it, or catch you using it in any fashion during class, we will have a "cell phone quiz." The cell phone quiz is a 2-point "check-up" as to whether or not they have been paying attention in the current and recent classes. The quiz will take the prepared student 2 minutes or less—but I always allow at least 5 to cover any disability time accommodations. You get one point for your name (being present) and a second point for having a perfectly correct answer (no partial credit). This makes the quizzes a snap to grade and return at the next class period. These points are *not* extra credit—they become part of the points in the course (if there were 800 points available, now there are 802). If there are a lot of cell phone disruptions in a class, there are a lot of opportunities for me to find out whether or not my students are keeping up with the material. A win for all of us. Usually, the "threat" of being the cause of a pop quiz is enough to deter students from using their cell phones or letting them ring during class. A win for all of us. **Mary Kassebaum, Anne Arundel Community College**

All phones in the "Off" position and on their desks for me to see. Period. Why negotiate? Is it your classroom or not? Unless, of course if your syllabus states that the policy is negotiable. The problem today is most people tend to bend the rules and expect this to be common practice everywhere. Rules are NOT meant to be broken, they are meant to be followed or changed. **Eric Garcia, South Texas College**

I address the issue in my syllabus and in class the first day. All cell phones, I-pods, MP3 players, etc are to be off and put away (out of sight). If I see their cell phone out and on (whether or not it's ringing or they're texting) then I pick it up and place it on the numbered-seating grid at the front of the class. When class is over they can reclaim their cell phone. The first few weeks of class I gently remind them that class has started and their cell phones should be off and out-of-sight. I usually have a few who resist but after I place their phone on the grid the first time at the front of the class, I usually don't have any further problems. I do have an "emergency provision" which basically states if you're expecting an emergency call then you must tell me before class begins otherwise the cell phone policy applies. **MaryAnn Manuel, Graceland University**

In my syllabus I state my cell phone use policy. If any use is noted or tone/vibration detected I confiscate the phone for 24 hours. They sign a statement at the beginning of the semester that says they have read the syllabus and agree to engage in the class and abide by the policies in the syllabus. I also go over the policy orally the first day of class. The first few semesters I only had to confiscate a phone once in each course. But the past couple years, as the word has gotten around that I do enforce the policy, I don't have violations in any of my courses at all. **Marty Seitz, Asbury University**

My friend teaches machine metal working. Students do a lot of individual work on potentially dangerous machines. He has safety policies that he goes over very carefully. These include no cell phone use. If he discovers a student talking on their phone in class, he will ask the student for the phone and talk (kindly) with the person on the other end often telling them that the student is in class and that they are not to be disturbed at this time. A bit unorthodox, and not for everyone, but it works well for him in his particular setting. **Janet Adams, Joliet Junior College**

My way of dealing with the issue is simple. On the first day of class, when I go over the syllabus, I make it clear that the 'cell phones off' policy is a standard meeting courtesy that the students will have to follow for the rest of their lives --- so they might as well get used to it now. I also set the example by taking out my own cell phone and turning it off at the start of class. Another variable is my personality. I am a classic Alpha Male, so anyone with any sense can judge quickly that it behooves him/her to stay on my good side. **Craig Barto, Charleston Southern University**

What works in my class is to have every student place their cell phone in the upper right side of their desk on silence. They are allowed to view who is calling or texting and if it is an emergency (child/parent) they are free to leave the class and return the call. It completely resolved the head down and in class texting. *Carol Mauer, Lamar Institute of Technology*

I use cell phones to text answers or questions during class discussions. This works really well when I want participation but some students may be afraid to ask or submit answers. Also this way I can give participation to all who sent responses. *Evelyn Brown, Parkland College*

I have a workable cell phone policy: my students are adults and, as such, are a locus of rights and adult responsibilities. An adult decides what is important to his or her life. My policy is that no person may interfere with another person's participation in the class activities. If the student's cell phone asserts, then it is entirely the student's problem to deal with it. My students have children in school; they are EMS personnel, hazardous waste disposal agents, firefighters, general professionals, and have other adult responsibilities to juggle with college. Sometimes their cell phones will demand their immediate attention. When that happens, I remember that I teach college, not children. My policy is that the student will take his or her cell phone out of the classroom and cope with whatever it is as an adult. I have never found cellular devices to be a problem because I treat college students as adults and expect adult behavior... generally, my expectations are met. *Steven Smith, Del Mar College*

I use some humor for the inevitable. At the beginning of the semester I program my cell phone to ring about 15 minutes into class, answer it and say "Oh, hi! No, nothing important. Just in class. Go ahead, what's up." They get the point. Then I tell them if I see them with their hands under the desk and them looking down, I'll assume one of two things: that they either have a personal problem, or they are checking their cell phone. I used to tell students with a smile that "I have a hammer that could fix that" when cell phones went off. But then I got my own cell phone...now, at the beginning of each class period I ask students to turn off their cell phones. If they start checking texts under the table, I say "put your cell phones" away. I remind them that it is disrespectful to the whole class. I haven't yet gotten punitive, and it does get discouraging, so I may try a few of these suggestions. *Tom Butler, Paradise Valley Community College*

