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## Okay, Class, Take Out Your Phones

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## **“Okay, Class, Take Out Your Phones,” by Julia Evanoff**

### **Instructor’s Note**

Julia Evanoff’s argumentative essay works well because of her creative spin on what could be a very technical topic. Instead of simply weighing the pros and cons of cell phones, Julia argues that they should be used as tools in the classroom because of their educational applications. Although this is a rather recent topic, Julia avoids the pitfall of overusing popular sources, showing scholarly information is available on virtually all topics if a writer knows how to locate it. What do you think about Julia’s use of support for her thesis? Is there any place in this essay where you wanted to know more?

### **Writer’s Biography**

Julia Evanoff is a freshman Biology major from Cincinnati. She has always enjoyed writing and reading fiction.

### **Okay, Class, Take Out Your Phones**

Cell phones are used by almost every student in America. Walk into any high school classroom, and you are sure to see girls with their hands buried in their purses and boys with one arm suspiciously missing from the teacher’s view. These not-so-sneaky ways of hiding cell phones demand a method for regulating the use of mobile phones in schools. Mobile devices are becoming an integral part of our culture, and schools are having to adapt their policies to these changes. As a result, most schools have adopted policies banning cell phones from classrooms, or even the school altogether. Nevertheless, most students continue to use their cell phones in school. These exclusionary policies are obviously not working. Instead of close-mindedly banning cell phones, schools need to reevaluate their policies in light of reality. These devices are not simply

disruptive tools for distraction. Schools need to recognize that cell phones can be useful in academics and in helping students learn personal responsibility. As a recent high school graduate, I know first-hand how cell phones can be used and misused in school. It all depends on how schools approach policy regarding if and how they are used. I believe that cell phones should be allowed in schools at the teacher's discretion because of their academic uses such as open channel questioning, polling, and Internet access, and their potential to teach responsibility.

It's common sense that total bans on cell phones in school just aren't practical. Students are going to use their phones at school whether or not there are rules against it. Part of the reason for this may be that kids are rebellious in nature. They like breaking the rules. Using their phones when they aren't supposed to is just one way to rebel. Another reason for this is that cell phones have become such an integral part of their daily lives that they simply can't live without them. According to Kevin Thomas and Christy McGee of Bellarmine University, 84% of teens between the ages of 15 and 18 had cell phones as of 2009 (2012). This percentage has undoubtedly grown in the last few years. Children and teenagers today are enamored with technology. They spend countless hours Internet browsing, tweeting, and sending an average of 2,272 texts per month using their phones (Thomas & McGee, 2012). School administrators need to recognize that cell phone usage is an inevitable reality. The fact of the matter is that students are using their phones during class regardless whether or not it is allowed. In a survey of college students, researchers William Baker, Edward Lusk, and Karyn Neuhauser concluded that almost 25 percent of students reported using their cell phone in almost every class to send text messages. Additionally, almost 29 percent of students reported using their phones to check their messages during almost every class (2012, p. 282). Cell phone usage in class is a trend that is not going to go away or subside.

Total bans on cell phones in school are also impossible to enforce. Teachers simply cannot monitor what students are doing all the time. Students will always

find a way around the rules. A complete prohibition of cell phones will also create grey areas. For instance, students may follow the policy during class but not at lunch or in the hallway between classes. This will cause confusion and a lack of enforcement of the policy. Some teachers may choose to prosecute offenders during these times, while others may believe it is futile. This can cause students to be confused or resentful if they are punished but others are not. Students will lose respect for rules that they deem to be unfair. Thus, a complete ban on cell phones is not an effective strategy.

A decade ago, cell phones were just starting to come onto the scene on a grand scale. Teachers immediately realized the potential negative implications of these devices, so they panicked. Elizabeth Marcoux writes, “At that time, not only were cell phones a new phenomenon to many teachers, but also to many administrations. The logical response was to ban them from school” (2011, p. 69). Because they only saw the negatives, they feared what they did not fully understand. They had yet to learn how popular these devices would become. They also failed to see their potential academic uses. Citing a study done by Domitrek and Raby, Baker et al. claim that students view electronic devices as essential, teachers view them as unimportant in the classroom, and administrators are indifferent. They assert that “Ironically, though, it is the administrators who create most of the policies forbidding electronic devices in the classroom, without ever consulting students or teachers” (2012, p. 277). Unless school policymakers become more proactive in changing their perceptions about the usefulness of cell phones, they will never realize their academic potential. Doctoral student M. Beth Humble-Thaden states that “Policy regarding cell phone use by students in school will not change unless studies indicate that administrators and faculty also view them as valuable learning tools” (2011, p. 14). Administrators need to start embracing cell phones in the classroom instead of fearing them. We know that total bans are ineffective, but we also need to realize that banning cell phones in the classroom prevents them from being used for beneficial educational purposes.

