Invasion of the Classroom Cell Phones

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It is one of the most common (and unsettling) occurrences in today's classrooms—the ringing of a cell phone, often punctuated by some silly tune or sound effect that announces to everyone that a call is coming in. Inevitably, educators say, it happens during an important part of a lecture or discussion, just when a critical point is being made, and suddenly, the "teachable moment" is lost.

What to do? Some professors glare at the offender, others try to use humor to diffuse the tension, while a few have gone so far as to ask the student to leave class for the day. The wide range of reactions is evidence that educators are struggling to handle a situation some liken to "technological terror" entering the classroom. Many faculty consider classroom use of cell phones at the very least uncivil and at worst a serious distraction to the learning environment.

In Spring 2003, the National Education Association higher-edua-

tion division ran a poll asking if professors should ban cell phones in their classrooms. An overwhelming 85% answered “yes.”

Anecdotes about cell phones range from annoying to ridiculous. Most commonly, the phone rings, the student sorts through his/her backpack to find it and shut it off, and then announces an emergency and walks out of class to take the call. The professor and other students are left to recover and try to refocus on the lesson.

But teachers are fighting back, using their own strategies and punitive measures. Some confiscate the phones until class is over; others threaten to add time to the end of the class to make up for time lost to cell phone disruptions. One community college professor announced there would be a pop quiz every time a cell phone rang. An English professor posted on her syllabus: “Leaving the class to answer your cell phone or make a call counts as one unexcused absence.”

**What Rules Are Reasonable?**

What kind of policy is considered reasonable and enforceable? Look first in the course syllabus, where instructors lay down ground rules about classroom decorum. This usually includes a statement that cell phones and beepers should be turned off during class. But then there are exceptions.

“I allow EMT, fire department, or other emergency workers to keep their beepers on,” said Angela McGlynn, a psychology professor at Mercer County Community College (MCCC). She says another exception could include someone with a sick family member. At MCCC, cell phones have come up several times during recent faculty meetings.

Although the subject is guaranteed to be on the agenda of meetings at hundreds of schools again this academic year, faculty are hard-pressed to develop a consensus. The range of opinions includes teachers who advocate that cell phones should be banned from class and that their use on campus should be treated like cigarette smoking, with strict limits on where students can talk on them and even designated “non-cell phone” areas.

For example, at Fordham University’s Law Library, cell phones are prohibited everywhere, including the stairwells. Violators are asked to leave. The University of Virginia library takes a kinder and gentler approach, asking that students conduct cell phone conversations away from study and research areas.

Banning the phones and trying to enforce such a guideline strike some as unduly restrictive and unnecessary. “I don’t have a policy that I announce,” said Thomas Sherman, professor of education at Virginia Tech. “Up to now, students have been so embarrassed when their phones ring that it rarely happens more than once.”

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"However, it usually does happen at least once these days. If it becomes a problem, I will announce for everyone to turn off their phones, not even leaving them on 'courtesy.' It is too much of a temptation and distraction to be waiting for a call to pay attention to what is happening in class."

With cell phone use among college students reaching nearly 85% and without any college-wide policies or technology protocols in place, it does seem that students are testing the limits of appropriate behavior and faculty tolerance.

One student at Montana State University told of a guy who ordered a pizza via cell phone during class, trying to time delivery for the end of class, but the deliveryman showed up early and was standing outside the classroom door. A community college professor cited a student who could not find her cell phone and disrupted the class by accusing other students of stealing it, when she had simply left it near the computer where she had been working.

It isn't just the classroom being invaded. There is no place on campus that is off limits to the intrusive cell phone conversation. In the "Can you top this?" category is the female faculty member who recalled being in the ladies room when a student in the adjoining bathroom stall received a call on her cell phone. When it came time to flush the toilet, the young woman announced that she would have to call back. She then hung up, flushed the toilet, and called right back.

**Faster, Better, More Irritating**

Incidents like these are likely to increase, especially since the newest models of phones offer faster and better connections with more options to entice students: "There is no question that modern cell phones are becoming a scourge that entices attention away from school work, offering students the options of games, taking pictures, checking the Internet, sending e-mail," said Sherman. "These devices are really little computers and have the potential for inappropriate screen time like a 'real' computer."

