In December we asked readers to share their policies on the use of cell phones and other electronic devices in class. About 50 readers did so. Thanks for answering the call (no pun intended). This is an important issue that’s of great concern to many faculty.

The collection of policies shared runs the gamut. We were amazed at the diversity of approaches represented. What we’ve done here is to identify a set of broad categories and offer select examples from those we received. Some policies illustrate features of more than one category. Occasionally, what illustrates the category is contained in a comment or explanation the reader shared, not an actual policy statement.

More beneficial than judgments on this much-debated topic are the questions raised by these varied approaches. Following each category, we’ve listed some of these questions. We found ourselves regularly returning to one basic question. **Are policies the best way to get students to stop using their phones?**

We encourage you to use this collection to discuss options and alternatives with colleagues and your students. We hope your conversations will move past a search for the "best" policy and focus more on the fact that the vast majority of students (indeed, people) cannot multitask effectively. If students are paying attention to their devices, it’s their learning that’s being compromised.

**PROHIBITION POLICIES (There were more that fell into this category than any other.)**

*Cell phones are not allowed in class, but no penalty is stated:*

**“Cell phones:** Please turn off or put your phone on “airplane” or “do not disturb” mode. Many studies have found a cell phone to be an impediment to learning in class. Cell phone use is a distraction to all members of the class—especially yourself. In addition, cognitive and behavioral scientists have found that electronic devices can erode ability to concentrate. Notably, the ability to focus is highly correlated with educational and occupational success. In addition, many college students report feeling addicted to their cell phones. Consider this class to be an oasis from your device. Please read the following article to understand one of the main reasons I have instituted this policy, google: “Age of Distraction: Why It’s Crucial for Students to Learn to Focus.”

“The subject matter of the course (biostatistics) is difficult to master and will require your undivided attention if you are to succeed. Otherwise you are wasting your time and money to be here.
Much research demonstrates that student learning is negatively impacted by distractions. Banning cell phones in class will allow you to learn more in less time by allowing you to efficiently use your cognitive functions.

Use of cell phones in class is disrespectful to both the instructor and to your classmates who are distracted by the sights and sounds of you on your phone. In my class respect is a two-way street. If you want respect you give respect.”

Don’t use your phone/electronic device and there’s a penalty if you do. (e.g. I’ll ask you to leave, I’ll take your phone away, there’s a grade consequence or some combination of these):

“Be Professional: Just as if you were on duty at your job, do not fool around on your cell phone or any other device during this class. Feel free to use a laptop, but ONLY for class related work. Everyone can tell when you are doing something off topic and distracting on your devices, including me. If you do this, I will call you on it, and there will be consequences proportionate to the offense ranging from a verbal warning to being asked to leave, or in flagrant cases, getting a zero on the assignment or test we’re doing. If you need to monitor your cell phone, e.g. because of an ongoing family emergency or health issue, please talk to me about it ahead of time so that I can accommodate you with the least disruption possible.”

“Expectations. I also expect you to do your part to maintain a class environment of respect, and civility. This includes being on time, staying seated except when asked to form a discussion group, refraining from texting, non-class computer use, or other disruptive behaviors. You have the right to be treated with respect by me and your classmates, and an obligation to respect others even when you disagree with their views. Failure to conduct yourself appropriately may lead to being withdrawn from the course.

“Screen use can interfere with the establishment of a productive learning environment. Therefore, cell phones, iPods, laptop computers, calculators or any other electronic devices may only be used during lecture or lab if specifically indicated by the instructor. Laptops may not be used to take notes unless you provide evidence of need and/or you provide evidence from the primary literature showing the value of a computer-based approach to note taking. Students using screens during class will be asked to put them away; persistent screen use will result in expulsion from class.”

Questions about prohibition policies: How effective are policies that prohibit the use of electronic devices? How is their effectiveness being measured? Are prohibition policies enforceable? How much energy does it take to enforce them? Are there consequences if a prohibition policy is not enforced? What are those consequences?

YOU CAN USE YOUR PHONE, but I’ll tell you when and it will be for a course-related activity

Not a policy but a comment: “I used to ban cell phones (and laptops and other technology); I knew some of the research—about distraction, multi-tasking, etc.—but I also realized that students were bringing these devices to class anyway and that I could harness their powerful
capabilities. I use free online programs (like PollEverywhere) to do anonymous polling, ask students to read articles I don’t want to print out, look up definitions of words they don’t know, explore apps in the app store for an in-class assignment, etc. We all agree, as part of the expectations for this grade, that they won’t use their phones for non-class purposes and so far, I haven’t had any serious problem. (I teach small courses—under 20—though, so it’s easy for me to tell/walk around and monitor usage.

“Professional behavior includes the professional use of technology in the classroom. Today, technology is ubiquitous and when used in the classroom presents both learning opportunities and disruptions. At times the use of technology is appropriate and helpful to conduct in class research and will be encouraged by the instructor when it is appropriate. The instructor is responsible for the management of the class and has preconceived course and lesson outcomes which may or may not require technology. It is common courtesy to put devices such as cell phones and laptops away during presentations and discussions as alerts and notifications from devices can distract you and others. So, the rule is to turn off cell phones during class time and put them away. Do not use a lap top in class unless you use it to take notes. If there is a need to use a device in the classroom, communicate this to your instructor so a discussion can occur and an understanding reached. Time spent in the classroom is designed to promote your learning; make the most of that time to grow and be the professional you aspire to become.”

