From Toy To Tool

Audioblogging with Cell Phones

By Liz Kolb

Imagine asking your students to bring their cell phones to class. As educators we often reject cell phones in the classroom, considering them destructive and distractive "toys." As a former technology coordinator, I used to think cell phones were harmful for the classroom environment.

I wanted to ban cell phones from my school. I thought it was too easy for students to use cell phones to cheat on tests and text message during class. Over time I have come to realize that cell phones are part of our students' everyday existence. Today students use cell phones to communicate and collaborate with the world around them. I think something so integral to our students' lives outside of school deserves some consideration for potential use inside the classroom.

I would like to propose that cell phones can be learning tools. As educators we can help students learn how to use their everyday "toy" as a "tool" for constructing knowledge. With the new audio input feature of many Weblog sites such as blogger.com and blogzy.com, students can use their cell phones to create blogs, collect and store data, and develop multimedia projects. (***Editor's note:*** See Resources on page 19 for these and other URLs.)

An audioblog is similiar to a podcast; it is a voice message from a phone that immediately posts to a blog site. Students can post audioblogs anytime from anywhere. I will explain how to create audioblogs using cell phones (see How to Audioblog, page 17) and give some examples of how cell phones and audioblogging can be integrated into the classroom.

Audioblogging with Students

Audioblogging with a cell phone creates opportunities for students to conduct interview activities (inside or outside of school). Instead of lugging microphones, tape recorders, tapes, and digital recorders to interviews, students have an instant recording and storage device with their cell phones. Because most students have their cell phones at all times, they can immediately conduct interviews outside of school.

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For example, students in an English literature class conducting local author studies could just pull out their cell phones to conduct interviews when they meet the author. They can dial in to Gabcast, set their cell phone down and ask their questions. When they finish their interview they press a button and their interview is immediately posted to a blog site. Also, as many cell phones have camera and even camcorder features, and sites such as blogger.com also have the ability to post pictures taken with cell phones, they could interview, snap a few pictures, and take some quick movies all with one simple device. Once the interview is complete, students do not have to worry about storage problems (such as tapes going bad or accidentally erasing information) because the interview is instantly saved online.

Once the interview is posted, students can perform various activities with the audioblogs. They can download the video files, put them into a video editor such as iMovie or Movie Maker and edit the interview clips, insert the pictures from their cell phones, and insert the movie clips to create a video journal of their author study. If the students did not want to use the video editors, they could further develop their blog around their interview clips.

How to AUDIOBLOG

Setting up audioblogging for your blog from start to finish takes about 15 minutes. First, set up your own blog using a site such as blogger.com (although with Gabcast you can use many different Web-based blog sites). Once the blog is set up, create an audioblogging cell phone account with Gabcast. Here's how:

1. Log on to Gabcast.com.
2. Click on the blue link that says "Sign Up Now."
3. Follow a quick tutorial asking for a login and password, a primary phone number, and a Screen Name.
4. Once you create your account, you are ready to set up your own channel. This is where your audioblogs will post. Click on "My Channels," then click on "Create a New Channel." You will be asked to give your channel a title and description, and type in a numeric four-digit password (you will use this number when you call in to Gabcast to create your audioblog).
5. To post your audioblogs automatically to your blog site, click on the "Add New Blog" button. Enter the login and password for your blog site. Also include your blog site ID. Now every audioblog you record from your cell phone will automatically post to your blog! Click on "Add." When you submit, you will receive a message to click on your My Channels options.
6. Click on "My Channels." There, pay attention to the channel number and password. You will need to know these when you call Gabcast. Now you are ready to audioblog!
7. Dial the toll-free Gabcast number (1.800.749.0632). Follow the verbal instructions, and then you will be given time to dictate your audioblog entry.
8. When you finish, you are given the choice of immediately posting this audioblog, listening to the file, or creating another audioblog.
9. Once you post the audioblog, you can immediately access the file by logging on to your blog, where the audioblog should appear as an audio file.
10. Your post will also show up in Gabcast under My Channels, where other people can subscribe to your channels and you can delete audioblogs.

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It is important to consider fair use and copyright issues when students are posting to the Internet.

Once the interview clips are posted, students can add text or pictures to the blog to enhance the meaning of the clips. Another option would be to download the clips and use them in a presentation about the author.

