

**GET YOUR CLASS BACK!
FREE YOUR CLASS FROM CELL PHONES IN 5 MINUTES
(STUDENTS LOVE IT)**

Although I have taught at a community college for over 20 years, I didn't realize I had forgotten what it was like to teach in a classroom without cell phones. The problem appeared daunting. "The Look" or simple (and repeated) requests to turn off cell phones had not worked. One day the magnitude of the problem became even more apparent. In my Psychology of Adjustment class we sit in a circle which I had thought would prove a disincentive to use cell phones. But a student in this class could barely put his phone away upon request for more than a couple of minutes, and then it was out again, his attention fully on the phone. This situation was an epiphany: for many of our students, cell phones are a very strong addiction. Cell phones users are on a variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement. Then one day I woke up with an idea. Positive reinforcement! Extra credit! It was the end of Fall 2013 semester, and I instituted the activity on a trial basis for the remaining two weeks of the semester. The first day I tried the activity I was sure that the young man who couldn't put away his cell phone would not participate. Wrong! Everyone in that class did, and, amazingly, he was the only one who forgot to retrieve his phone from the front desk at the end of the class. The students said they loved the activity and recommended it for future classes. In Spring 2014 semester I implemented the activity with my five classes for the entire semester. Below I will describe the activity as well as the end-of-semester feedback from students in my five classes.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY:

1. Students decide each class period whether they wish to participate or not, i.e., participation is entirely voluntary on each day. This is best because occasionally the most devoted participants may feel the need to keep their cell phones with them for various personal reasons (e.g., concern their child's school will text about their child who may be sick, etc.). Students are never asked why they choose not to participate.
2. Students are told that for each class period they participate they will receive 1 point extra credit toward their final grade. My classes have a total of 1,000 points of required activities and approximately 30 class meetings per semester, so a total of approximately 30 extra credit points was possible. However, first day of class, exam days and other class meetings with special events may not be included.
3. Students who wish to participate are asked to turn off their cell phones and place their cell phones on a designated table in the classroom. In my classes this has been a table in the front of the classroom.
4. After roll is taken at the beginning of class, I ask who is not participating today and I make a note (small symbol) in my roll book in each box for that day's attendance for those students. In my classes all or almost all students participated each day.
5. The first time I offer this activity in a class I tell students that if anyone forgets their cell phone at the end of class that I will bring it to the secretary's office immediately after class where they can retrieve it.
6. At the end of each class, I remind students not to forget their cell phones. Only 5 students forgot their phone in approximately 112 class sessions. In 3 of those cases the students returned to class in minutes to retrieve their phone, and only twice did I need to

bring a phone to the secretary. I don't leave the classroom until all phones have been taken by their owners.

Although originally conceived as a possible way to conduct a class without the ubiquitous competition of cell phones, this activity turned into a splendid way for students to learn experientially about operant conditioning, especially the power of positive reinforcement and the extreme pull of variable-ratio reinforcement and its high resistance to extinction. Upon reading their essays, it also turned out to be a very effective way for students to learn about how addictive habits may develop and how they can be broken. They learned many things that they would otherwise never learn, such as how their experience in a class without cell phones is different, how they can concentrate better in a class without their cell phone, as well as a little bit about what life was like in the pre-cell phone era. Since almost all students participate every time, with some occasionally not participating, I felt good knowing that almost all my students were benefiting from this activity.

In future use of the activity, I plan to briefly discuss operant conditioning at the very beginning of the semester when I introduce the cell phone extra credit activity. I will specifically touch on positive reinforcement and the variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement. Then later in the semester when we cover operant conditioning in detail, I will revisit as an example our cell phone extra credit. I think all the students at that point will learn and probably remember forever what a variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement is and how it can easily lead to addictive behaviors (like gambling and cell phone use). I also am planning to briefly give information summarizing current scientific knowledge of risks of cell phones to human health as well as to the sustainability of our planet, when we cover related topics in our text. This activity is not designed, however, to teach one specific topic such as operant conditioning but rather to enhance learning across the curriculum. It enables instructors to free their classes from cell phones in a way that students actually love and participate in enthusiastically. Grading on other activities may be modified, if necessary, to ensure a criterion-based final grade.

