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Five Tips for Managing Mobile Devices

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Here's how teachers can turn their low-tech classrooms into high-tech hubs—and keep distraction at bay.

A teacher recently told me that her school had adopted a campuswide policy of collecting and locking up student cell phones. Apparently, the school made this decision because many of the teachers believed that cell phones were "terribly distracting" and caused "behavior and discipline issues."

I walked away from this conversation dismayed. How could a school with little to no access to technology confiscate students' cell phones? What a waste of potentially valuable assets!

Locking up devices because we fear they'll distract from learning is the exact opposite direction I want to see education heading. Cell phones and mobile devices are lifelines that enable us to teach the life skills our students will need long after they leave our classrooms.

Welcomed, Not Banned

I encourage my 9th and 10th graders, whom I teach in a combined language arts class, to bring their own devices. I include a note on our syllabus that the moment they enter the classroom, they've entered a buzzing technology hub.

It's easy to forget that I don't have any actual hardware in my classroom. I work in a traditional classroom with no technology, save the computer on my desk and a refurbished computer donated by our local computer recycling program. I requested this refurbished computer so that my students, especially those who don't have a computer or Internet access at home, would have a computer to use on campus. As a result, students frequently come by before school, during a break, at lunch, or after school to hop on the computer to finish assignments or work on projects.

Facing the Fear

Many teachers are concerned about the chaos they assume will accompany a bring-your-own-device (BYOD) approach. Yes, students are working on different devices, but they're working on their devices. There's something powerful about allowing students to use their own devices in the classroom. These are the tools they use to navigate

the world. These are also the tools students are most comfortable with. Those two factors translate into more meaningful, relevant, and engaged learning.

For teachers and administrators who are concerned that having devices in class will only distract students and compromise the learning environment, I caution you not to make decisions from a place of fear. I've found that allowing students to use their devices is absolutely transformative. It's made it possible for me to put my students at

Once students were in their groups, I asked them to use one device to explore the magazine. I encouraged them to discuss the explicit and implicit information they found in it. Then using another device, they posted all the inferences they were able to make about the time period, gender roles, race relations, diet and health, and political issues. They posted their inferences to a shared Padlet wall so they could see one another's posts in real time.

This activity was successful for several reasons. First, my students love all things visual. They were fascinated by the pictures in Life. Obviously, life in 1935 was wildly different from their own experiences, a fact that also fascinated them. Second, the objective of the activity was clear; they knew they had to post their inferences to our shared Padlet wall. Finally, they had 20 minutes to complete the activity, which was enough time for them to accomplish the task without getting bored or wandering off task.

This more social and engaging approach to learning also enables teachers to capitalize on the collective intelligence in the room. Students have more opportunities to learn from one another, and they begin to value their peers as resources in the classroom.

4. Feel free to ask students to put their phones away.

Even though I welcome all devices, there are times when teachers want students to work without technology. For example, instead of worrying that devices will compromise a testing environment, I encourage teachers to have students store their phones in a phone cubby. I bought an ornament organizer box after the holidays and use it for that purpose. My students know they must put anything with a screen in the cubby during testing.

Particular activities benefit tremendously from the addition of technology, whereas others do not. For example, when

It Makes Sense

My favorite part of the BYOD approach is how easy it is to shift the focus from me to my students. My goal is to create a student-centered classroom in which kids work together and use their devices to research and solve problems. I want to cultivate confident learners, which is easier to do if students believe they're capable of accessing and processing information.

BYOD also makes sense from a financial standpoint. Maintaining hardware in a school is a constant financial drain, and each year the number of students with devices increases. Instead of investing in putting a school-owned device in each student's hand, schools and districts might more wisely spend their money to improve infrastructure and purchase a smaller number of devices for use by students who don't have them.

Another question on my mind is this: How much of what students learn on a school-supplied device will translate to how they use their own devices? If a school goes one-to-one with iPads and uses a variety of apps that students don't have access to at home, how much of their technology literacy translates to the work they do on their computer or iPod Touch?

From Low-Tech Classroom to High-Tech Hub

The more we make learning a relevant and stimulating experience in which students are active generators of information using the various digital tools at their disposal, the more likely they are to leave our classrooms intellectually curious and armed with the skills they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world. Mobile devices offer

