

Using Cell Phones for Exams

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I have watched with interest, in far-off America, the media storm raised by the use of mobile phones for exams at Presbyterian Women's College, Croyden, based – at least in part – on my recommendations. I was even interviewed by phone by two Australian radio stations.

This high level of media interest – which places the idea of permitting twenty-first century devices in our teaching and evaluation squarely in the public conversation about how we educate our kids – is as it should be, and here is why:

Too many of today's adults are of the opinion that their children's education should remain exactly as it was when they were educated in a period before digital technology, the Internet, and other twenty-first century innovations. Unfortunately, this attitude, if implemented, prepares our children not for the future they will face in their lifetimes, but only for the past.

In particular, the idea of testing a person without all the tools they will have at their disposal in the real world is no longer appropriate. It is akin to asking person to tell you the time, but not letting them consult their watch. Every plumber or doctor, or musician is tested with the tools and instruments of their trade. Can you imagine an examiner saying "OK, doctor, tell me about this patient's heartbeat – but leave that stethoscope in your pocket!" Or that doctor's having a question about a diagnosis and not phoning a colleague?

The attitude that we should know as many facts as possible, and hold in our heads every trivial piece of information we might need to use in our lives was useful in a time when the body of knowledge was much smaller and information was much harder and slower to find. Memorizing phone numbers allowed you to dial faster. Memorizing the multiplication tables

saved you the trouble of adding. Memorizing the names of places was helpful when maps were not always available.

But those were, in the words of one 10-year-old, the “olden days.” Today’s kids store numbers on their phones, use the calculator in the phones to multiply and divide, and, increasingly, tell the time from the phones as well. This frees their mind, ideally, to think of more important things than what is increasing known as “trivia” – IF they are taught to do so, and IF they are evaluated on that ability, rather than on what they have memorized.

Understanding of key concepts is just as important today as in the past – perhaps even more so. But one can understand what a map of the world looks like and represents without being able to name every country and capital. How completely and accurately could you, the reader, fill in a blank map of Africa, or of the former Soviet Union, or of the former Yugoslavia, without help? There is nothing shameful or “uneducated” about this, because this information, in the twenty-first century, is easily findable.

Given this, smart educators, like those at PLC, assume the availability of such facts via the students’ always-on devices, and on exams, ask harder questions, such as “What do these facts mean?” or “How do we interpret this information?”

And as for those who raise the scenario of technology breaking down, or of someone’s forgetting, or not owning the tools, I remind those people of what we all do whenever we leave our watch at home, or when its battery runs down: we just ask someone else for the time. It is *not* doing this that would really seem “uneducated” in the twenty-first century.

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