Policy Dilemma: Cell Phones in Classrooms and Clinical Sites

Sydney Fullbright, PhD

The familiar hum of the vibrating cell phone goes off in millions of classrooms every day in America. You must decide to ban these devices or allow them to become a part of the learning environment. Programs such as Poll Everywhere are designed to be used with smart phones in the classroom—and are among the good reasons for you to allow cell phones. Some faculty have replaced response clickers with such programs. However, each course and clinical facility is different.

When making cell phone policies for any college, you must weigh the student pros and cons along with the unique situation of the clinical instructor and clinical site policy. Such policies are not easy to write because there are many aspects to consider. This article will present both sides of this discussion.

Risks and Benefits in the Classroom

A review of literature reveals two sides of the decision. Those who favor the use of cell phones in the classroom point to student satisfaction and learning effectiveness. Others quote studies that indicate phone use in the classroom is distracting to other students. A student reading and answering a text is enough to cause distraction from learning for their classmates. Research has indicated that classroom performance of the user is also affected.

Clayson and Haley found that 86 percent (of 298 students surveyed) texted someone during class, while 94 percent reported receiving texts while in class. Forty-seven percent felt they could text and follow a lecture at the same time; however, when controlled for GPA, missed classes and region, texting resulted in a significant negative difference in class grade.¹

In a study of 536 undergraduate students at a large, public university, Lepp, Barkley and Karpinski found that cell phone use was significantly related to college GPA. Students were divided into three groups: high cell phone use, moderate cell phone use and low cell phone use. The high cell phone use group had a significantly lower GPA (M=2.84, SD =0.61) than the other two groups.²

A study by Duncan, Hoekstra and Wilcox demonstrated that students who reported regular cell phone use in class showed an average negative grade difference of $0.36 \pm 0.08$ on a four-point scale. The sample size of 318 college students also showed that 47 percent

Continued on page 3
Many surgical technology educators are already active in their state assemblies and encourage students to get involved. State assemblies often allow students to participate in business meetings and workshops for free or a reduced rate. Find out more about how your state assembly connects with students by visiting their website. Find your state assembly website now.

If your state assembly doesn’t offer options for students, maybe they just need some ideas. Read what other assemblies are doing with students and contact your state officers with suggestions.

• Ask about student rates for business meetings and workshops.
• Check to see if students can volunteer to help with registration, set up, promotion or other aspect of state assembly events in exchange for free or reduced rates for participating.
• Encourage your state assembly leaders to host a Scrub Bowl competition. (See details below.)
• Offer to host a state assembly meeting or workshop on your campus and include networking time with students.
• Ask your state assembly to sponsor a CST exam prep workshop, resume workshop or other job-related training event.
• Ask your state assembly to start a jobs board or to sponsor a student/young professional job fair in conjunction with a meeting.
• Inquire about creating a student representative position on the state assembly board.
• Invite state assembly members or officers to come to your class and talk to students.
• Ask your state assembly for help in starting or sponsoring an AST student association chapter or event.
• Encourage your state assembly to partner with your school to celebrate National Surgical Technologist Week, Sept. 20-26, 2016.
• Ask your state assembly board members how your students can get involved in legislative efforts in your state.
• Ask whether the state assembly has a shadow or mentor program.
• Volunteer your students to help plan a student day, session or roundtable in conjunction with an upcoming state assembly meeting.
• Encourage your state assembly board to consider starting a scholarship for tuition or books (based on need, leadership, career transition, etc.) or a scholarship to attend a state workshop or the AST national conference. Or ask about co-hosting a fundraising event to benefit national scholarships through the Foundation for Surgical Technology.
• Invite your state assembly to join your students in a community outreach activity, such as a food or clothing drive or service day.

What’s A Scrub Bowl?
A scrub bowl is an academic competition pitting teams of students from different surgical technology programs against each other in a fun, friendly way. Teams can range in size with all members participating or designated alternates. Questions - written by educators in another state or a school that isn’t participating - are read aloud or flashed on a screen. The first team to hit a buzzer or hold up a card, giving the correct answer receives points for that question. Each team is assigned a referee who also keeps score for the team. The bowl may have multiple rounds where teams face off in different pairs or where all teams compete together but the response time is shortened every round. The team with the most points wins.

“We have a pizza dinner for everyone and the students have a lot of fun. This will be our second scrub bowl, and we look forward to it being an annual event,” says Beth Applegate-Debo, CST, CSFA, FAST, president of the New York State Assembly. We send invitations to every CAAHEP and ABHES accredited school in New York.”

