

Are Cell Phones Driving You Crazy In Class? Take A New Approach.

I can honestly say that cell phones are not a problem in my classroom, even though I teach sophomores in a public high school in NYC - Not exactly a group known for voluntarily powering down their devices before class.

Let's talk about what strategies worked well in my classroom so that you can consider adapting them to your practice to solve the pesky cell phone issue for good.

Should You Allow Cell Phones in Your Classroom?

Now, I will say something that many teachers and administrators might dislike, but please, bear with me: **I allow students to keep their devices out and on hand during class unless completing assessments.**

We know that cell phones cause trouble in the classroom. This [Western Kentucky University study](#) found that cell phones in class lead to declining academic performance and cause distractions for teachers. However, I would argue that the problem is not the cell phone itself being in the room, but instead how we use them in the academic space.

My approach to cell phone use in class has been where I deviate most frequently from my colleagues, but I will repeat: I do not have a cell phone problem in my classroom. In this situation, I believe that the proof is really in the pudding, as they say.

Why Do I Allow Cell Phones In My Classroom?

I firmly believe that we need to teach students how to use their devices. I do not mean, literally, how to use them - They could probably teach us all a thing or two in that regard. I mean, how to responsibly use them as functioning adults, which they will all become when they leave high school in just a few short years.

Consider your own experiences: Most of us do not lock our phones away while we complete daily tasks or go about our lives. As I type this, my own phone is sitting about five inches away

from my left hand. The ability to remain on task, despite the consistent distraction of your cell phone, can be taught, and really - it must be taught.

The Cell Phone Policy In My Classroom

At the start of each year, I explicitly teach my cell phone policy to the class. After the expected positive responses that follow the announcement that cell phones are allowed to be out during class, we review the rules. Because, of course, with a policy like this, there must be clear and consistent rules for students to follow.

Rule #1: "Screen Side Down"

The Rule: If your cell phone is out on your desk, it must be turned screen side down, with all flashing light notifications turned off.

Why the Kids Love It

This strategy teaches students how to control the level of distraction that their cell phone brings them. Yes, it is out on their desk. But, they need to make a conscious choice to flip it over and check it.

This policy stops them from being distracted by worrying they are missing notifications, which we all know can keep the average 15-year-old off-task all period. It also reduces the anxiety that many students face when their phones are locked away.

This rule also teaches an essential skill that students can take with them after high school. [This study in the Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences](#) found that cell phones are the most common distraction for undergraduate students in the classroom, highlighting the importance of teaching our students how to use their devices appropriately in an academic setting.

At least ten students have told me that "screen side down" helped them in their futures. They keep their phones screen-side-down during independent work in upper-level high school, college, and the workplace. Teaching skills that help students in their future is why we teach.

Why I Love It

First and foremost, I can see their phones. At a glance, I know which students are using their phones and which students are not. I never need to wonder if they are using their phones under their desks, behind their books, or even sneaking pictures for their social feeds.

Secondly, I never need to stop instruction to ask a student to put their phones away. If I see a phone screen side up or misused, I make eye contact with the student, hold my hand flat, and rotate it from palm-up to palm-down. 9 times out of 10, the student flips their phone over, and we all move on without actual interruption.

Rule #2: No Scrolling

The Rule: It's okay to check a quick notification in class, but it is not okay to scroll through feeds or lengthy information during class time.

How to Teach It

On day one of class, we discuss appropriate cell phone use in a professional environment, such as our classroom. We explicitly discuss the difference between briefly checking your phone and becoming deeply distracted by it.

As I like to say to the students: "There is a difference between checking a text and scrolling through Instagram." In our classroom, checking a text is acceptable, while scrolling through Instagram is not.

Why the Students Love It

Students respond well to this rule because it feels reasonable to them.

You might be wondering how this could work, and perhaps even getting ready to quote: "if you give a mouse a cookie..." or "give them an inch, they'll take a mile..." I have heard it all before. My response is always the same: For whatever reason, this works.

The overwhelming majority of students follow the rule, and as a result, I have far fewer problems with cell phones than many who take a more traditional approach. My theory is that high schoolers are young adults who follow rules that they believe make sense and are fair.

Rule #3: No Phones Or Devices During Assessments

The Rule: Students may not use their devices during assessments.

While I do believe in allowing visible devices during class, I absolutely do not believe in permitting them during assessments for obvious reasons that I do not think I need to detail here.

The rule in my classroom is that if I see or suspect device use of any kind during an assessment, I will let them finish, but they will have a zero when they check their grade. The student will know why, and I will know why, but we will not discuss it unless they directly approach me the following day, in which case the dean will also be involved.

This policy might sound a little harsh or unreasonable, but it is the same policy New York State uses when standardized testing, and, go figure - I actually think it is a great one. By allowing them to finish their exam, I still get the data that I need for instructional purposes, and we avoid any scene that could distract the other 33 students in the class from their assessments.

Rule #4: You May Listen to Music During Independent Work Until it Becomes a Distraction

The Rule: Students may listen to music on their headphones when completing independent work unless it becomes a distraction for them or others around them.

I do not allow music during assessments, partially because of the risk of cheating, but also to better simulate the standardized testing environment of their end-of-year exams.