Cell phones can be used in large classroom settings to allow students to ask questions or make comments without being disruptive by texting them to the teacher. This concept, called the open channel, allows for more student participation in classes where students may feel uncomfortable to ask a question or risk disturbing the large class. Using this system, teachers can see the comments on their laptop and decide whether to comment on them without interrupting the flow of the lecture. Any questions not addressed in class can also be answered afterwards via a traditional discussion forum. In a study done concerning this technology, researchers Eusebio Scornavacca, Sid Huff, and Stephen Marshall concluded that “The instructor involved in the trial had a very positive experience using the system and perceived a notable increase in quality and quantity of student feedback during class” (2009, p.144). Students feel more comfortable sharing their comments without fear of embarrassment, doing away with the concept of passive listening. With this method, cell phones can make students in large or intimidating classroom environments feel more confident to speak up and engage in class discourse.

Other potential academic uses for cell phones in classrooms include m-quizzes and polling exercises. These methods involve the teacher presenting a multiple-choice question that requires students to text in their responses. The results are then tabulated and either used in place of a pencil-and-paper quiz grade or displayed on a screen to show a graph or chart of the aggregated responses. Teachers using this method for quizzing purposes are thus spared the time and effort of grading. Students are also able to view their scores immediately instead of having to wait for their results. In a study exploring this technique, “The instructor noticed that m-quizzes provided several benefits, including instantaneous feedback on concept tests or using m-quiz results to stimulate class discussion” (Scornavacca et al., 2009, p. 144). When this method is used for polling purposes, students can express their opinions on certain issues and see how they measure up to the rest of the class. Polling exercises call for students to anonymously text in their positions on a topic without fear of judgment or

rejection by their peers. When students are able to visually see their class's collective opinion on a given issue, they become more interested and willing to participate in class discussion. I experienced this first-hand in my high school English class when we used to do polling exercises exploring our opinions about certain topics and issues raised in the literature we were reading. I remember these exercises sparking many valuable conversations and debates because we were able to explore our differing opinions on certain issues. Being able to instantaneously see the results of the polls after we texted in our answers was both fun and academically beneficial. Practices such as m-quizzes and polls have proven to make classroom discussion a more enjoyable, engaging experience.

There are many more valuable academic uses for cell phones, but perhaps the most important is the ability for smartphones to provide instant, easy access to the Internet. The Internet has become an invaluable tool in education, providing the everyday person with unlimited information on-demand. Having access to this in the classroom can be valuable in certain situations. For instance, during my senior year in high school, one of my teachers used to stimulate class discussion by telling us to look something up on our phones if we didn't know the answer to a question. This got us engaged with the topic because we were responsible to investigate material that we actually wanted to learn about. In allowing students to use their smartphones for these purposes, schools can save money on computer lab costs. According to Thomas and McGee, "The ban on cell phones ultimately hurts students by denying them access to inexpensive computing" (2012, p.22). Allowing cell phones to be used in an academic setting has countless advantages, but ultimately it sets the precedent that phones can and should be used in education. They are not objects to be rejected; they should be embraced as a reality with an important academic potential. Scornavacca et al. said it best when they claimed, "Our experience has shown that positive results can be achieved by encouraging students to bring their mobile phones out in the open and to use them to contribute to the class, and to their own learning—that is, by joining them instead of

trying to beat them” (2009, p. 146). Cell phones are already a part of daily life, so why not make them a part of our daily education?

As stated earlier, school-wide policies often do not reflect the same values or opinions as the teachers or students in the school. As a result, students may view administrative policies as unreasonable or unfair. Because students tend to make a greater effort to obey rules they agree with, those who disagree with a policy will most likely act out against it. This principle rings true particularly for rules regarding cell phone usage in schools. Out of all school policies, none affects the everyday personal lives of students more than the cell phone policy. Anita Charles of Bates College refers to this by claiming that “Although schools set rules that define appropriate behaviors with social digital networks, it appears that students and teachers frequently negotiate the boundaries and intersections of these tools and discourses through relationships founded on trust and respect” (2012, p.6). All students want to be respected and treated fairly. When given the opportunity to work together with teachers to create reasonable boundaries for cell phone usage, students will respond in kind. For example, students involved in Charles’ study reported that a driving force behind their self-control was the desire to respect and please the teachers whom they trusted. The principle of mutual respect between teachers and students is a big part of what makes a successful school policy.

