



A Proposal for Banning Pencils

EX ABUSU NON ARGUITUR IN USUM.

(The abuse of a thing is no argument against its use.)

GUEST EDITORIAL

When it comes to “technology” use in schools, every responsible educator’s first concerns should be student safety and educational suitability. I am suggesting that we ban one of the most potentially harmful technologies of all—the pencil. We must eliminate them from schools because:

1. A student might use a pencil to poke out the eye of another student.
2. A student might write a dirty word or, worse yet, a threatening note to another student, with a pencil.
3. One student might have a mechanical pencil, making those with wooden ones feel bad.
4. The pencil might get stolen.
5. Pencils break and need repairing all the time.
6. Kids who have pencils might doodle instead of working on their assignments or listening to the teacher.

Oh, sure, kids might actually use a pencil to take notes or compose a paper—but really, what’s the chance of that?

Sounds pretty absurd, doesn’t it? But listen to the reasons teachers and administrators on our district technology committee gave for banning iPods and MP3 players from the classroom:

1. They might get stolen.
2. They make kids who can’t afford them feel bad.
3. Kids might listen to them instead of to the teacher.
4. Who knows what kinds of lyrics the kids might be listening to?
5. Kids might listen to test answers.

Oh, sure, kids might actually use them to study, to replay their French vocabulary lesson,

or to listen to audio books, an NPR broadcast, or a teacher-created lecture—but really, what’s the chance of that?

I cringe whenever I hear a district or school “banning” cell phones, student blogs, e-mail, flash drives, chat, personally owned laptops, or game sites. Student access to the Internet itself was hotly debated in the mid-1990s. Each of those technologies can and does have positive educational uses. Each of those technologies is a big part of many kids’ lives outside of school. And yes, each of these technologies has the potential for misuse.

One of my biggest worries has always been that by denying access in school to technologies that students find useful and meaningful, we make school more and more irrelevant to our “Net Genners.” (One of our students on the advisory board had the courage to say he concentrates better in study hall and the library when his digital music player drowns out other distractions.) When are we going to learn to use the kids’ devices for their benefit rather than invent excuses to outlaw them?

My experience is that the more familiar educators are with a new technology, the less likely they are to restrict its use by students. When we old-timers experience a technology’s benefit ourselves, the more we understand its benefit to students.

Is an iPod on your wish list? Add it—for your students’ sake.

What do you think about allowing the use of personal technology devices (e.g., cell phones, MP3 players) in the classroom? Tell us at letters@iste.org. Include a photo of yourself to accompany your response, and you might just see your smiling face in a future issue of *L&L*!

By Doug Johnson

Doug Johnson has been director of media and technology for the Mankato (Minnesota) Public Schools since 1991. He is a veteran author whose works have appeared in books, journals, and magazines. Johnson serves on ISTE’s board of directors and as a volunteer columnist for L&L.