

Five things you always wanted to know about using mobile devices at school (but were too afraid to ask)

In this series, **Nicky Hockly** explains aspects of technology which some people may be embarrassed to confess that they don't really understand. In this article, she discusses how schools can start using mobile devices with students in a principled manner.

1 Why should schools allow students to use mobile devices?

Let's get one thing clear first. The use of mobile devices (or indeed any technology) doesn't automatically mean that students will learn better. It all depends on how the devices are used. Increasing numbers of educational institutions are deciding to allow their students to bring their own phones and laptops to school and to use them in specific ways in the classroom. Many educators feel that, rather than swimming against the tide by banning students' devices in the classroom, they should find ways for the students to use these powerful devices in appropriate ways to support learning activities.

Although it is difficult to link the use of devices directly to improved learning outcomes or test scores, there is ample evidence to show that if devices are used appropriately in pedagogically sound ways, students' motivation can increase, and in some specific areas (such as vocabulary) there can be learning gains. And given that many students are already bringing these devices to school, there is no reason why we shouldn't try to make good use of them in the classroom. At the very least, they can help make our lessons more engaging and relevant to our students' lives.

2 How can I make sure that my students use their devices for learning tasks?

Probably one of the greatest concerns for teachers is that students may use their devices inappropriately, such as for checking their *Instagram* accounts or messaging their friends. This is arguably of less concern to teachers of adults, but for younger students, one option is for the school to develop a digital policy which includes an 'acceptable use policy' (AUP) for mobile devices in the classroom. See ETp Issue 99 for a detailed description of this.

But apart from having a robust AUP in place at school level, there are two key

classroom-based aspects to keep in mind. The first is task design, and the second is classroom management. If you give your students engaging and worthwhile tasks that they need to carry out on their devices, they are much more likely to complete the task than to do something else. And if you have the classroom management strategies in place, then your students can be told when to take out and use their devices, and when to put them away again into their bags, or face down on their desks (where you can see them).

3 Can you give me an example of an effective task?

Tasks that are personalised and short can work very well. For example, set your students a 'mobile photo race'. Ask them to take out their mobile devices and to open their photo albums. Then ask them to find a photo with something red in it. Pause for ten seconds while each student searches for a photo that fits that criterion and then silently shows it to a partner. Then give another example, eg a photo of a pet, and pause again for ten seconds, and so on. Each pair of students keeps a score of how many photos they manage to find between them. After doing several examples, get feedback from the class about any unusual or fun photos that they shared. The language focus in this activity is on reviewing vocabulary, and it practises listening skills. The activity is personalised because the students share their own photos, and the use of devices is short and focused, so the students simply don't have time to be doing something else.

4 What if mobile devices are banned in my school, so I can't use them even if I want to?

One option is to set tasks for your students that require them to use their devices out of school, and then to use that as a springboard for classroom activities. One simple example: ask your students to


take photos related to the topic you are currently studying, outside of class, and to share their photos via a *Facebook*, *Edmodo* or *Whatsapp* (or similar) group. Then use those photos (collated onto *PowerPoint* slides, for example) as the basis for discussion in class.

But if you are really keen on exploring the potential of students using their own devices in the classroom, then you need to discuss this with the school director/management. Develop a robust strategic implementation plan that involves all stakeholders: teachers, students, administrative and technical staff and – in the case of students under 18 – parents.

5 What does an implementation plan look like?

If your school wants a pedagogically sound and well-structured approach to the use of mobile devices in the classroom, I recommend the following ten-step plan:

- 1 Identify your rationale.
- 2 Assess your context.
- 3 Involve all the stakeholders.
- 4 Present your case (eg to teachers and parents).
- 5 Create effective learning plans that integrate mobile devices.
- 6 Assign teachers as digital leaders.
- 7 Run a pilot phase.
- 8 Evaluate your pilot phase.
- 9 Extend the implementation plan.
- 10 Provide ongoing teacher development.

And finally – good luck! 



Nicky Hockly is Director of Pedagogy of The Consultants-E, an online teacher training and development consultancy. Her most recent books are *Digital Literacies* (Routledge), an e-book: *Webinars: A Cookbook for Educators (the-round.com)*, and *Going Mobile* (Delta Publishing), a book on mobile learning. She maintains a blog at www.emoderationskills.com.

nicky.hockly@theconsultants-e.com