I have a written policy which I distribute at the beginning of the term which states that "Cell phones and other electronic devices are not to be seen or heard in the classroom." I make a point of emphasizing that by occasionally asking students at the start of the class whether their phones are turned off. If a cell phone goes off during a class, I immediately ask everyone to take out a sheet of paper and I give a short (5 question) pop quiz. One occurrence is quite enough to embarrass students into keeping their phones put away. I also take off points if there is some reason why a quiz isn't feasible at the moment. The above works for me! *Karin S. Alderfer, Miami-Dade College*

As per my syllabus, students aren't allowed to use cell phones in class, it is too disruptive! We discuss this during the first day or two of class while reviewing the syllabus. Recently though, more and more students have been sending text messages and so I asked the class to come up with a consequence for those students who are caught texting. They decided that the offender would bring in a snack (donuts, cookies, etc.) for the entire class and if they failed to do that, the student would be dropped a grade. I was surprised by how harsh their punishment was for their peers ... I haven't seen a cell phone in class recently, so it must have worked. I think they liked being involved in how to handle the situation versus my "putting" this punishment on them. *Nora Manz, Delaware County Community College*

I like to tell them if their phone rings in class they should answer it and let me talk to the caller. This usually happens only once as the class hears me explain to the caller that we are in class and the person they are calling is hard at work trying to do well in my class! *Charles Welch, Developmental Mathematics*

I like the policy a colleague at another institution told me he used. He said, "If a cell phone rings during class, I answer it." *Lucy Garmon, University of West Georgia*

I teach an ESL class and the first day of class I tell the students that no phones are allowed in class, and if they do ring in class that student pays one dollar! Then I tell them that at the end of the term for our end of term party that money will go toward buying some food and treats. It really works, all of the class gets involved and if a phone does ring the class calls the student on it. Sometimes they joke and say five dollars!!! It works really well, my classes have gone from 6-7 calls a day to MAYBE one a month!! We don't have a lot of money for the end of term party though!! *Elaine Morningstar, Bow Valley College*

I have no problem with cell phones in class. If a student's cell phone rings out loud, that student must bring cookies or fresh fruit for everyone in class next time we meet. (I have had to bring cookies myself a few times.) I find that policy much less disruptive than attempts to penalize students for cell phone usage. I make no attempt to control texting. Frankly, I don't care. All of my students are over 18. I'm here to teach math. It's true, I'm not teaching them responsibility. I'm also not teaching them history nor government nor a lot of other things. I'm teaching math. Period. As far as my classes are concerned, that's all I care about. *David Lung, South Texas College*

I teach an on-line statistics class at a community college. Students are required to send me weekly their homework. Some drop it off in person, some do it either Word or Excel and send that as attachment, some scan it into a pdf file. This semester, I have a

student who takes a picture of his homework on his cell phone and sends it to me as an email attachment. *Jeanne Osborne, Middlesex County College*

One approach that I have used and find works quite well is to ask students to create a Phone Call Kitty. Whenever a cell phone rings or a text message chimes, the student who's phone it is contributes \$5 to the Kitty. If the student proceeded to answer the call or respond to the SMS, they contribute an additional \$10 (emergency messages are excepted – and everyone pays attention to what type of call or text someone receives). At the end of the term, depending on the amount in the Phone Call Kitty, we use the money to have a class dinner out or a texting party in class – or something in-between. It works very well since nobody is interested in sponsoring such an event (and everyone is interested in being sponsored!) *Alexander Laszlo, The Green MBA at Dominican University of California*

I have a colleague whose rule is if your cell phone goes off in class, you get to come in front of the room and sing a song. *Kathryn Van Wagoner, Utah Valley University*

The use of cell phones in the classroom is expressively prohibited by my University. Allowing students to use cell phones not only violates the rules but encourages students to do the same. My freshmen class is only 50 minutes long - students can manage the lack of instant gratification for that period of time - otherwise, they are merely implementing a form of ignoring behavior and quietly letting someone else know of their discontent. This holds true for Facebook, Myspace, Mylife, and other social networking sites that students visit. And instructors have no way of monitoring (and shouldn't).

Multitasking (polyphasia) can often be non-attentive, stress producing and life threatening (texting while driving). Students also text/talk while walking, in restaurants, movie theaters, banks, during interpersonal discussions, and while working. A rule, is a rule, is a rule - if the rule is no longer pertinent or sufficient or enforceable - then the "rule" should be changed. (Forgive me - I'm receiving some text messages and have to go...) --*Toby Mastrocola, Florida Atlantic University*

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