

Cell Phones in Classrooms? No! Students Need to Pay Attention



By [Greg Graham](#)
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In the battle for the hearts and minds of students, the front line for educators has changed over the last couple of decades. Rather than the age-old struggle for access, the foremost concern today is one of attention.

Sure, there will always be issues of access, but for the most part that battle has been won. We're no longer suffering from an information deficit; we're suffering from an attention deficit.

The shift from access deficit to attention deficit has some very practical ramifications for schools. Certainly it gives perspective on the question of whether to allow cell phones in the classroom. On KQED MindShift (and reposted here on MediaShift), Audrey Watters [argued for cell phones](#) in the classroom because they (or at least smartphones) are powerful research tools. But the ability to get to information is not the problem; what students lack is the critical thinking skills to sort, filter and interpret information. [Recent research](#) has shown that students are good at getting to information, but weak at knowing what to do once they get there. So we must be protective of the classroom as a uniquely effective learning environment.

In 1997, writer and critic [Howard Rheingold](#) proposed two rules for our rapidly changing world: "Rule Number One is to pay attention. Rule Number Two might be: Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention." This was before text-messaging, smartphones, Facebook, Skype, YouTube or Twitter. Not surprisingly, the business community responded quickly to the importance of attention. Business strategists like Michael Goldhaber began referring to our economy as an "attention economy." Echoing Rheingold, Goldhaber stated in 1997, "What counts most now is what is most scarce now, namely attention." Their words are much truer today than they were in 1997.

Distracted students

This scarcity of attention is certainly an issue with today's media-multitasking students. A [study](#) released in January 2010 by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that total media exposure per day for young people ages 13 to 18 increased from 7 hours and 29 minutes in 1999 to 10 hours and 45 minutes in 2009. Use per medium increased, but the largest increase was time spent multitasking. My work as a teacher confirms this. At the beginning of every semester, I ask my students how many media they use while doing homework. The great majority of them admit using some combination of two or three of their cell phones, laptops, televisions and iPods while studying. Out of a class of 25, only one or two still value shutting everything off and focusing completely on their work.

Taking Rheingold's two rules and applying them to the classroom can give schools the framework for a well-informed policy regarding cell phones.

Rule #1 – Pay Attention

Teachers are vying for their students' attention. Of course, this is a venerable struggle, but in the past students' only options were looking out the window, passing notes, or throwing spit wads at each other. Most teachers will tell you the struggle is much tougher today; it's one of those things they talk about at meetings and lunch breaks. Just the other day, the topic was brought up at a departmental meeting where I teach, and the stories and opinions (universally negative) immediately came gushing forth. The

teacher sitting next to me told me he has a “one-and-done” approach: The students are warned in the syllabus and on the first day of class, and as soon as one of them pulls his or her cell phone out during class, he or she gets the boot. While I have a hard time being so strict, I respect his strategy; we teachers are all aware that our top competitor is that little electronic wonder lovingly buzzing in our students’ pockets or purses.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has been under constant pressure to lift a ban on cell phones that he instituted in 2007 for New York’s 1.1 million-student school system. According to [CBS News](#), New York had long maintained an “out-of-sight, out-of-trouble” approach to cell phones until Bloomberg’s department of education started using metal detectors to not only search for weapons, but confiscate cell phones as well. Bloomberg has remained steadfast, surviving not only the outrage of parents and students, but a court battle as well. In March 2008, an appellate court ruled that “the Chancellor reasonably determined that a ban on cell phone possession was necessary to maintain order in the schools.”

New York schools are not unique. School systems everywhere are outlawing cell phones, but students are undeterred. In a [recent survey \(PDF\)](#) by Pew Internet, 65 percent of students admit bringing phones to class even though they are banned. They put them in their socks, their underwear, their sandwiches, whatever it takes. Fifty-eight percent of the students in those same schools admit sending a text message during class.

To make matters worse, parents are not allied with teachers in this. As a matter of fact, one can safely assume that the majority of students’ texts during school are exchanges with parents. In the same Pew survey, 98 percent of parents of cell-owning teens say a major reason their child has the phone is so that they can be in touch no matter where the teen is (a blessing and a curse to students). This business of parents always being connected to their children has wide-ranging implications (in her book “[Always On](#),” professor Naomi Baron points to “the end of anticipation”), but as pertains to cell phones in the classroom, parents are simply added to the growing list of distractions.

Rule #2 – Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention

Students need to understand that their attention is an in-demand resource, i.e., everyone wants a piece of them. When I talk to my students about this, they are very receptive. They have an awareness deep down that they are too busy, too distracted, too harried. Many of them don’t have a point of reference, a time they can remember when things were simpler, quieter, slower. This is especially true of those born in the 21st century who’ve never known a time when they weren’t “always on” — virtually connected to loved ones and the wider world. According to Pew, 84 percent of cell-owning 13-17 year-olds acknowledge sleeping with their cell phone next to them, and it is a “fairly common practice” for that group to sleep with their cell phones under their pillows so that a call or text will awaken them.

This issue of attention is more than just teachers wanting to control students; it is about the importance of students learning to focus on one thing. A growing amount of research by neurologists confirms what our mommas already told us — we think best and perform best through focused, undistracted attention. In 2009, Stanford researchers studied the cognitive capabilities of media multitaskers and came to [the following conclusion](#): “People who are regularly bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch form one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time.” When comparing the two groups, Stanford researchers sought to discover where media multitaskers are superior.

Alas, says lead researcher Eyal Ophir, “We kept looking for what they’re better at, and we didn’t find it.” Students need to be challenged and trained in the art of single-tasking. Where better than the classroom? As Neil Postman urged in his book “The End of Education,” schools need to be engaging in technology education. He wasn’t talking about teaching students how to use technology, but rather “learning about what technology helps us to do and what it hinders us from doing.” In Postman’s mind, technology

education should be a branch of the humanities, providing students with a historical perspective on “humanity’s perilous and exciting romance with technology.”

Preserving the Classroom

When I asked her thoughts on cell phones in the classroom, Dr. Baron, who is executive director of the Center for Teaching, Research, and Learning, pointed to the varied roles filled by the classroom. “A classroom is many places at once,” she said, “a room for sharing ideas, a space (literally) for contemplation, a setting for social interaction. None of these functions harmonizes with intrusion from the outside.”

Indeed, the classroom has a hallowed place in our society, and it still functions pretty much as it has always functioned. Countless people point to a time in their lives where a certain teacher in a certain classroom made all the difference in the world. Just ask.

The other day I was walking through a building on my campus. Inside one of the small classrooms was a goofy-looking middle-aged man holding court with 25 or 30 students huddled around. I have no idea what the man was teaching, but he did so with gusto. I slowed past his room, drawn to whatever was happening in there. He loved what he was talking about, and his students were sitting on the edge of their seats, leaning toward him. Just as I started picking up my pace, the entire room burst into laughter. He was just getting warmed up.

That scene is repeated every day in hundreds of thousands of classrooms around the world. From the most prestigious halls of higher education to my son’s kindergarten class led by the delightful Ms. Norman, teachers keep joyfully passing on knowledge and wisdom to the students under their tutelage.

There never has been — nor will there ever be — a more dynamic learning context than face-to-face in close proximity. Everything possible should be done to protect that timeless environment from interruption and distraction.

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