The local author study is just one example of how cell phones can be used in the classroom through audioblogging. In social studies, students often conduct interviews with veterans of wars, civil rights leaders, and local community leaders. Audioblogging is an easy way for the students to conduct these interviews, store them, and later construct a meaningful project with the interviews.

In an elementary science classroom, students can collect sounds from a trip to the zoo or just a trip outside. They can also create their own sounds for a project. Beyond interviewing and gathering sounds and voices outside of the classroom, students can also integrate audioblogging inside the classroom. For example, students can interview each other, they can create radio broadcasts or their own "books on tape" with sound effects, recite poetry, explain how they rationalize a difficult mathematical problem, brainstorm ideas, work on verbal language presentation and communication skills, complete class reflections, or journal scientific research.

Concerns with Audioblogging

Privacy Issues. Of course, there is some concern with using blogging coupled with audioblogging in the classroom. One worry is privacy and protecting students. Blogger.com is not a password-protected blog site; as a result, anyone can read the blogs or audioblogs that are posted by the students. Also, audioblogs stored on Gabcast are open to the public unless users upgrade to the premium service ($12 per month) for password protection. One solution to this problem is to use blogzy.com, a password-protected site that also allows for cell phone audioblogs. Another option is to make sure that identities of specific students are not identified in audioblogs by focusing on interviews or research information and not on personal student journals.

Copyright Issues. It is important to consider fair use and copyright issues when students are posting to the Internet. Make sure they understand that they cannot use any copyrighted material (such as popular music) in their audioblogs without permission of the author or artist. I have found Cyberbee to be a helpful interactive way to talk with students about copyright and the Internet. It is imperative to teach students how to ask for permission not only to use copyrighted material on their blogs, but also to ask permission to publish names, voices, or images of anyone who participates in the audioblogs they create.

Cost Issues. Although not all audioblogging sites have toll-free numbers associated with them, Gabcast does, and does not charge any fees to use their services. Because you do not have to connect to the Internet to use Gabcast, it works just like a regular call on a cell phone. Thus you do not have to pay to post on the Internet with this particular form of mobile blogging. Although Gabcast's free account only allows up to 200 MB of recording (about 60 minutes) per channel, users can set up multiple channels to get more recording time. My phone and the phone plans of my students have never been charged an additional cost as long as we are calling within our plan. For example, my plan has a certain number of anywhere minutes and thus falls within the "free" category. I have always of-

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fered my own phone to any of my students who did not have one (or one whose cell service would charge for the call), but it is rare for students to use mine, as they usually preferred to use their own. Because Gabcast is toll free, students can also use a land line to record their audioblogs.

Of course there could be some phone plans that are highly restrictive wherein it costs to make even one call or image post. One solution is for teachers to write mini technology grants to purchase a couple of classroom cell phones with appropriate plans. For example, teachers can purchase a Cingular plan for two cell phones for $59.99 a month that would cover all calls (and then some). The students could also get involved in selecting and researching which phone plan is best for what they will be doing with the phones. The cell phones could eventually replace expensive equipment such as digital cameras or even camcorders, although some quality will be sacrificed with current technology. Every student does not have to have a cell phone to use them constructively within the classroom.

If students do have their own cell phones, they may be unaware of the specifics of their phone plans. Although audioblogging is primarily free for anyone with a cell phone, it is also an excellent opportunity to talk with students about responsible use of their phones. Let them know that sometimes there is a cost to all the text messaging, photos, e-mails, and calls they make (even when their plan says "unlimited"). Make them responsible for researching their own phone plans and being responsible for staying within the limits of their plan. I am always shocked at how many students are unaware of the regulations in their current cell phone plans. It is yet another way to create mindful users of technology.

One final option is to use a free online phone service such as Skype. Skype allows anyone to call anywhere for free at any time. Therefore if students or teachers do not have access to a cell phone or free long distance minutes, they can use Skype to create an audioblog post.

