

Texting 1, 2, 3: schools test 'bring your own technology' programs

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As protesters took to the streets yesterday to protest the inequality of wealth, two computer scientists in Portland, Oregon are protesting the inequality of resources in schools.

Tired of helping "unethical bankers" on Wall Street set up cloud data management systems, Russell Okamoto, 45, said he and co-worker Greg Passmore, 30, wanted to create a state-of-the-art cloud computing system that helps "the little people." So they turned their attention to schools, and in September 2011, they rolled out Celly, a text-messaging service that teachers and students can use to make classwork more fun and engaging. In fact, the Occupy movement uses it to organize protesters. "I want our tool to help spread democracy and debate, so I was up all night trying to help [Occupy Portland]," Passmore said last month.

Celly is part of a larger national trend in schools known as "Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT)," in which students are allowed to bring their mobile devices to class. Advocates argue that if young people are already glued to them, then teachers and principals should come up with educational uses for them. And at a time when state budget cuts are increasing—at least 30 states are providing less funding to schools now than they did four years ago—it makes sense that educators would experiment with BYOT as they try to figure out how to do more with less. But some experts say schools may use BYOT as an excuse to avoid providing essential services to students.

One thing most kids seem to have are cell phones with text messaging capabilities. Seventy-seven percent of teenagers (ages 12-17) have them, and 75 percent of all teens text, according to a Pew Internet & American Life Project study published in March 2012. Sixty-three percent say they send text messages every day. And one in four teens have a smartphone.

"We wanted to make a platform that could be used by all kids, teens, and college students and that cuts across demographics," Okamoto says. "You don't just have to have iPads or live in a very wealthy school district."

Each school or class can create a group for themselves called a "cell" that users may access straight from their phone, email, or the Internet. They text to personal screen names, and to prevent cyber-bullying or inappropriate conduct, they cannot see each other's numbers. The cell's moderator must approve texts before they can be seen publicly. And while there is no fee to join, standard text-messaging rates may apply. So far, Celly is being used in all 50 states, and members have sent more than a million texts within about 10,000 active cells.

Joseph Gianotti, 38, an English teacher at Lowell High School in Lowell, Indiana, uses Celly like a message board. For instance, students listen to *To Kill a Mockingbird* on tape, text their reactions, and Gianotti projects the stream of responses onto the wall for everyone to see. He finds that Celly has increased overall class participation.

"The shy kids don't like to talk during regular group discussions, but they're really active on Celly," he says.

Scott Brewer, 48, professor of counseling at Santa Barbara City College, a community college in California, polls students via Celly in his class on how to be successful in college. When he asked them to name the biggest challenge to doing well in school, procrastination got the most votes, so he used the next class to discuss that issue.

Speaking of goofing off, if students have the devices out in front of them all of the time, will they be tempted to play games or go on Facebook? Inevitably yes, but they have always found ways to daydream in class, teachers say. "When I was a kid, we wrote notes to each other," Gianotti says.

Eric Sheninger, 37, principal of New Milford High School in New Jersey, says he has noticed fewer distracted students since the school started allowing them to bring any mobile device to class—including laptops and tablets. He also claims he has received fewer cyber-bullying complaints since the BYOT program went into effect this year. "When you show students that you trust and respect them, that enables them to be more responsible," he says.

That being said, the school's wireless network blocks Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (although students can bypass that by logging onto their cell phone's 3G network, for instance). Teachers who want to use some of the more educational videos on YouTube have to request permission from the school district.

Still, thanks to BYOT, high school is not so bad after all, according to New Milford tenth grader Kiefer Handschuh, 16. "I know it is a cliché, but from the movies you think high school is boring and that all of the cool things happen in detention like in *The Breakfast Club*, but [BYOT] really does make school seem a lot more fun," he says.

Just as schools cannot afford to give students mobile devices, many families cannot either. In fact, only about 25 percent of the 700 students at the predominantly blue-collar New Milford High School actually do bring their own computing devices. However, at Glenwood Intermediate School in Chatham, Illinois, which is currently running an eight-week trial of BYOT in the fifth grade, 38 of the 47 students in the trial were able to bring a laptop, iPad, iPod Touch, Kindle Fire, or NOOK Color, and the school borrowed iPads from another school for the students who did not have a device to bring. So far it has been worth it, says Tim Niemeyer, 34, one of the fifth grade teachers running the program: "Technology is becoming increasingly important for not just the kids, but for adults in the workforce."

But experts say providing technology is the responsibility of schools, not parents. Fiona Hollands, adjunct professor at Teachers College and researcher at Columbia University's Center for Technology & School Change, says, "BYOT is pushing costs that should be paid by federal, state, or city governments to the families, like asking them to pay for the amount of bandwidth students need to do their work."

Scott Campbell, a University of Michigan professor who has studied young adult mobile technology use for the Pew Internet & American Life Project, does worry that BYOT may "exacerbate the digital divide between poor kids and wealthier kids, whose parents can afford the latest technology and are more likely to be on family plans with unlimited texting and Internet service."

Educational consultant Gary Stager agrees, arguing that BYOT just makes have-nots feel worse. "The rationale for school uniforms, for putting kids in matching plaid polyester, is so poor kids don't feel bad and aren't stigmatized in the classroom. BYOT is another form of stigmatizing kids," he says.

He worries that BYOT is a slippery slope. "What's next? Bring your own desks?"

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<<http://techland.time.com/2012/05/02/texting-1-2-3-schools-test-bring-your-own-technology-programs/?iid=tl-main-lede>>. Acesso em: 4 May. 2012.