

Turning Off the Cell Phones and Living in the Present

Susie Jans-Thomas, Mount Mary College

The idea for this research began in the summer of 2003 when I was stopped at a red light in a left turn lane. Jimmy Buffett was wafting through my speakers reminding me of my up and coming beach vacation, and the windows in my van were open allowing me to experience the warmth of a Wisconsin summer day. I looked across the intersection into the southbound left turn lane and saw a man on a motorcycle talking on a cell phone. Somehow, this did not fit the Milwaukee owned Harley-Davidson image of tough guys with tattoos donned in black leather that film and advertisement had provided me. However, after having lived in Milwaukee for a number of years and attending many of the Harley-Davidson birthday celebrations, I understood that just about anyone from any walk of life can be a H.O.G. (Harley Owners Group).

As Buffett was singing about the Northern Caribbean, I caught myself staring at the Harley rider in wonder as to just how he was going to make a left hand turn on a motorcycle while talking on a cell phone. There was no car behind me, so when the green arrow was made available to me I chose to remain at the intersection, so that I could watch the Harley rider on his cell phone. When he received the green arrow signal, he put the cell phone in his mouth, proceeded to make a left hand turn through the intersection, and pulled over to complete his phone call. His behavior stunned me. Never before had I witnessed this behavior. I had never owned a cell phone, and up until this point had paid little or no attention to people using them, but the "Left Hand Turn Cell Phone Talking Harley Rider" converted me into a "Cell Phone Usage Observer."

Throughout the remainder of the day, I remembered the Cell Phone Biker incident with astonishment. I thought that motorcycles provided their riders with the image of the open road, an image of escaping the everyday world, an image of being alone, an image of leaving responsibility behind and taking the world by storm. These images were given to me through the world of advertisement, but nonetheless, they left me in a state of wonder. I was teaching an evening course that summer, and when I got to class, I had to share the story with my students. They all looked at me in amazement that was two-fold. First, it was a pretty amazing feat on the part of the motorcycle rider and admittedly, none of them had ever witnessed the behavior. Second, how in the world did I survive without a cell phone? How could a professor, whom they considered to be fairly "with it" in terms of pop culture, not have a cell phone? I asked, "By a show of hands, how many of you own a cell phone?" Of 23 students, 18 owned a cell phone.

The course I was teaching was "Child and Adolescent Development in a Diverse Society," so the topic of cell phone usage fit into the category of adolescent behavior. We engaged in a dialogue about the usage of cell phones. They told me about various incidents where the cell phone assisted them in what they perceived to be an emergency situation, and how the cell phone permitted them to remain in constant communication with their families and friends. They did not think that parents should be purchasing them for their children unless they were involved in sports or other after school activities. I wanted to take the dialogue into issues involving socioeconomics, because so much of child development is associated with environmental concerns; but when I did so, the discussion came to a halt. The result of the discussion yielded that, those who can afford a cell phone will attain a cell phone, and those who cannot afford them will not.

The summer course continued and throughout its duration, there were humorous references made to cell phone usage. I purchased a professionally made "No Cell Phones Beyond This Point" sign for my office door and grew comfortable with the fact I did not have a cell phone as I listened to student conversations during break. They were rather trivial in nature, and served to irritate a few. I also noticed that there was a rift forming during break between students who had cell phones and those who did not. When breaks were given during class, the students with cell phones would jump out of their seats and leave the classroom to have a conversation with someone in the world outside of the college environment. Students without cell phones mingled while talking about aspects of the course, or movies they had seen, and even which candy bars to purchase from the vending machine. The group dynamic was interesting. I made note of it at that place in time, but I did not really do too much with my observations.

Throughout the next academic year, students made comments about the sign on my office door. Many teased me about not having a cell phone, but I noticed that each person who entered my office turned off their cell phone, which was behavior I wanted in that time and place. Simply put, when someone came into my office to speak with me, or attended my class to hear me speak, teach, and exchange ideas, I wanted them to be in the same place with me. Not away from the present world.

It was May of 2004 that the use of cell phones on campus became an obsessive dislike for me, a pet peeve of mine, a bane on intellectual experience known as a college education. On one of the first spring days that nature allows mortals to go outside without a coat and sit to enjoy the wonders of the world, I was walking across campus. The smoking section of the campus had three tables neatly tucked between two buildings with southern exposure, and as I approached the area, I noticed six students seated at the tables. As I looked more carefully, I notice that all of them were on cell phones. They were not talking with each other, they were all engaging in conversations with someone away from their present place.