That potential has become a reality. As cell phones and laptops have become more pervasive, the opportunity to engage in diversions, such as a quick game of solitaire or checking scores during baseball season, is tempting more and more students. The Pew Internet and American Life project released a recent study of 1,162 students on two- and four-year campuses nationwide that showed one-third of college students play video games on their cell phones and laptops during class, reporting it did not affect their academic performance.

"Anyone who believes playing a game during class will not harm
learning is living in a fantasyland," said Sherman. "Students who say that are likely not to be doing very well in the first place; so, maybe they are correct! Human beings are not able to concentrate on two things at once, especially when one of them, either the game or the class content, is quite difficult."

Sherman has been outspoken on the subject of cell phones and learning. As someone who is training tomorrow's teachers, he emphasizes that cell phones don't contribute to learning and are a distraction for younger children.

"Cell phones mediate or 'stand between' people," explains Sherman. "The words are sent but the nonverbal information is not. Some consider voice tone, facial expression, and physical gesture as important to the meaning of a message as the words. When communication is frequently mediated, it is possible that children will not learn these subtle aspects of communication."

**Undeveloped Planning Skills**

Sherman worries about the amount of screen time that children engage by spending so much time with cell phones, e-mail, and video games instead of active play. But the negative effects can apply to older students as well. Sherman says he has seen how using cell phones can adversely affect the development of planning skills.

"This instant communication and always waiting to the last minute has a potential negative effect of limiting the amount of planning people do," said Sherman. "I've worried about that with children, and it's a problem with adults as well. In general, there's not much that college students need to do that demands instant and constant communication."

As institutions struggle with technology policy-making, college officials are asking student governments to lend a hand. Two years ago, at the University of Nebraska, the student association considered a bill that would ban cell phones in classrooms; however, since there was no means of enforcement, they voted to post signs in every classroom reminding students to turn off their cellular phones during class. The policy has had limited success. Professors report that when they don't allow calls in class, students get up and walk out to take them in the halls.

Some people blame the cell phone companies for constantly promoting the value of instantaneous communication, but Larry McDonnell, director of public relations for the Northeast Region of Sprint PCS, says the company also promotes responsible use of the technology.

"We do our best to emphasize common sense and common
courtesy when using the phones, either for voice calling or games or photos," said McDonnell. "Some of the best solutions are the most obvious (e.g., ‘vibrate’ mode rather than ‘ringer’). Text messaging is also popular with students, and it’s quiet and would be appropriate for a library."

McDonnell understands that instructors must enforce limits, such as requiring students to turn off phones during class and monitoring the potential for cheating via phones, but he does not think that the technology is to blame. "Any technology can be misused," said McDonnell. "Cheating was an issue on campus long before wireless phones."

But Would Parents Really Do It?

While faculty search for solutions, Sherman says that parents could be helpful by restricting the features that come with the purchase of a cell phone. "If I were the parent paying for a college-age child’s phone service," said Sherman, "I would limit the ways the phone could be used by carefully choosing a ‘low-tech’ phone, one that was relatively ‘bulky’ and more difficult to carry, and buying only a limited amount of minutes consistent with the limits placed on phone use. Appropriate uses would include travel emergencies and a few other travel situations."

In trying to find successful strategies to deal with intrusive technology, colleges might take heart in corporate policies that are aimed at setting standards for cell phone and laptop use. Executives of several companies have started cracking down on inappropriate cell phone use, such as when a call disrupts a meeting, by fining employees.

One Chief Executive Officer from a Minnesota company said that not only are ringing cell phones a breach of etiquette, but they also cost his company time and money. Consequently, when a cell phone goes off in a meeting, the offender is slapped with a $50 fine. Likewise, a firm located in Massachusetts imposed a $5 fine if a cell phone rang during a meeting and collected $900 the first year the penalty was in effect.

Realistically, however, colleges will have to develop codes of conduct that are less stringent. While there may be no consensus with regard to the matter of policy, there is general agreement that the marriage of college students and cell phone technology is here to stay for both social and practical reasons.

"On balance, wireless phones on campus are a success story," said McDonnell. "Students and families stay in touch more frequently and far less expensively. Wireless data cards make it possible to get work done outside the classroom or dorm. Cameras and games are fun."