I am sure that a mere request to place your cell phones on the front desk would have yielded little or no response. Although students undoubtedly only initially participated because of the opportunity to earn extra credits points, based on their essays at the end of the semester students came to see and appreciate a wide variety of benefits from having participated. These are detailed below. Ultimately, it is up to the older generation who lived without cell phones to transmit this experience to younger people.

EVALUATION OF THE ACTIVITY:

At the end of Spring 2014 semester I gave my five classes who participated in the activity an optional questionnaire consisting of 8 multiple choice questions about their participation as well as an optional essay question asking for a detailed discussion as to why they recommend or don't recommend the activity for future classes. Students were offered this opportunity to evaluate the activity right after they completed their final exam; 82 out of 90 students participated (91%). Students received up to 5 extra credit points for participating in the evaluation, 1 point for completing the 8-item multiple choice questionnaire and up to 4 points for the essay. I asked

participating students to make up a 5-digit number and use that as the identifier instead of their name, and to write this number and their name on a sheet I passed around before the final exam. I explained that in this way I could anonymously grade the essay, but would then be able to enter extra credit by using the signup sheet.

Of the 91 students who received a final grade in my classes, 19 students (21%) received one letter grade higher on their final course grade because of the extra credit points they received for participating in the cell phone extra credit activity. I felt that the attention of the class for the entire semester and the potential extra classroom learning of the students was well worth the extra credit points granted. Any concerns about too much extra credit are easily handled by adjusting the total number of points for the course so that 1 point is reasonable. For example, 1 point in 1,000 total possible points for the course may be reasonable, but 1 point in 500 total possible points for the course may be considered excessive. In that case, if all other class activities have their points doubled, e.g., an exam that was 100 points is now worth 200 points, this issue is easily taken care of.

Before I started the activity I didn't think more than a handful of students would be willing to part with their phones, even for extra credit. But they virtually all did, from day one, and this continued unabated throughout the semester.

Since it is certainly expected that students will love anything that gives them "easy extra credit" (quote from some of the student essays), I was most interested in the reasons they gave in their essays for recommending the activity. These are discussed below.

RESULTS OF QUESTIONNAIRE:

Results indicated overwhelming recommendation of the activity (note: percentages may not add to 100% when students left an item blank or due to rounding to whole numbers): 61% of students indicated they loved the activity, 33% liked it, and 5% didn't care one way or the other. No students indicated they didn't like it or hated it, certainly in my experience an extremely rare situation. Participation was high, with 61% of students indicating they participated every class session, 37% almost every class session, 1% most class sessions, and none indicated very few or no class sessions. An overall big positive effect on classroom atmosphere was endorsed by 60%, a little positive effect on classroom atmosphere by 33%, no positive effect by 1%, and 4% indicated they were unsure. Students indicated their concentration on classroom activities was improved, with 67% indicating they were able to concentrate a lot better in class, 27% able to concentrate a little better, and 5% no change. The classroom atmosphere was judged to be much more focused by 62%, a little more focused by 28%, not changed by 5%, and 4% were not sure. The classroom atmosphere was judged to be a lot more respectful by 71%, a little more respectful by 20%, not changed by 5%, and 4% were unsure. Recommendation for future classes was unanimous, with 70% indicating, "Yes, it was awesome," and 27% indicating "Yes, it was good," with no votes for don't recommend, it was awful, or not sure. It is interesting that the highest percent vote was 71% for a lot more respectful classroom atmosphere.

RESULTS OF ESSAY:

As an additional part of the optional evaluation, students were asked to write an essay related to whether or not they recommend the cell phone activity for future classes and why. They were told both verbally and in the written instructions that the number of extra credit points they would receive for the essay would not be based on whether or not they recommend the activity but instead on whether or not they give a detailed discussion as to why they recommend it or do not recommend it (approximately one page suggested).

