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Great Ideas For Teaching

19.6 Let There Be Text: Harnessing Cell Phones in the Classroom

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Do you remember a time before smartphones? If you walked onto a college campus prior to 2010, you may have seen cell phones, but probably not many smartphones (those phones with internet access, apps,



etc.). Fast forward nine years to 2019 and our phones (which are all smartphones now) have arguably become the most essential accessory in our daily life. Students use their phones to dictate assignments, access

Canvas, manage their calendars, communicate with friends, conduct research and... goof around on social media. When it comes to the digital landscape, for our students, the main tool is their phone and, like it or not, that phone usage seeps into our classrooms. And the debate continues: Should cellphones be in the classroom, or are they a distraction to learning?

I believe the question is not whether or not cell phones SHOULD be in the classroom, but rather HOW they should be used in the classroom. I use a social media app in my classroom that harnesses student's use of cell phones to help them engage with the course and each other. It's called WeChat, and it's the #1 social media tool used by college students in China. WeChat boasts over 1.058 billion

monthly active users, making it the fifth largest SNS globally, beating Instagram at 1 billion active users and dwarfing Twitter at 335 million active users. Imagine an app that combines the functions of Facebook, WhatsApp, Amazon and Uber into one highly sophisticated mobile operating system, and you have WeChat.

With WeChat, an instructor can quickly set up a private chat for each class that, unlike Twitter, is closed to outside access and limited just to students in that class. WeChat also syncs easily with classroom computers, enabling the instructor to type class chat messages using the classroom keyboard and computer to all student's phones instantly and attach any content they like to that message. This can include pictures of board notes, handouts, video links, pictures, websites, etc. Imagine no more handouts in your classroom. Imagine sending a picture of your finest board notes and diagrams to your students' phones after your amazing lecture. Imagine feeling like the Wizard of Oz, your voice cackling and booming as you effortlessly distribute a cornucopia of digital content to your students' phones. Imagine your answer always being yes when students ask, "Can you send me what you just covered in class?"

WeChat also provides a backchannel whereby students can communicate with each other, inside and outside of the classroom, on the platform they use most - their phone. With a few stern warnings about monitoring WeChat for cheating and following student code of conduct guidelines, I have experienced no problems with students abusing WeChat in my classes. Students answer each other's tech support and assignment questions and are

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encouraged to do so with extra credit points. This cuts down on the quantity of FAQ's the instructor has to respond to.

The classroom WeChat can also be pulled up on the projector screen in class and used for polling and peer grading exercises. In my Business Communications class, I display a student work sample, and students chat feedback on errors and corrections for quick and collaborative feedback on class writing. Here the magic can really happen as students begin teaching each other, using the mobile channel they are comfortable with.

But wait, there's more! I also use WeChat for peer feedback on student presentations. As students complete their individual presentations, the rest of the class chats feedback to that student in real time. After their presentation, the students can scroll through their feedback and quickly determine where they did well, and where they can improve, directly from the audience feedback.

WeChat can also solve the riddle of only being able to project one thing at a time in the classroom. Do you show videos in your class and distribute separate handouts for students to answer questions? With WeChat you can distribute these questions directly to students' phones, where they can view the questions while the video runs on the projector screen. No need for handouts.

Have a hard time getting students to participate with difficult or contentious topics? With WeChat you can ask students to respond with an "agree or disagree" or "yes or no" response to an opening question, for example,

"Do you agree or disagree that the border wall is a bad idea?" With the class WeChat displayed on the projector screen and responses displaying live, I can quickly scan the student responses and select a student who I think would be good for starting a discussion on that topic because, for example, they have the minority opinion on a topic. WeChat allows you to curate your participation respondents in a way that fosters better discussions.

WeChat can also serve as a fun icebreaker. When I launch WeChat in the second week of the semester, I let students take a few minutes to be silly with emoticons and pictures (within code of conduct guidelines). These digital introductions allow introverts to express themselves.

Of course, technology can fail and workarounds are required. This semester I found Android students blocked from WeChat access, and their phones wouldn't load the app. Occasionally, students don't have a smartphone, or their wifi isn't working. It's important to make app use optional and not required. Paper submissions are always a reliable workaround. I have set up a text group for students having access issues, and that has solved them.

Bottom line: Whether it's in the class getting work done or outside of class getting support, students love being able to pull out their phones and connect with their classmates. Making an effort to engage with them in their native platform is appreciated. There are many mobile tools - try one out. Your students will be more engaged with the class and each other. 📱