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Making Cell Phones Work for You and Your Students

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- School divisions must do more than create rules to govern cell phone use and simply encourage mobile learning: Buildings must have sufficient bandwidth to accommodate full use of the devices.

The implications are clear. Over time, schools have been asked to take up teaching students to drive, how to responsibly manage finances, and about family life and sexuality, among other topics. Now, teaching students respectful and substantive use of mobile technology must be added to that list of life skills.

Obviously not every learning experience benefits from the use of mobile devices, but when educators see the potential for meaningful applications, we need to go for it.

Looking back, I see that my most successful technology-enhanced lesson was a collaborative research project using Wiki-Spaces. A team's successful completion of the project required determination to work with available technology and dedication to the success of all group members. To eliminate the possibility of lost work, students had to create a schedule and stick to it. They had to plan and communicate with each other on the organization and appearance of the WikiSpace, and they shared research and graphics that appeared to be useful to other researchers. They acted as editors for each other's writing and documentation. When the WikiSpace was complete, each contributor was required to have two adults visit the site and leave comments. The resulting projects were always professional-looking and informative, and the students were proud of the websites built with a combination of mobile and tethered technologies.

Amber Case, the cyborg anthropologist, notes, "The most successful technology gets out of the way and lets us live." This is a good way to think about design principles for technology-enhanced lessons. The focus shouldn't be on the technology, a mistake many teachers make. The lesson design should first be about arriving at desired learning outcomes; then you can look at how those outcomes could be best reached by efficacious use of digital technology. Don't let mobile devices, or any technology, serve as a replacement for developing students' potential for original thinking, creating and learning. Mobile devices are only a useful tool.

With persistence and any luck at all, we might help create a culture of employees who don't let their cell phones interfere with their work, parents who prioritize time with their children over time with their cell phones, and students who manage the power of digital technology to better their lives.■

Motley, a member of VEA-Retired, is a former English teacher in Virginia Beach.

Making Cell Phones Work for You and Your Students

We are in one of the most rapidly changing times in the history of education. The Internet has brought students unprecedented access to knowledge; they no longer have to ask teachers to gain a lot of that information. Cell phones provide on-the-fly information access, and students also know how to use these small, powerful tools for many social activities. Few understand how to take advantage of them for learning. Technology is a tool, but like any tool, teachers need to show students how to use it appropriately for learning.

This is a difficult time for teachers because many haven't had the chance themselves to learn how to use cell phones for learning, let alone teach anyone else. A common mistake is using cell phones to replicate prior teaching practices. For example, paper worksheets appear for students on their cell phones. This is using 21st-century tools for 20th-century teaching practices. The goal is to use mobile devices in ways that make teaching and learning even better than before. Imagine being able, in seconds, to privately collect information from students that lets you know who understands the lesson objective and who doesn't. Imagine never to have to collect or grade a test again. Imagine having technology providing ongoing scaffolding to your students, customized to their individual needs.

Teachers sometimes forget about the mobility of the devices. During class, have students go to where the concept being taught happens naturally in the real world. Let them take photos, video, record interviews, measure, translate, reply and calculate using their cell phones. If you think about it, having students using their cell phones for learning activities stops them from being able to use their device for anything else. Hold them accountable for tasks on their cell phones. Remember that mobile devices are only tools, but they can be used to do very powerful tasks.

— by Helen Crompton, PhD, assistant professor of Instructional Technology at Old Dominion University