Control Issues. Many teachers find it difficult to give control over to students by allowing them to bring cell phones to class. It is difficult to trust that students will use their tools appropriately while in the classroom. One solution is to give students boundaries

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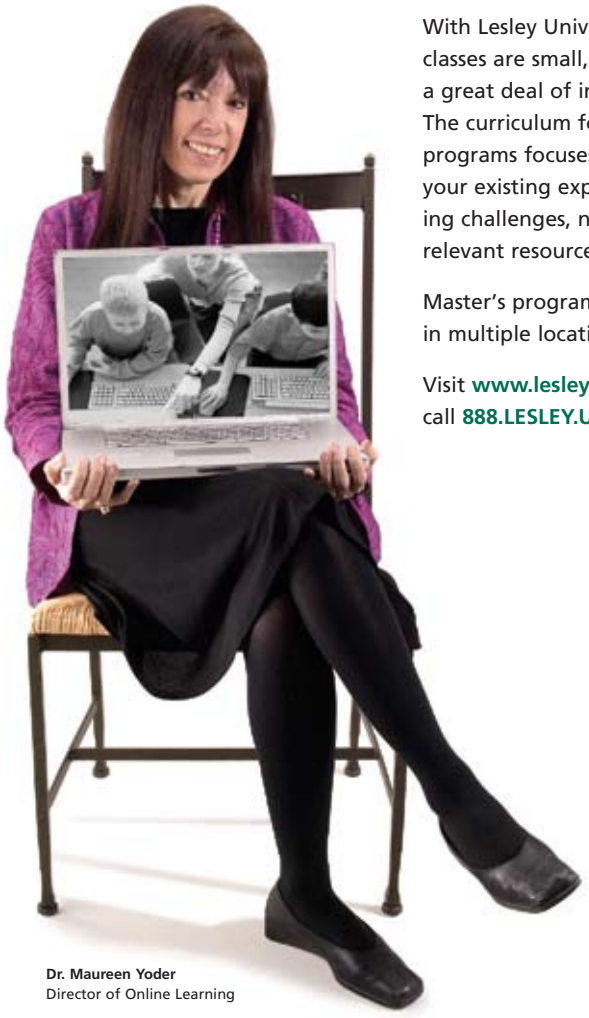

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with their phones (only bring them when they are being used for an assignment and not to have them on unless using them for an assignment). Teachers can set up a social contract with the students about cell phone etiquette for the classroom before allowing students to bring them to class. In addition, teachers should let parents and school administrators know what the students are going to be doing with the cell phones for class. Beyond the phones, there are control concerns with allowing students to post to a Web resource for class. There is the possibility that students could abuse this privilege by posting inappropriate information or media on their blog sites. A solution is for the teacher to create the blog and set the password, so that the teacher has administrative access at all times. Blogger and many other blog sites can send the administrator an e-mail every time there is a new comment or post on a site, so teachers can continually check the material posted.

Despite these concerns, the potential benefits of using audioblogging are numerous. They are free resources with great potential for the classroom. They are active and engaging; Students can use these technologies to dynamically construct their own knowledge. They are easy to access tools because many of our secondary students already own cell phones. Also, by integrating the cell phones and the blogs into the classroom we are able to connect with the technologies that our students are using daily in their social lives, and channel that use into meaningful learning. Students can then transform cell phones from being just a social toy to a learning tool in their everyday lives.

Resources

Blogger: http://www.blogger.com
Blogzy: http://www.blogzy.com
Cyberbee Copyright: http://www.cyberbee.com/copyrt.html
Gabcast: http://www.gabcast.com
Gcast: http://www.gcast.com
Skype: http://www.skype.com

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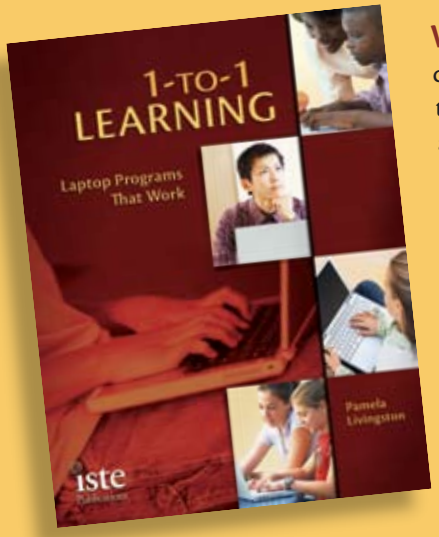

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