Questions about controlled use policies: Do students comply with these policies? Does teacher controlling the use of electronic devices an effective way to demonstrate the role of technology in learning? Can these policies be enforced? What if they aren’t enforced?

YOU DECIDE POLICIES
Sometimes it’s “you shouldn’t”, other times it’s “I wish you wouldn’t,” but the bottom line is it’s really up to you:

“Decisions to use phones, laptops, and/or tablets should be guided by the principles of (a) whether the use is relevant to class activities, (b) whether the use increases or decreases your focus on the class and your classmates, and (c) respect for classmates and the instructor. We will discuss this further in class.”

Not a policy but a comment: “I don’t have a cell phone policy. I make it clear verbally and in syllabus that they are responsible for their own learning – their time, their money, their grade. If they want to spend the entire class on their cell phone – as long as they are not disturbing the learning environment for others, be my guest; good luck to them!”

“Appropriate classroom behavior: [1] You are here to learn. [2] Your classmates are here to learn. [3] Real, meaningful learning is hard work. Your classroom behavior should reflect these three assumptions. Thus, the ultimate test of anything you do in our class is: Does it help you and your classmates learn? Here are some implications of this test: [1] Any technology or device is welcome in our classroom if you are using it to learn. Conversely, using it for purposes
other than learning is inappropriate. I expect that you will monitor yourself, but if it consistently interferes with learning (your own or others), I will point this out to you.” (37)

Questions about policies that let students decide: Are student learners mature enough to appropriately handle making decisions about their behavior in a course? What responsibility does the instructor have for creating and maintaining a climate conducive to learning in the classroom? What if students proposed the cell phone policy? Are there advantages when students decide? Risks?

NO POLICIES
I have one or used to have one, but I’ve given up trying to enforce it:

“The instructor will determine when and how computers will be used during class. Cell phones will be turned off during class unless arrangements are made prior to use.”

Comment: “The policy above is from the syllabi of my Freshman Comp I and II classes. Students pretty much ignore the policy, and I have pretty much given up trying to enforce it. It remains in my syllabi for sentimental reasons.”

I don’t have one:

Comment: “I work at a community college. Students are managing multiple roles and attempting to fit education in among a myriad of other life challenges, some of which I cannot even fathom. Sometimes they need to monitor children or work or ailing parents from afar, and I never have an issue with their checking in during class. . . . My courses are also built on a foundation of mutual respect, which I cultivate from day one. But in order to achieve mutuality, I must first advance my respect for students and their time. . . . I see students as whole people. Eliminating cell phones in my classes means that I have separated them from their wholeness, which compromises their ability to learn.”

Questions about not having a policy: What happens in classes with no policy? Is it different from what happens in classes with policies? Does not having a policy when so many other teachers do, communicate that the teacher without a policy has somehow given up?

PARTIAL POLICY OR POLICIES WITH EXCEPTIONS
Some kinds of technology are okay; others are not (e.g. no laptops for note taking, no calls, but texting is okay) OR Phones may be on in case of emergencies but ask permission or let me know:

“You will have one short break during this two-hour class, and you can plan to check your personal devices at that time. However, it is true that ‘life happens’. If you have an urgent reason to leave your phone on, please inform me. If there is a medical or other serious need for access to your personal devices during class time regularly or occasionally, please speak to me before class.”

Questions about partial policies and exceptions: How does a teacher determine whether a certain technology is or isn’t appropriate? How much extra work is involved in dealing with and keeping
track of exceptions? What criteria can be used to determine the legitimacy of an exception request? Are there fairness issues associated with this policy approach?

For a deeper dive into this important topic, don’t miss Confronting the Myth of Multitasking: A Collection of Tools and Resources. It includes a downloadable self-check quiz for students, plus a concise summary of key research findings on multitasking in the college classroom. Learn More

NOVELTY POLICIES

Mild or humorous penalties for using electronic devices

“If it rings, you sing. So be sure and pick out your favorite song and be ready to belt it out in front of the class.”

“If your cell phone interrupts class or you participate in any non-class related activity during class, you will be responsible for bringing cookies for the class to share during the next class period (or forfeit your highest homework score). Definition of “non-class related” is at the discretion of the instructor.”

“For every minute I use my cell phone during class, you may use yours for two minutes.” I teach economics. This sort of sassy approach opened a discussion about incentives (it provides an incentive for me to avoid using mine). My section are 20 to 30 students.

Questions about novelty policies: What does being novel add to the issue of cell phone use? Does something like humor put the problem in perspective or diminish its seriousness? What if a student refuses to comply with a policy that requires some action?

And a couple of final queries on cell phone polices in general: What’s it like to be a student taking five courses each with a different cell phone policy? How regularly do we solicit student feedback on this and other policies? What might we learn if we asked?

Thanks to Pete Burkholder and Gary Hafer who helped us review this policy collection.