Below I have quoted verbatim from some of the essays. Of course, there were many more comments than copied here, but I have attempted to eliminate duplication while giving all the main ideas presented by students.

The following are some longer essay excerpts:

“Personally, I enjoyed this activity. At first, I really didn’t want to put my phone up on the table for the whole class period because, like most of my generation, I have my phone on and with me at pretty much all times. However, I was excited to see what came about from this little experiment. I feel like the whole classroom was generally more focused and attentive, and there was quite a lot of discussion participation. I typically don’t speak much in classroom settings, but I feel like I really improved on that. As the semester went on, it was almost a relief to turn my phone off for that period of time a couple times a week. I guess you could say I looked forward to “getting away” from the technological world and really focusing on learning Psychology, which is pretty important since I’m pursuing a career in this field! Along with this activity being a way to avoid distractions in class, there are actually health benefits! Cell phones radiate a ton of radioactive waves, especially when it’s in your hand or pocket. By turning them off and putting them up front, we actually avoided those waves for awhile. Who would have thought?! I would definitely recommend this activity to other classes. I wish all my teachers did this!”

“I feel as if [the activity] helped change the classroom atmosphere drastically. This was my first college class that I had in my freshman year that everybody was focused on class participation and not stuck in their cell phones. I feel as if the policy should be adopted campus wide, if for no other reason than because it’s as if it takes us back to a different era where students didn’t have a constant distraction in their pocket!...I will suggest the idea to my other instructors/professors.”

“I highly recommend this for future classes. The first day we did the activity, I was confused how I felt about it. I wasn’t used to being away from my phone which is really sad. After we had been doing it for a couple of weeks, I realized I really liked it because I didn’t feel the need to constantly text or check my phone. It was kind of a sense of freedom in a way. I was more focused in this class than any other because there wasn’t that distraction. I think it had an overall positive effect on the class because even when we were in groups, everyone was more concerned with the work than looking down at a screen. There’s just something different about a whole class not being distracted by a cell phone. Everyone seemed more focused and participated in

discussions than if we wouldn't have turned them in. Honestly, I leave my phone somewhere and don't mess with it as much at home now because this activity showed me how much more productive I can be and how much of a nuisance it really is."

"When I'm in my other classes many times the students are distracted with staying in contact with their lives so they will try to hide and text but even if the teacher catches them they will continue to try and use their phones. The atmosphere without the temptation to use my phone has been really great. It seems like the students are more open to hear, and I have also noticed that I have gotten to know a little more about some of my classmates than I do in my other classes. This is probably due to us not focusing too much on the relationships that we already have but building new ones."

Although we as instructors are well aware of the distraction students' cell phones cause us, it was interesting and unexpected to read what many students said about the distraction other students' cell phone use was causing them:

"Possibly the biggest positive result from the extra credit activity is that it entirely removed the distraction of other students playing on their phones. When students text or do other things on their phones [it] is not only disrespectful to the rest of the class, but also it is distracting and disrespectful to the instructor. Essentially it made the classroom environment much more professional."

"The biggest advantage of the activity was reducing the distraction of other people using their phone. In some other classes I have people use their phones (or other technology) all the time. The noise of the phones vibrating will distract the attention from a lot of the people in the room, not just the one using the phone."

"It is very distracting when cell phones go off during class or when another student is constantly looking at their phone....Most students would not agree to have their cell phones up there if there was not some type of award....[the activity] should be offered in all classes."

"Concentration for me became easier, I found myself becoming more involved in discussions and participating in activities...The atmosphere was more learning and involved rather than giggling coming from a text message or the distracting glow of a phone because a student was playing a game."

"In my other classes I pull my phone out at least every five minutes to check it. The activity also helped everyone in the class because when I see others moving around to get their phones out of their pockets it distracts me and I sometimes look over to see what they are doing. It also helped because phones weren't ringing or making noise in class, when we put them up front it always reminds me to put my phone on silent."

