Cloudlearn: smart phones in schools component

Our Cloudlearn research project was funded by the Nominet Trust, 2011 - 2012. This document 2013, revised and slightly expanded, 2019, then 2021

The catalyst for the overall Cloudlearn research focussed on social media and portable devices. For both there was a growing deep divide developing between those schools who were embracing social media in all its forms, or embracing portable devices (specifically mobile & smart phones), and those schools maintaining a policy of banning, locking and blocking either. This research sought to identify effective and proven practice, to help all schools going forwards with embracing both.

This document concerns the smart phones component of the research collation.

Concerns were twofold: **firstly**, the embracing schools were achieving and reported greater engagement, a significant component in improving standards, but that opportunity was lost to the locking and blocking schools; **secondly**, we had an acute concern that locking and blocking might be potentially dangerous, for a number of reasons, a concern which this work reaffirmed. There are dangers inherent with smart phones and our adopting schools felt that they needed to be a core part of children's evolution of safe and appropriate practice with smart phones, as with road safety, sex and more.

Additionally, it it clear that simply saying "yes" to phones is not enough. As was observed by one participant: *"The devil makes work for idle thumbs"* and it is the way that phones are overtly embraced as a part of learning, with their use in authentic and appropriate tasks, with a clear view to equity, that will matter in adoption.

The core Mobile Devices group, one of four within the Cloudlearn project, consisted of 14 teachers and educationalists, primary and secondary, who all work within a classroom setting. The members varied from Head and Deputy Head Teachers, other Senior Leadership Team members, Heads of Subject (varying from Maths & Science to Arts and Humanities) and classroom practitioners who have been teaching in the classroom anywhere between 2 - 20 years.

The group was mostly based within the UK in a variety of geographical areas: cities, towns, village schools. However, other members were from Sweden, New Zealand, Australia, the Netherlands and

Canada. The group contributed their own experience, **but also** researched, crowd sourced and evaluated many others' practice, including learner voice.

The schools represented were from a variety of settings: Pupil referral unit, secondary academies, secondary local authority schools, primary academies, all through schools etc. A representative spread of governance type and function. Each contributor had been using smart phones for at least one year within their own classroom, but usually substantially longer.

The research produced a lot of material: case studies, example parental letters, a three stage progression of policy from very controlling to wholesale adoption and more. There were significant gains observed: cognitive, attainment, engagement and safety, with particular gains for data capture in science, sport and elsewhere. **This note is a summary for busy practitioners.**

Your institutional guidelines will evolve but the research indicated some common starting points:

Do - in general:
- Have a clear, lucid and comprehensive policy on the use of smart phones.
- Keep parents informed. Write a formal letter to parents explaining the use of smart phones in school, why they are being used, and the expectation of use when they are provided (including rewards and sanctions). It is never a requirement for parents to supply smart phones, merely an option.
- Your phone policy will be 100% congruent with other school policies; bullying, internet use, social networking, etc. It should be clear that any behaviour with a smart phone that would be unacceptable if spoken or handwritten, will be equally unacceptable when any form of new media or technology are being used.
- Ensure that your students have a lockable area to cover their personal insurance requirement (i.e. lockers or a locked classroom at lunchtimes) to store their handheld. device.
- Encourage a working group of students and teachers to work and research policy and protocols together, continually reviewing the way smart phones are being used to enhance learning and teaching within the classroom.
- Begin with a small trial and then roll out the the whole school. Each school is different and will experience separate teething problems. Make sure things revealed in your trials are covered in your evolving policy.
- Expect a small spike, but then a larger drop, in bullying reports. Once phones are acceptable tools to use in school, students are more likely to report bullying (which will have been already occurring). When it becomes clear that the same sanctions and rules apply, this will reduce bullying again, and further.
- Consult the students! They often have more knowledge and ideas than the teachers. Their agency is important. Once included, they will encourage, refine and 'police' protocols and policy for you.
- Use your trial group of teachers to share resources and information with those interested in the work
- Be clear that equipment is brought in at the students' own risk.
- Encourage different types of kit. This helps limit banter about who has the latest phone, and encourage students to think critically and evaluate the strengths of different solutions. Definitions evolve. Today's large phone, or small tablet are very similar. Today's smart watches carry many of the functions of yesterday's mobile phone.
- If you move forward in stages, the students will be aware that making each stage work effectively will unlock the possibility of further and greater levels of use. Again, this encourages students to police your shared and evolving smart phone protocols.

Do Specifically begin by adopting these three base protocols:

- During lessons, student homework diaries, pencil cases and **phones remain out, on the table, usually face upwards** although many find face down less distracting. - your choice.. This means it is MUCH easier to monitor use. Phones on silent, obviously.
- **Be explicit about a formal expectation of sharing.** One phone between two, will be the normal minimum. This means that students will need to allow, and expect, some others to share their phone - eliminating a number of privacy, equity, secrecy and "inappropriateness" issues.
- If some children do have their phone with them, be sure to **offer at least some tasks using phones that could not be done without them.** As is observed above, the devil makes work for idle thumbs, but smart teachers make great learning for inquisitive fingers!.

Our many practitioners reminded us that there are very many uses for a smart phone in school. Data capture - in particular the important variables of sound and light in the classroom: (left & centre below),
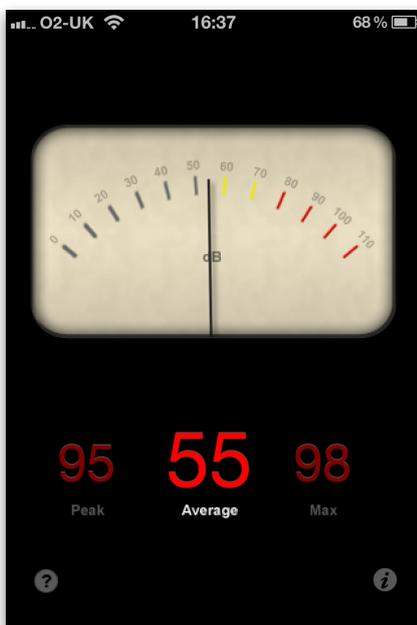
Using phones to take advantage of the free resources only available in phone based landscape format, eg: TinyPhysicsLab on TikTok (right, above), or phone only apps like 3D scanning. In some world contexts, this may be the only route to connectivity too. And of course as we move, post CoVID to more outdoor learning they become indispensable ways to take technology along for the session, plus of course outdoor movement related data like mapping and measuring running in the playground, Think of the maths inherent in the tree drawing example shown here.

So, in summary, there is no false dichotomy here BAN THEM vs USE THEM. As ever in learning the reality is complex and varied. But if you are one of very many around the world adopting, or continuing to allow, phones, then hopefully the experience of others, summarised above, will be helpful.

Prof Stephen Heppell   2013 2019 2021