Should We Ban Instant Messaging in School?

Yes, Ban Messaging

One thing we know about teenagers is that they love to socialize, chatting with friends every chance they get. For today's teens, the mode of that chatting is instant messaging (IM). The kids in my school—according to their parents at least—constantly IM their friends, often late into the night.

No one wants to challenge the basic adolescent need to socialize or to keep kids from using this cool tool to do so, but school policy *can* keep that desire from taking over the student's life in the classroom. That intent led our high school to ban instant messaging.

By Sharon Texley

No, Don't Ban Messaging

No, we shouldn't ban IM. Instead, we need to embrace technologies that students have already made their own. Despite an increasing number of technology resources available, evidence suggests teachers have yet to systemically tap the potentials of interactive technologies.

In contrast, teenagers persistently embrace technology. In particular, the use of IM continues to escalate. Though students often use IM as a social medium, they also use it to chat with friends and teachers about homework. Further, students tout that IM is a useful means of

By Donna DeGennaro

Last spring, our school gave laptops to every student. As a staff we were well prepared: teachers had ongoing training in using technology in their classrooms, and a planning committee met for months to set policies.

Members of that committee debated whether to allow kids to use iChat, Apple's IM application. We talked about our own uses of the application to share information and ideas. We demonstrated iChat for those who had not used it. At that point, the meeting became a play session as we merrily "chatted" with each other for the next hour. Maybe that should have been a clue.

Finally the committee decided that students too could benefit in many ways: sharing information on group projects and helping each other with assignments—great ways to enable cooperative, flexible learning. Hence, the decision was to allow iChat.

As time went by, the folly of that decision became apparent. Students did use iChat to communicate, but not the way we idealists had envisioned. The constant "iChatter," instead, included who's going out with whom, who went to the party last weekend, who's bored in class, and so on. In addition, many of them shared answers on tests and other work meant to be done individually.

We knew this behavior was happening because administrators, tech people, and teachers (when they had time) used Apple Remote Desktop to observe student desktops over the network. Students knew they could be watched, but they also knew that no one could monitor more than 300 computers all the time.

We tried to curb this misuse the same way we handle any unsuitable behavior in the classroom: by more careful teacher supervision. Soon, though, it became too frustrating for our staff. If a classroom activity did not require laptop use, it was easy enough to say, "Lids down." But our teachers incorporate the use of the computers extensively and students use their laptops for much of their class work. The most skilled and experienced teacher cannot concentrate on presenting material or leading a discussion and, at the same time, observe what each student is doing with his or her laptop. That problem was even greater for teachers who use Blackboard for online testing; cheating became far too easy. Our special edu-

exchanging ideas because the software enables several peers to simultaneously discuss homework. If students are motivated enough to use IM for educational purposes outside of school we should find ways to harness it.

IM has educational significance for both teacher-student and student-student interactions. Personalized interactions between teacher and student allow for instantaneous teacher-student exchanges. Shy students, who might hesitate to ask questions in class and students who feel uncomfortable with the subject matter find IM is a place where students can safely reach out to teachers. Students feel more comfortable asking questions that they might not ask in front of peers. This continued communica-tion gives students the confidence to eventually ask questions in face-to-face settings. Teachers can respond with immediate feedback and provide necessary scaffolding for individual-ized learning. Through IM, teachers gain insight into student knowledge, strengths, and challenges. This insight allows teachers to identify interests, help students when necessary, and point students toward resources that continue to motivate their learning.

IM-mediated student-student inter-actions support learner-centered and flexible classroom designs. IM provides an exceptional opportunity for students to be eagerly involved in building and creating knowledge, solving problems, and analyzing the process of a given task. Though IM is a synchro-nous tool, students have the opportunity to reflect before they respond. In a flexible classroom design, learning goals are not connected to a static curriculum; rather, they are emerging. Subsequently, students take on the role of learner and teacher as they are exposed to multiple perspectives.

Whether the exchange is between teacher and student or among students, the idea of placing students in the center of their own learning is not original. Nor are interactive communications tools for learning. There is, however, something distinctive about IM. Kids *own* IM. The way in which students use IM emulates their culture of learning, communicating, and interacting.

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cation students, for whom staying on task is always a challenge, were especially affected; they were far too easily lured by the iChat siren.

Our principal, reluctant to take away the IM privilege from students, issued a stern warning to students. They did not, sadly, exercise self-restraint, so we removed the iChat application from each laptop and banned any instant messaging during the school day.

Admittedly, we have seen an increase in the number of student e-mail messages in the wake of the IM ban, but, as our teachers communicate regularly with students through e-mail, its value far outweighs its negative side.

This powerful communication tool of instant messaging—wonderful as it is—is simply too tempting, too distracting in the classroom. Our students are better students without it.

Sharon Texley is the laptop coordinator for Smoky Valley High School in Lindsborg, Kansas. Sharon began her career as an English teacher, then became a school library media specialist. Currently, she is the building technology guru, oversees the laptop program, and teaches computer skills at every opportunity.

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As students' technology proficiencies increase, so does the gap between teacher and learner. IM provides a unique connection between adult and learner, which in turn helps bridge the generational divide. We must learn from social trends, capture the power of student-technology interactions, and consider how such relationships engender students' motivation for learning. The stipulation is that we as educators must be willing to reshape our traditional norms of communication as well as be open to draw upon skills students bring to the classroom.

If we ban IM we risk isolating learners and preventing their obtaining technological fluency. We can't eliminate IM because we think kids will only socialize. Teens often socialize rather than engaging with the material—with or without technology. We need to ask ourselves why these distractions exist. The key is purpose and engagement, not restrictive policy. The more we impose rules on kids, the more we distance them. Develop parameters with kids rather than for them. Engaging students in the process reminds us how technology fluency transpires. The transition from learning *about* to learning *with* technology starts with exposure and exploration. Only after realizing the nuances of applications can we connect these technologies with purposeful activity.

Although IM is not the end-all and be-all, it can be one technological opportunity to help engage learners of the 21st century.

Dr. Donna DeGennaro wrote her PhD dissertation on how technology facilitates public-private school partnerships and empowers children across socio-economic groups. A veteran educational technologist, she is director of teaching and learning through technology at the Springside School in Philadelphia. Donna's work involves understanding youth-technology interactions to inform innovative learning designs.