I was flabbergasted with this behavior. I remembered my undergraduate education on spring days like these and thought of how I learned from other springtime worshippers which professors to take for philosophy class, and scholarships that might be available, and the country's political climate, and stories of families that we all would be seeing in a few short weeks. I came to the realization right then and there that these six young women were paying \$12,000 a year to attend school, but were not communicating with the people in their present place. They were communicating with another place. I was sadly awakened to the fact that the need for constant communication with others away from the present place was happening everywhere around me, creating a void in shared experiences. It was not simply the students on campus; it was the people in the grocery line, the people at the video stores, the people in restaurants, and the people everywhere who were going through life in a state of parallel existence never to intersect.

In the fall semester of 2004, I decided to put all of my observations together and require my students to complete a "Cell Phone Challenge." As a final examination in Child and Adolescent Development, an undergraduate course, and Curriculum Design, a graduate course, students were challenged to hang up their cell phones for one week. They were to keep a journal and record observations of cell phone usage on and off campus as seen through daily routine. Further, they were required to conduct one thirty-minute observation of cell phone usage in a public place and record their observations. Finally, they had to answer the question, "Should cell phone usage be allowed in high schools?" Students who lived in the dormitory posed a variable for the assignment. The landlines in the dormitory were wired for local calls only. Students could receive long distance calls, but they

were unable to dial any long distance numbers. So that their parents would not worry about them, and their boyfriends would not be frantic, we agreed that they could make long distance calls from their cell phones only when they were in their dorm rooms. They could not make the calls in any communal area.

The student journals from the first day of the challenge were enlightening. Students wrote of an internal struggle not to use their cell phones. Their journals openly showed that the majority of them had purchased their cell phones for emergencies. One student wrote, "I believe this will be an easy task for me. I do have a cell phone but I only use it for emergencies where I cannot get to a phone. Well, now that I think of it I do use my cell phone one other time every week. I use it to call my sister in Kentucky. It is free when I call long distance after 7:00 p.m. on weekdays and anytime on the weekend. This saves a lot of money since I usually talk to her for at least an hour. It is a lot cheaper than any long distance plan with our regular phone." The need to justify owning a cell phone was a pattern for the first day of the challenge.

Etiquette surrounding cell phone usage was another behavior revealed through student observation. All of the students had noted how loudly people spoke on cell phones. Evidence of this was found in one student's journal when she observed a situation in the college library. She was conducting research at one of the computer stations when someone's cell phone rang. The student answered the phone and had an entire conversation, and just as her conversation ended another student's phone rang and she too proceeded to have an entire conversation. The student wrote: "I felt that it was a very inappropriate time and place for these students to be answering their cell phones and disrupting others in the library." The library is a quiet place for reading, researching, reflecting, and learning. It is a place where ideas are gained and taken out into the world. Having conversations on cell phones in the library alienates the user from the purpose of the place that is the library.

Students reported the number of people they saw talking on their phones while changing lanes on the expressway, choosing items in grocery stores, and even in bathroom stalls. Interestingly several students reported that they sought fellow students out after classes to talk with them rather than call them later in the evening to ask questions concerning social events. This particular behavior fascinated me as it clearly represented my original intent of the "Cell Phone Challenge," that being college campuses are places to learn, to grow, and to meet people who will shape individual character for a lifetime; yet students are not talking to one another in the hallowed halls. These data revealed that the "challenge" had indeed required the students to change their individual behavior while on campus.

As a professor, I was interested in the classroom behaviors observed by students of others who were using cell phones on campus. All students reported incidents of others talking on cell phones before and after class. However, there were specific observations that should be shared with other professors so that they become aware of the place of cell phones usage in college classrooms. Three students reported that there were students in classes sending text messages throughout an entire class period. Although cellular phones are compact, they can complete almost as many tasks as a computer. Text messaging is one example of the computer tasks that cell phones are capable of accomplishing in terms of word processing. Students are able to sit in a classroom and send written messages to other people away from their present place without saying a word within the immediate environment. Text messaging allows the student flexibility of time and space to communicate with another person in another place. One student observed that there were two students in one class text messaging each other across the classroom. By putting the concept of text messaging into the great scope of college classroom behavior, it is evident

that some of the students are making clear judgments as to the important aspects of their individual educations.