At their Scrub Bowl in April, the New York State Assembly (NYAST) had 25 students attend and teams competing from Finger Lakes Surgical Technology Program in Geneva, Niagra County Community College in Niagara Falls and Swedish Institute in New York City. Questions were written and read by NYAST secretary Richard Fruscione, CST, from Kingsborough Community College.

Members of the Swedish Institute’s winning Scrub Bowl Team answer a question during the first round of competition.
of the students felt it somewhat disrespectful to use their phone in class. However, many stated that if no policy existed, they had the right to use their phone in class.\(^3\)

In a study of 400 college students and 100 faculty, Berry and Westfall establish many pros and cons of cell phones in the classroom. Their research showed that the faculty were concerned that cell phones in the classroom caused distractions for the students and for the faculty. Students agreed and do feel that phones distract them, but didn’t feel that the distractions affect their performance in the class. More than 60 percent said using their phones make it harder to focus on learning tasks. Eighty percent reported using their phone at least once a period. Ninety-two percent did not believe using their phones in class had a negative effect. Students stated they were less likely to check their phones when instructors use inclusive class discussions or activities and videos/video clips.\(^4\)

Smith-Stoner spent years trying to limit cell phones in the classroom before deciding to make them a part of her actual teaching plan. She offers 10 ways to use cell phones as a learning technology. Outcomes indicate that incorporating cell phone use in her classes has increased the level of engagement, student satisfaction and student ratings of teacher effectiveness.\(^5\)

### Risks and Benefits of Cellphones in the Clinical Area

Despite a syllabus that prohibits phones on a student’s person, UAFS faculty found students at a clinical site hiding in the orthopedic equipment storage, texting and talking to friends. They conceal phones in their pockets, socks, even the waistband of their scrubs. Alternately, staff in the ORs are using cell phones for better communication with the surgeons. Nurses and surgical technologists are collecting pre-procedure information, sharing with surgeons using smartphones. They send text messages to coordinate the arrival of specialists and support staff, as well as to notify families of patient conditions or when to arrive in recovery. If a faculty member is at Hospital A and the student at Hospital B becomes ill, he/she can call the instructor for permission to leave. Students would be able to ask questions or change their daily assignments due to fluctuations in the surgery schedule. A very important use is looking up medical, medication and procedure information. Our courses are all web-enhanced with accessible information, web links, etc. These web-enhanced courses are available off campus so students can access them from clinical sites.

The number of apps available for healthcare students are also increasing. Apps range from flash cards to video animations of surgeries. Most hospitals provide Wi-Fi accessibility, making it convenient for the students to access these apps or reliable medical sites for answers and help when scrubbing on procedures that are rare.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Cell phones are here to stay and will continue to increase in use. Research shows that cell phone use in class can affect students’ GPA in a negative way. Students, however, believe that phone use does not affect their ability to learn, although a majority admit that texting in class is distracting. Cell phones have positive aspects, including instant information, polling in class and access in case of family emergency. In the clinical area, cell phones can be a resource for students to start a procedure with knowledge and confidence. However, the cell phone can carry pathogens and...
It’s better to do a few things really well.
And when it comes to surg tech education, AST leads the way. There’s a good reason behind our leadership in educational resources—we can tap into some of the best and most innovative practitioners who want to share their expertise and talents with their colleagues and future practitioners. Our members are surgical technologist writers and editors whose mission is to enhance patient care and to advance the profession through education. Take a look at the quality resources we have created—and wait for the others that are in the pipeline. AST members receive discounted pricing as a benefit of membership. Call 800-637-7433 to order or order through our online store at www.ast.org.
(Note: Not all products listed are pictured).
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be distracting. And the temptation to share “really cool” pictures or information can be a danger.

When considering the many pros and cons of allowing cell phone use in the classroom and/or clinical area, policy is important. Most universities do not have a campuswide policy on cell phone use, leaving individual faculty to make their own.

When formulating policy, consider separate class and clinical policy. You may find that allowing cell phones in class is a great idea, but allowing in the clinical area is a bad idea. If the hospital does not allow employees to have their phones on their person; students will not be allowed to carry them. In that case, your policy simply states that you abide by hospital policy and will not allow cell phones into the operating area. You can then decide if you will allow them to have phones in their lockers to access at lunch and break.

