

Mobile phones in schools

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Mobile Phones in Schools

WHEN it became compulsory for cyclists to wear helmets in Queensland, I recollect the predictable 'policing' of students as they rode in and when they left the school gate. I also recollect the humorous suggestion among principals, who intimated that they could increase the wearing of helmets remarkably if they were able to ban the wearing of bicycle helmets.

In a similar, but converse way, the high level of uptake by students of mobile phones has brought with it considerable challenges – cyber-bullying, interruptions to lessons, and so on, with schools asking the question – to ban or not to ban them. It's understandable that mobile phones have been banned in some contexts – for example, devices with cameras are left outside of performances, gym change rooms, and so on. And, I firmly believe, rules and responsibilities have to be developed and foregrounded with students to avoid inappropriate use of new technologies.

However, schools and teachers have been urged by University of Tasmania honours student, Martin Beattie, to 'get over' rules restricting students from using mobile phones (Merc., 3/2/09:1). From his study involving five high schools around Hobart, Beattie indicated that 'teachers were unable to control the onslaught of mobile phone texting' (ibid). His study reported that over 90% of students used their phones at school, and in schools with strict no-phone policies, he found that 85% of year 9 and 10 students admitted to sending text messages without teacher permission, 30% of messages involved communications with their parents, and they contacted friends out of class or school for 62% of the time (BM, 3/2/09: 5). The contribution made by Beattie is to recommend that schools might explore how introducing mobile technologies could be used for meaningful, educational purposes (also known as mLearning).

While schools grapple with controlling and banning the use of mobile phones, this seems almost disconnected from the Federal Government's Digital Education Revolution, which expects the current ratio of one computer for each eight high school students will drop to 1:1 by 2011 for years 9 to 12 (SMH, 2/2/09:15). The move to ubiquitous computer access by students at schools, in school-led provision, is playing catch-up to student access in their lives beyond the school gate.

Much more needs to be understood about the technological capabilities of various devices acquired by students. Examples, such as the ACER and Lenovo Netbooks being used by grade 6 students at Loddon Mallee region (BenA, 4/2/09: 7), with the cost for parents, subsidised by the Victorian Government, being only \$156 during a three-year trial period, can inform the exploration of possibilities.

The challenge is – how can we bridge the distance between student personal use and desirable school use of mobile technologies to create positive learning outcomes for schools, teachers and their students?

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