Taking digital pictures with cell phones was another aspect of usage observed by the students. While taking a digital picture at the scene of an automobile accident to serve as evidence for an insurance company is a good thing, taking pictures of examinations, classroom blackboard information, and other people's assignments is not. Several students observed other students taking pictures, but they were unable to determine the use of the pictures based on the observable behavior. The idea of taking a picture of an examination and sending it to a student who is in a place outside of the classroom is another ethical issue surrounding student achievement across academic disciplines and institutional levels. Some of the graduate students were high school teachers, and they reported having to confiscate cell phones from students so as to decrease cheating in their classrooms. They viewed the monitoring of cell phones as yet another thing that teachers were required to do that had little or nothing to do with education. I viewed their observations as a heads-up to college professors, for if the behavior is being practiced in high schools it is being practiced in colleges. Of course, every educator can site a Code of Conduct about cheating to the students and community, but cell phone usage is providing education with another behavior to take into consideration.

There is one more observation with regard to a direct on-campus observation that must be included in this work. One of the students involved in the research reported that a professor's cell phone rang just before the start of a class period, and the professor answered the call. It was a student from the class who had a flat tire and would not be able to make it to class. The student's journal read, "I was surprised that the professor had her cell phone on during class. I always make sure that I silence my cell phone before I enter any of my classes. It is disrespectful to leave on during class." The recorded response demonstrates a respect for knowledge, learning, and the place of higher education.

The student observations that were conducted in 30-minute time blocks demonstrated the behaviors that cell phone users exhibited in places that were not associated with the college campus. Since the challenge was administered during the Christmas shopping season, several students went to a mall to observe people's behavior while waiting to visit with Santa Claus. All of the students who observed at the "North Pole Picture Taking Stage" found that the adults who were on their cell phones were paying no attention to the children with them. They were distressed while considering the fact that the purpose of a visit to Santa was for the children, and the adults did not want to be a part of the magic that is found through the eyes of a child at Christmas time. The concept of place was clearly observed in the line to visit Santa Claus, because it revolved around adults and children, and the observers were teachers.

Several students sat in the Mall's Food Court to conduct their observations. One reported observing four teenage girls walking around the food court talking to each other on their cell phones. Another reported people who had been separated while ordering food from different restaurants phoning one another to see where they were within the confines of the food court. She wrote, "The food court was crowded, but not so crowded that looking around for a minute would not have permitted them to find each other." Students reported adults who were with children and talking on their cell phones to others throughout the entire time they were eating a meal. Their reaction to this behavior was that society is habitually talking about the decline of the family, yet a family activity such as having dinner, is being invaded by people in another place.

During the scheduled final examination periods for the two classes, I chose to conduct a debriefing session of the student observations and reactions to the cell phone challenge. It was during the shared observation about meals in a mall food court that the students began to reveal the changing values in society. I harkened back to my childhood when no one's phone was to ring during the family dinner hour. This had meaning to some of the students, but not all, simply because of age differentiation. I then made the statement that I did not feel places like McDonald's and Taco Bell were restaurants. I qualified my statement by saying that I did not feel that they are restaurants where children are taken to learn how to dine in public. This statement struck a chord with everyone, and the concept of etiquette surrounding cell phones and our changing society came to the forefront.

Students freely exchanged ideas and observations of how people using cell phones were physically in one place, but their attentions were in another; thereby limiting interactions with the immediate environment. Everyone had an antidote to share about one time or another that they were in a restaurant and a person on a cell phone was ignoring everyone at their table. I told them of how I have a standing joke about people who attend the theater and run out at intermission to see if anyone has phoned them to leave a message. It is my feeling that if one is paying hard-earned cash to attend the theater, one should discuss the event with the person with whom he is attending. My thought is that only those people who are on human organ donor surgical transplant teams need to have a cell phone with them constantly. The students laughed; however, they quickly said, "The theatergoers may need to phone their baby sitters." I said, "You know, I thought parents went out for a night to get away from their children." They all nodded their heads in agreement, but then the concept of the emergency filled their responses. I said, "When I was a kid, my parents went out and a neighbor was an emergency contact. This was even before the 9-1-1 emergency phone number was put into place." Several other students jumped into the conversation by saying that in their childhoods they never experienced emergencies with a babysitter that could not be resolved by a neighbor.