Policies must be clearly stated. If the instructor allows cell phone use in the classroom, the policy must state how the cell phone can be used. Can the student use the phone for texting, playing games, surfing the web or can it only be used for class activities? If cell phones are not allowed in class, what are the repercussions for using them? The penalties must be clearly stated. Our program does not allow cell phone use for anything other than an assigned activity. If the student has a sick child, etc., they can keep their phone out and leave the classroom to answer a call from the caregiver. If students are caught using their phones for other reasons, they are asked to leave class. This prevents students distracting others with texts.

In the clinical area, UAFS faculty have not had good results when allowing students to have phone access. We have found phones dropped in trash, a student hiding in the supply room talking on the phone when a case was starting, and a phone dropped out of scrub pants that went sliding across a dirty OR floor. Our policy clearly states the phones are to be on silent and locked in their OR lockers. They can access them on break and lunch. Emergency numbers are provided to share with family and babysitters. The first time students are caught with their phone in the OR suite, they are given a warning. The second time they are dismissed from the program. This is clearly stated in their policy manual. We have not had a single complaint when the reasons for this policy are explained.

Whatever you decide, state your policy very clearly along with the repercussions for violating it. Have students sign the policy and keep copies on file. This prevents denial of understanding later if a student violates the policy.

References
College in Brooklyn. The team from Swedish Institute took first place.

“NYAST started doing [a Scrub Bowl] in conjunction with our spring conference last year,” says Applegate-Debo. “We believe that it is important to get students involved with AST while they are still students. We do this in the spring because, for most schools, the students are beginning to really study for the CST exam. They are encouraged to participate in the NYAST spring conference the following day to get a feel for a state conference, and most of them do.”

The NYAST also sponsors a student to attend the Student Forum at the AST Annual National Conference. “We feel it is another way to promote a sense of pride and professionalism in being a surgical technologist,” says Applegate-Debo.

**Share Your Ideas**

If you have a great partnership with your state assembly or additional ways to connect, tell us about it. Send your ideas and stories to publications@ast.org.
**PRECONFERENCE EVENTS FOR EDUCATORS**

**TUESDAY, MAY 31**

**8 AM–3 PM**

**ARC/STSA Accreditation Fundamentals for Educators**
- **Capacity:** 100 Registrants (6 CEs)
- **Fee:** $100

ARC/STSA Board and Staff
This workshop is designed to inform newly appointed and experienced program directors, instructors and administrators about the ARC/STSA process, policy and procedure needed for CAAHEP accreditation. Includes a one-hour break at noon. (Separate registration required at www.arcstsa.org).

**3–5 PM**

**SVT-B Site Visitors Training Beginning**
- **Capacity:** 50 Registrants (2 CEs)
- **Fee:** Free

ARC/STSA Board and Staff
Site Visitors Training Beginning is designed to orient those who would like to become site visitors to basic ARC/STSA site visitation process, policy and procedure. Prerequisite: Accreditation Fundamentals for Educators and CAAHEP Site Visitor online training required prior to attending Beginning Site Visitors Workshop. (Separate registration at www.arcstsa.org). Please contact ARC/STSA at info@arcstsa.org for more information.

**TUESDAY, MAY 31 & WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1**

**Instructors Workshop (10 CEs)**
(Includes both Tuesday and Wednesday)
- **Fee:** $275 Members; $350 Nonmembers

**Tuesday, May 31 (PART 1)**

5–5:10 PM  
Welcome and Introductions  
Roy Zacharias, CST, FAST, AST President

5:10–6:10 PM  
The Healing Power of Laughter  
Diana Jordan

**Wednesday, June 1 (PART 2)**

7:30 AM  
Breakfast for Instructors  
Sponsored by ARC/STSA

8–8:50 AM  
Developing the Professional Student: Instructional Strategies That Work  
Dodi Zotigh, CST

9–9:50 AM  
Thinking Out of the Box: Different Techniques to Prepare Our Students for Didactic & Clinical  
Linda VanDyke, CST, CSFA, FAST;  
Teckla Willumsen, LPN

10–10:50 AM  
Taking Over the Reins in Difficult Situations  
Cindy Mask, CST, FAST

11–11:50 AM  
NBSTSA Updates  
Lunch

1–1:50 PM  
Collaboration: Key to Program Success  
TC Parker, CST

2–2:50 PM  
Mind Tap: Reaching the Electronic Learner  
Joseph Charleman, CST, CSFA, CRCST, LPN

3–3:50 PM  
Where Is Your Passion?  
Christopher McGriff, CST

4–4:50 PM  
What Will Your Students Bring to the Table? Lesson on Professionalism and Preparing for Their Career  
Wanda Walter, CST

5–5:50 PM  
We Have the Clinical Site, So What About the Clinical Preceptors?  
Debra Mays, CST