

Cell Phones at School

A New Headache in Educational Settings

As far as I know, there is no school which approves of carrying a cell phone as a necessary tool for education. Far from it, there are many elementary and middle schools, even high schools where students are prohibited from carrying a cell phone onto the school grounds.

However, in a realistic move to establish more reasonable parameters, this prohibition has often been found to be untenable, so many schools have established less strict rules, such as a requirement that students must write out a good reason for carrying a cell phone to school or must "Turn off the battery during class hours." After all, schools have been forced to accept that students feel the need to carry their phones during the school day, and will circumvent unduly strict controls. It appears that if students can uphold a reasonable and noninvasive pattern of usage, behaving properly in class, schools will follow a so-called double-tongued strategy. Of course this is still an invasion of the educational setting, one more stress on establishing a proper educational environment.

Aside from this problem of appropriate usage, now probably most Japanese students carry their own cell phone to their schools. Actually, "carry" is not an appropriate expression. We might better say that children "attend school wearing their cell phones as an extensions of their bodies."

Then how are cell phones used in a class? From testimonies of high school students in the radio program called Teens Express on last October 24th, their actual usage includes such below-the-desktop text messaging as "sending messages or playing games" or "sending slanderous messages, mostly to speak ill of our teachers" moreover, they "open junk mails and connect to adult sites" and "use the phone text functions for cheating" - these are the stark reality as revealed by students themselves. Furthermore, "there are students who leave a class (perhaps giving the excuse that they need to use the restroom) because they want to answer a call they have received from a friend."

As students have pointed out, the cell phone's mailing function and dictionary function are great tools for cheating. This improper storing of test answers as cell phone text is not limited to high schools but from my experiences also occurs in colleges. In addition, the ring tones of phones not muted and students' scrolling through celebrity photos on their cell phone monitors, all hidden below desk level, increasingly make cell phones a tool for disturbing lessons. Often students playing with this exciting new

media do not realize they exhibit a bad attitude by creating disturbances, until they have been cautioned by a teacher to act more politely.

I can assure you that during my lectures at Gunma University there are no such bad attitudes. The main reason is because I have thought to call attention to this media problem – responsible and respectful cell phone literacy - as a priority theme in my lectures. However, there seems to also be another reason. Students quickly distinguish which teachers will or will not tolerate disturbances or lack of attention, then automatically modify their attitude accordingly in each class. For instance, students tell me that, “Whether we spend time sending messages and playing games depends on the teacher. If the teacher overlooks our usage of cell phones then we do as we wish, but if the teacher strongly gets angry about cell phone usage then we don’t.” In short children are always critically evaluating each teacher’s sense of authority and respect.

From the teacher’s side, this is an annoying device to have operating in a class. If a teacher confiscates students’ cell phones as a violation of school regulations then their relationship with their students can become unstable. In some cases, when a teacher has confiscated a student’s cell phone due to annoying ringing tones which disturb a lesson, the student has suddenly exploded into anger then screamed, or in another school, a student’s parents brought a complaint against the teacher, demanding the return of the confiscated cell phone. Nowadays it is not an overreaction to say that teachers are becoming sensitized to the fact that psychologically, a student’s cell phone has become a part of their body; confiscation is experienced as a direct attack and violation of the student’s person.

As a result, although a student’s invasive cell phone usage during the class hour must be curtailed, teachers will now not say “confiscate” but more politely say “keep the phone safely until after class is done.” Besides, teachers do not want to keep a “student's most important tool” in their office.

For students, a cell phone is as important as their souls but it is an annoying tool for teachers who face the task of properly guiding students in the educational setting. Counter measures to the cell phone problem depend on the perception of each school and even in each class, there being no blanket solution which may easily be applied to cell phone monitoring and regulation. As teachers, we are just beginning to understand and come to grips with the pervasive self-identification students attach to this device. While it is clear that invasive use cannot be allowed during lessons, and cheating is cheating whether by cell phone or otherwise, yet a cell phone is not just a utilitarian article – like a car or a house, it reflects the owner’s identity, as an extension

of self, rather than as an accessory or decoration. There is no universal solution yet to the problem of cell phone invasion of academic settings.