Why Students Love It (Do They?)

Students often greet this rule with great enthusiasm at the start of the year but then stop listening to music while they work after the early part of the fall. I am not sure why this is, but possibly the novelty wears off, and they lose interest.

Why I Love It

I like this rule because I believe music helps some people focus, and they should be allowed to listen if it benefits them.

How to Teach It

We work on strategies to help them listen to music without becoming distracted. These include:

- Choosing songs without lyrics
- Choosing a lineup of songs in advance
- Listening at a low volume

I have also found that allowing students to listen during their independent work time stops them from listening when they are not supposed to. Again, this might be because high school students are more likely to follow rules that they find reasonable and fair.

The Benefits of the Cell Phone Policy

I am a witness to many benefits of this cell phone policy.

I Do Not Have A Cell Phone Problem In My Classroom

Not having a cell phone problem in my classroom is the most significant benefit of this policy. The overwhelming majority of students follow the rules laid out above, and in doing so, they ensure that devices will not deter or take away from our learning.

Students Learn Essential Life And Work Skills

Yes, I teach history, but I also teach life skills - We all do. I would even go so far as to say that teaching students to be productive and functional in different areas of their lives can be even

more important than the content we teach (gasp). As we mentioned earlier, students will benefit from learning to use their devices appropriately as they age.

Class Does Not Stop Because I See A Cell Phone

In my opinion, nothing is more frustrating than a back-and-forth with one student that derails class for the other 33 in the room. This cell phone policy ensures that such a situation does not happen.

My training and employment in a district where 34+ students are the norm in a single class have led me to believe that you have already lost if you are the teacher involved in a back-and-forth with a student.

This Policy Goes A Long Way Towards Building Positive Relationships With Students

Students love this policy, and they follow it because they like it. These rules help them see you as fair and someone who views them as young adults instead of treating them like children. High school students are not yet adults, but they are old enough to appreciate being trusted with a little bit more responsibility.

We Can Use Cell Phones For Instructional Purposes Without Issue

Finally, this policy allows cell phone use for instructional purposes, from prompting students to google an obscure fact or definition to playing Kahoot on review day.

Using devices in this way teaches that phones are tools as well as toys. Students learn to use their devices to investigate unfamiliar words or phrases or topics of interest they discover during an assignment.

Some Final Tips for Success

I want to leave you with a few final tips that helped me successfully implement this policy in my classroom.

Check Your Assumptions About Devices In A Classroom Before You Start This Policy

If you are someone who has been using a zero-tolerance cell phone policy and you genuinely believe that cell phones have no place in the classroom, engage in self-reflection before trying out this policy. While you might be fed up and looking for anything to help resolve the cell phone issue, this policy will not work well if you do not honestly believe in it.

If you feel like you might not believe in the policy but still want to give it a shot, try reflecting on the following questions:

- Is it realistic to ask your young adult students never to access a device they have likely been carrying since elementary school?
- Do YOU lock your phone away? Why not?
- Are you capable of functioning with their devices on their person?
- How do you ensure that your device does not distract you?
- How did you learn not to let your device distract you?
- Did someone teach you how to stop your device from distracting you? If not, do you wish that someone had?

Start This Policy at the Beginning of The Year

It is much easier to teach good habits before the year starts, rather than trying to break bad routines already established in your classroom.

Implementing this mid-year is not impossible, but it will save you a headache to start at the beginning of the year. Additionally, starting it up only after having serious cell phone issues in the room might teach the students that you will change rules if they them, which is not ideal for your overall classroom management strategy.

Be Open with Your Administration About This Policy

Do not try to hide your cell phone policy from your administration. Explain the reasoning behind what you are doing, and try to get them on board.

After our administration announced a zero-tolerance device policy and distributed locking cases for students to use every day, I calmly explained my perspective to my AP. I also showed her a student's phone screen, on which the locking device had left cracks. Many of those devices are designed only to fit specific phones and models, which will not work for all students.

After hearing my perspective, my administration agreed that unless cell phones became a problem in my classroom, I could continue using the policy working for my classes.

Handle Any Problems Individually, Away From Other Students

If you have a student who cannot effectively learn with their device on their desk, it is best to determine the most appropriate course of action with that student.

This conversation might involve you suggesting different strategies for remaining on task or deciding together the best location for that student's phone.

Consider arranging with the student to plug their phone into a charger near the front of the room. Not only does this allow them to charge their phone and for you to keep an eye on it, but it also stops the student from feeling alienated as the only one who is not permitted to have their phone on their desk.

Try To See This Policy As Part Of Adapting Your Classroom To A New Age

This is not a policy that I could have used ten years ago. But, today, it is not only practical, but it is also necessary. We are preparing students for a world in which they will use their devices for most of their day, and the 21st-century classroom needs this type of instruction.

Wrapping it Up: Cell Phones in the Classroom

We know that cell phone policies can have teachers scratching their heads all year long. If you allow students to keep their devices out and then teach them how to use them appropriately in an academic setting, you can end the cell phone problem in your classroom. Not only will you have an easier workday, but you will also be teaching students essential skills that they will take with them in their futures.