Allowing students to have a part in determining cell phone policy also teaches students about personal responsibility. In schools where teachers determine the policy, students learn which teachers are lenient and which are strict. This act of evaluating people and situations prepares students for the “real world” in which they will need to know how to behave differently around different people. Students need to be able to gauge what is acceptable behavior in different situations. This philosophy of student involvement in policy also teaches self-control and self-discipline. In schools that allow students to monitor their own cell phone usage, students learn how to discipline

themselves to resist the desire to use their phones. They learn what behavior works best for them, even if they have to make mistakes along the way. Students will learn from experience that too much time spent distracted on their cell phone will cause them to miss things in class, leading to poor academic performance. Charles also asserts that “Another reason to set self-imposed boundaries seems to be the degree of attention required at a given time, and the value of listening, sometimes as a subset of good manners” (2012, p.8). It stands to reason that when given a choice of whether to use their phone in class, students will eventually learn when they need to pay close attention to the lesson and when it is okay to send a quick text. Students that fail to learn this lesson will inevitably suffer the consequences. If students constantly rely on rules to dictate their behavior, they will never learn how to do it on their own. When cell phone usage stops being forbidden, it will become less appealing and easier to control.

Some may argue that letting students regulate their own behavior is too idealistic. This notion is not without merit. While it is important to let students learn how to manage their own behavior, there are always limits. Schools should foster independent thought and responsibility, but unfortunately there will always be those who take advantage of the system. Teachers need to be understanding and lenient in order to foster personal choice and self-control. However, they must act within reason. They are ultimately in charge of what goes on within their classroom. For example, a teacher may notice that her students are having trouble controlling their behavior, so she helps them along by reprimanding those who use their mobile devices inappropriately. It is essential that teachers are not oblivious, but are aware of what is going on in their classroom. Appropriate classroom management is important to make sure that students are not taking advantage of teachers’ leniency. Cooperation with students promotes respect, but teachers must not sacrifice their authority in the process. Students will resent an authoritarian teacher, but they will also resent a teacher who doesn’t know how to control their classroom. This is exemplified in Charles’ study when a student says that her

teacher “just doesn’t care.” Charles notes that “Carrie judged her teacher harshly, disapproving of her lack of management and directive” (2012, p. 11). The best approach to teaching is one that combines cooperation with control.

Some common arguments made by those who oppose the use of cell phones are their potential for cheating and legal problems. However, both of these arguments are invalid. Cheating is a huge problem in schools, but it has always been a problem. Students are simply using their smartphones to look up answers instead of paper cheat sheets. This highlights the need for better classroom management, not the banning of all cell phones in school. Thomas and McGee echo this sentiment by saying, “Removing the opportunity to use cell phones will hardly fix the issue. A better resolution would be for students to check in their phones at the beginning of a testing period and retrieve them when they leave the room” (2012, p.21). Cell phones can be tools for cheating, but they are not the causes of it. Students who really want to cheat will find a way to do it with or without a cell phone. Another reason people give to support their opposition is the ramifications of phone misuse on school property. If parents find out that their child was cyberbullied or sent sexually explicit texts at school, they could blame the school and cause all kinds of problems. The answer to this issue also lies in the fact that banning phones will not solve the problem. Schools should not hastily react to these problems by banning cell phones altogether. Instead, they should follow the principle that “the abuse of a thing is no argument against its use” (Thomas & McGee, 2012, p. 28). If school policymakers work together with students, teachers and parents, they can create a reasonable policy that works for everyone and promotes the wise and appropriate use of these devices.

The old saying “If you can’t beat them, join them” certainly applies to the issue of cell phone use in schools. We are coming to the point at which schools are going to have to accept the fact that cell phones are a part of our culture. They are here to stay. No school rules are going to

keep kids from using them. What schools can do is control their effects. If they choose to implement a lenient and reasonable policy, cell phones can become tools for self-discipline instead of distraction. They can be used for academic learning instead of menial social interaction. They can foster cooperation instead of creating division. However, to do these things they must first be allowed.

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