

Mobile phones help secondary pupils

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Ask a teacher to name the most irritating invention of recent years and they will often nominate the mobile phone. Exasperated by the distractions and problems they create, many headteachers have ordered that pupils must keep their phones switched off at school. Others have told pupils to leave them at home.

However, education researchers at The University of Nottingham believe it is time that phone bans were reassessed — because mobile phones can be a powerful learning aid, they say.

Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young and her colleagues have reached this conclusion after studying the consequences of allowing pupils in five secondary schools to use either their own mobile phones or the new generation of 'smartphones' in lessons.

During the nine-month experiment, 14 to 16-year-old pupils used the phones for a wide range of educational purposes, including creating short movies, setting homework reminders, recording a teacher reading a poem, and timing experiments with the phones' stopwatches. The smartphones, which could connect to the Internet, also allowed pupils to access revision websites, log into the school email system, or transfer electronic files between school and home.

The research involved 331 pupils in schools in Cambridgeshire, West Berkshire and Nottingham.

"At the start of the study, even pupils were often surprised at the thought

that mobile phones could be used for learning, " Dr Hartnell-Young will tell the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association in Edinburgh today. "After their hands-on experience, almost all pupils said they had enjoyed the project and felt more motivated."

Some teachers also had to reassess their views even though staff who took part were already champions of new technology in their schools. "Students like mobiles and they know how to use them," one said. "Using this technology gives them more freedom to express themselves without needing to be constantly supervised."

Other teachers found that pupils who lacked confidence gained most from the project. However, they recognised that greater use of mobile phones in schools could prove problematical.

Increased temptation to steal phones was one worry. "I thought, well, four of these smartphones are going to end up on eBay tomorrow," one teacher said.

That fear turned out to be misplaced but a few teachers remained concerned that phones could prove a distraction for some pupils. Allowing pupils to access school emails via mobiles would also pose data security risks if passwords were shared, they said.

Teacher unions have similar fears and have supported phone bans in schools. "Pupils nowadays come to school equipped with mobile phones, MP3 players, and portable games consoles when teachers would like them to just bring a pen," Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASUWT teachers' union, said last month.

Dr Hartnell-Young says that the teachers' worries are understandable. "While the eventual aim should be to lift blanket bans on phones we do

not recommend immediate, whole-school change," she said.

"Instead we believe that teachers, students and the wider community should work together to develop policies that will enable this powerful new learning tool to be used safely. We hope that, in future, mobile phone use will be as natural as using any other technology in school."

Source: University of Nottingham

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