Cell Phones Are Ringing

Will educators answer?

By REBECCA FORTNER

Teachers often participate in professional development programs to stay on top of technology they could use to teach their students. Rarely, however, do they look at potential roles for technology their students are already using. The cell phone is one such device. Its value as an educational tool is vast and virtually untapped.

Cell phones are a significant feature in kids' daily lives. According to *Generation M²*, a 2010 Kaiser Foundation media study, nearly two-thirds of 8- to 18-year-olds have cell phones. Among 8- to 10-year-olds, 31 percent have their own phone, as do 69 percent of those ages 11 to 14. Eighty-five percent of teenagers 15 to 18 have them. A study by Mediamark Research & Intelligence found that most of the younger kids use the phone to contact their parents. Girls are more likely to use the phones for social uses, while boys are more inclined to play games or access the Internet.

The Pew Research Center in April 2010 released results from a survey that confirmed the ubiquity of cell phones among teenagers, some of whom manage to send text messages from class, even when the technology is banned in their school. While the Pew survey focused on texting, kids use their cell phones for all kinds of things. Along with brief calls to their parents and hours spent texting their friends, kids use their cell phones to listen to music, play games, and watch videos. Kids whose cell phones have cameras take pictures and send them to their friends. Older teens use smartphones like iPhones and Blackberrys to check Facebook and e-mail, get directions, and to obtain any other information they might need during the day.

Businesses have certainly caught on. Phone manufacturers and wireless carriers target their advertisements to young people. (Nearly all backpacks have cell-phone pockets.)

So have other groups. The *New York Times* has reported a rise in education apps, as they're called. At a summer camp held at the New York Hall of Science in Queens, kids used smartphones and probes with Bluetooth capabilities to test and record levels of air pollution, part of a project run by New Youth City Learning Network. With other new mobile applications, students can take a picture of an insect or historical site, send it off, and receive a message back with full identification of the image.

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Educators could view cell phones differently— as engaging, interactive tools.

Surely schools could make productive use of a technology that is relatively cheap, portable, and already in the hands of the majority of U.S. schoolchildren.

The simplest use for students' cell phones is keeping track of assignments. Rather than carrying around an assignment notebook, students could use their phones. The calendar and reminder functions can easily handle homework and tests. Kids are much less likely to leave the phone at home, at school, or somewhere else than they are a notebook.

A pilot program in North Carolina extends the cell phone's reach far beyond keeping track of deadlines. Project K-Nect, a pilot program in Onslow County, uses smartphones as a learning tool in math classes, supplementing traditional math instruction with alternative teaching strategies. The project provides at-risk high-school students who lack computer or Internet access at home with smartphones. Teachers assign math problems for students to solve on the smartphone. If students need help, they can connect with their classmates through instant messaging and dedicated blogs. If they still can't solve the problem, they can access digital content through the phone. Project Tomorrow, which has evaluated the program, found improvement in student test scores, engagement and participation in class, and collaboration among students.

Cell phone use is typically forbidden in public school classrooms. Teachers rightly object to phones ringing and students updating their Facebook profiles or texting during class. But educators could view cell phones differently. For adults, they are engaging, interactive tools—for communicating and for storing and accessing useful information. The same could be true for kids in school.

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