Don't give students more tools of mass distraction.

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Abstract:
This article presents the editors' views on the positive and negative aspects of digital and mobile technology in the classroom. The authors note the benefits of incorporating technology into education, but note that the presence of student cell phones and other hand-held wireless devices is problematic. Information is also provided on laptops in universities and instant and text messaging.

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The role of technology in the classroom has no doubt been a contentious issue since the first Roman student brought an abacus to his grammaticus. Using the most up-to-date equipment in school has always seemed to be a necessity. And yet the process of learning hasn't really changed that much since ancient times: teachers still need to teach and students still need to pay attention.

Last week Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty sparked a national debate on the role of technology in Canadian classrooms. Asked about a proposal to relax a ban on cellphones in the classrooms
of Toronto-area high schools, the premier seemed rather agreeable to the idea. "Telephones, BlackBerries and the like are conduits for information and one of the things we want our students to be is well informed," he said. "It's something we should be looking at in our schools."

McGuinty has a point. It seems inevitable that some sort of hand-held wireless device will eventually become part of education systems across the country. The cost and complication of traditional textbooks makes electronic delivery of course material straight into the hands of students a rather attractive proposition. For this reason alone, electronic tablets or smartphones such as the BlackBerry likely have a place in the classroom of the future. The prospect of linking students together via communication technology also holds great educational promise.

At the same time, we can't ignore the enormous and obvious downsides of such technological intrusions. Cellphones may be conduits for information, but they're also tools of mass distraction. Texting, tweeting, surfing and updating your online profile have nothing to do with learning and no place in the classroom. Yet it's even become commonplace for parents to text their children during school hours. What are they thinking?

Any effort to make cellphones part of the official school day must solve the problem of their non-educational use, either by setting strict rules of acceptable conduct or blocking access when it's not appropriate. And we should recognize that there's a big difference between integrating wireless devices into the curriculum and simply inviting students to bring whatever diverting gadgets they might possess to class. The fact not every student owns a smartphone must also be addressed. Regardless of what the future holds, it's far too soon to be advocating widespread use of cellphones in the classroom.

It's also the case that the value of technology to learning is frequently oversold by eager advocates. A long series of educational revolutions via technology has been promised throughout the years: from television to video to desktop computers to laptops to SMART Boards to cellphones. Despite claims that these innovations will change the educational experience for the better, there's no evidence technology actually leads to higher marks for students.

The ubiquitous presence of wireless laptops on university campuses in many ways anticipates the presence of cellphones in public schools. A study from 2008 in the academic journal Computers & Education looked at how these laptops have affected classroom behaviour. "Results showed that students who used laptops in class spent considerable time multitasking and that laptop use posed a significant distraction to both users and fellow students," the research observes. "Most importantly, the level of laptop use was negatively related to several measures of student learning." Students with laptops had lower test results than those without. The reason? They were often not paying attention to their teacher. We should expect the same thing from cellphones.

Similarly, a 2009 study looked at students who sent instant messages during class. Texting students took longer to perform simple tasks such as reading a written passage than those who did not. Consider it another blow to the alleged benefits of multitasking. An investigation into PowerPoint lectures found students enjoyed them more than traditional presentations, although this did nothing to raise test scores. Clickers, small hand-held wireless devices used for in-class
quizzes that are popular with students and teachers, similarly have no discernable impact on marks.

Technology may lower school costs, make marking more efficient and even raise student satisfaction. But it can't produce students with better grades. And this means technology will never replace the timeless need for skilled teachers capable of catching the attention of easily distracted students and engaging their minds. The smartest phones may be the ones we keep outside the classroom.

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