

The Student Cellphone Addiction Is No Joke

By Steve Gardiner

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Addiction is a strong word, but it accurately describes the dysfunctional behavior exhibited by teenagers in my high school English classroom when I ask them to put away their cellphones.

In a career that spans 38 years, I have not seen any single diversion that so distracts students from reading, writing, thinking, and working. When the cellphone is in front of them, they are completely focused on it. When the cellphone is in the backpack, they are worried because they can't see it.

On the first day of class, I tell them that if they can't go 57 minutes without checking their cellphones, they have a problem and need to seek professional help. They laugh. I laugh, but I know how true that is. Only when I tell them to take their cellphones and put them inside their backpacks do they start to understand how accurate my diagnosis is.

In much the same way a chemical dependency controls an addict's life, my students' cellphones control their lives. Students claim they can read and listen to music at the same time. They claim they can do math and text simultaneously. Numerous research studies state otherwise. The ability to multitask with a cellphone is an illusion. With a phone in front of them, students' thinking is fragmented, as is all their work.

We provide help to people who can't control their behavior related to gambling, sex, drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. We have no programs to help teenagers who can't live two minutes without seeing their phones.

Yes, they have their excuses.

"I am expecting a text from my mom."

"My grandma is in the hospital."

"My boss is going to tell me what time I have to work this afternoon."

"The ability to multitask with a cellphone is an illusion. With a phone in front of them, students' thinking is fragmented, as is all their work."

"I need to know where my friends are going to eat lunch."

All of those reasons may involve important information. Some of them may actually be true. We have eight minutes between classes. We have 43 minutes at lunch. School rules allow students to use their phones during those times, but not during class. That means nothing to them.

They get creative. They text in their laps. They text in their notebooks. They text inside their pockets.

They tell me how important it is to respond to their friends, but the irony is that in paying so much attention to the friend on the other end of the cell connection, they blatantly ignore the friends sitting in the room with them. They walk down the hallways, oblivious to the hundreds of other students walking past them, in order to text a student on the other side of the building.

Needing a phone in hand or sitting on the desk in front of them reminds me of Linus from the Peanuts comics, who carries a security blanket. Cellphones have become the modern security blanket. It is not just during school, at lunch, or after school. Students are using their cellphones 24/7. They sleep with them by their beds and text each other throughout the night.

I don't want to be a part of the cellphone police. It is a losing battle. This addiction is so strong that it is not going to change one bit because I ask them to put away their phones and discuss a short story with the class. It is not going to change because I confiscate a phone and take it to the office. In fact, in the latter case, the students report to the office shaking, the administrators tell me, in a state of panic about how to get their phones back.

There are legitimate reasons to have cellphones out in class. There are applications that work exceptionally well in most subject areas and make the cellphone a good learning tool. Even during those situations, however, a majority of students will be off task and doing something besides the assignment. They cannot control good use of the device. It controls them.

What will they do when they are out of school and in the workplace? Many of them will lose jobs based on their obsessive and dependent behavior.

Yes, addiction is a strong word, but physically, mentally, and emotionally, a high percentage of teenagers are addicted to their cellphones. We have incentives to promote attendance and graduation, but many teenagers need help, because their bodies are in the classroom, but their minds are inside their cellphones.

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