The groups then had to debate the question as to whether or not cell phones should be permitted in high schools. The response was no, there was no need for teenagers to utilize cellular phones in schools. One of the issues discussed with a great deal of rigor was the fact that many schools are removing pay phones. Pay phone usage is down; therefore, they are not economically feasible for phone companies to install in schools. The groups decided that teachers and parents should work to maintain pay phones in schools. They decided that cell phones are another item that society can use to demonstrate the socioeconomic haves and have nots, because not all families can afford to purchase cell phones for their children.

The "Cell Phone Challenge" demonstrated a change in society in terms of how we communicate and how we share our place in the world with others. Student observations clearly showed that many of the conversations they overheard were insipid, and they were left wondering if people were able to make decisions on their own. For example, one student overheard a person in the women's sweater department asking the person on the other end of the line what color sweater grandma would like for Christmas. I shared of how I observed a man standing in the grocery store while talking on a cell phone saying, "Do you want Kraft Mac and Cheese, or the store brand?" My immediate response to him was to say, "Pick one or the other. If you chose incorrectly, you will either 1. never purchase that brand again, or 2. your wife will do all of the shopping because you are obviously incapable of choosing the correct brand."

Student observations also demonstrated that people talking on cell phones do not interact with the immediate world around them. The users are not making eye contact with store

clerks, or other store patrons. People talking on cell phones appear to be void of their present circumstances. All of the participants agreed that the cell phone does allow others to get in touch with them at any time, and this was a plus according to them. I said, "I do not think I want people to get in touch with me at anytime. I want some time to myself everyday." A few of the students nodded their heads in agreement.

All of this leads me back to listening to Jimmy Buffett and driving around alone in my van. Interestingly, it is alone in my van that I thought of the cell phone challenge. The cell phone is a piece of technology that is having an impact on school curriculum in terms of the behaviors that must be enforced in order to assure proper usage. The ethical implications as related to cheating on examinations and assignments are now coming to the forefront. The cell phone allows people to remain in communication with others who are not in their present place, yet it is the absence of interaction with the present place that is disheartening. When people do not recognize where they are physically in the world, based on others around them--the architecture surrounding them, the wildlife scurrying about with them, and the weather effecting them--they often fail to appreciate the romantic dimension of life. Perhaps the most luminous observation a student made was a description of a cell phone user in the college dining room. She observed that a student was seated at a table for eight all by herself, talking on a cell phone. In a journal entry the student wrote, "I think she was afraid to be alone." Further discussion must be given to the difference of being alone and being lonely. Since the people involved in this project are in the field of education they are required to explore various aspects of the environment on children and adolescents, and cell phone usage is a behavior that is impacting development in terms of understanding age appropriate behaviors. If adults model talking on the cell phone while driving a car, then adolescents are going to talk on the cell phone while driving. If adults talk on cell phones to others during mealtime, then children and adolescents are going to talk to others during mealtime. When it comes to learning by example, cell phone usage behaviors are truly observable.

Epilogue

While the "Cell Phone Challenge" ended the week before Christmas, I must include a few events that occurred over the winter break. For the first time in my life, I talked on a cell phone while driving a car. I was in Tampa visiting an old friend and was unable to locate a street. When I realized that I was off course I told the person in the car with me to use her cell phone and call our friend to ask for directions. The person, who was serving as navigator dialed our friend, then handed me the cell phone so that I could receive the directions directly from the source. Oddly, I found it all very easy to listen, speak, and drive through a subdivision. However, I would not want to make it a daily habit.

The second event that must be shared happened in my office last week. A graduate student had an appointment to discuss an aspect of her thesis. She is a fun loving kindergarten teacher and mother of two daughters. She told me about how she is no longer calling her children on her drive home from work to check on them when they get home from school. She said, "I'm leaving my cell phone under the seat of my van to use only for emergencies. If the kids are going to burn down the house, it will still take me twenty minutes to get there no matter what I do." I remembered that she was one of the students in the class during the summer of my H.O.G. user observation. She had no idea I would be writing this paper. I guess when an idea is real in a specific place and time, it is remembered for many days to come.