"When I was in EMT class I was constantly distracted by other students on their phones....If students have their phones on them they will inevitably use them. The urge to text, play games,

etc. is too great when your phone is in your pocket....Thank you for a positive class experience and using techniques like these to better the classroom experience.”

Many students referred to increased concentration made possible by not having their phone with them:

“I know that even when I am trying very hard to focus but my phone goes off, I have a sudden need to check it. By leaving my phone in the front of the room I no longer had this issue.”

“This is something that not only will help us to concentrate more in that class but it will help us feel relief with pressure of checking every minutes our phones and also having phone close to us every hour of that day is not good for our health....I felt in peace every time I came to class.”

“I have never done so well on tests and note taking. I believe this is because I am sitting there wondering when someone is going to text me.....Everyone made some new friends....It lead me to turning my phone off in other classes so I could understand the material better. This activity made me realize how interesting psychology is because I actually listened.”

“It helps students to focus more on a lecture and if they do it every class it will boost up their final grade. It is a win-win situation. Students will participate more and will talk more with teacher about the topic.”

“I also felt that my concentration was much better. In class, I noticed that those who did not participate in the activity were lost in our lectures. Comparing grades, theirs were lower.”

“Concentrating in today’s age is tougher because of the many other activities that can be done silently on the cell phone during the class period....The classroom also has a better feel of the room, like the students are more up-beat and lively, and not just wanting to leave because their friend texted them wanting to hang out or get something to eat after class.”

“I personally loved the cell phone extra credit option. When I have my phone in class, I am tempted to get on it. Now, if I put it on the front desk, the temptation is gone.”

Many students emphasized that they believed the activity was increasing their learning:

“It was easier to pay closer attention to what we were learning and actually enjoy/understand the materials and lecture during class because our phones were put away.”

“I did the extra credit every day, except one, because I feel I learned more, instead of played on my phone and not learned anything.”

“I think the cell phone extra credit allowed the class to have more detailed and in depth discussions because less people were focused on texting and more so on the class.....It was awesome!”

“Discussions and question times were much more engaged in this class than any of my other discussion experiences. I believe this correlates to the cell phone activity...I would recommend this activity to others because of the positive effect I saw take place in your classroom.”

“Normally when you go into a classroom during class a majority of the class is on their cell phone. With this activity I was forced to choose between my cell phone or extra credit. I chose extra credit and it helped me on focusing on psychology.”

Apparently, for some students the activity provided motivation to come to class:

“I recommend the cell phone extra credit because it gave me motivation to come into class knowing that I would get extra credit for just simply putting my phone at the front of the room.”

“I very much enjoyed the cell phone extra credit because I am a firm believer that technology, or at least most of it, has made the new generation lazy. It gave me more motivation to come to class every day.”

Many students commented on improvements in the classroom atmosphere:

“I wish more classes did this because it gives students an active choice to be more active and respectful in the classroom...Students were taking notes and reading along in the text more than I've seen in any other class in my first year of college.”

“The mood in the room changed when we put our phones up there.”

“It made the classroom atmosphere more respectful, if you were to comment it felt like people were actually listening to you.”

“The overall classroom atmosphere became more focused on social interaction than technology interaction.”

“It was a novel way of encouraging class participation and attentiveness.”

The benefits of the experience were apparently generalized to other classes and to home:

“I was not getting distracted by my phone which was a great thing! I also noticed I wasn't checking my phone as often in other classrooms too!

“When no one was on their phone the class was actually enjoyable. People were more respectful of the teacher and other students around them. It actually helped me become detached from my phone a little bit. I usually can't go anywhere without but now I can leave it upstairs or anywhere and not freak out about not having it.”

“While I did feel uncomfortable at first, I got used to it not being in my pocket and even around the house or certain places now I do not have it with me 24/7.”

“I felt like doing this activity caused me to pay attention and learn more....I think it has influenced me to put down my phone even in classes where this isn’t offered.”

Many comments discussed general personal good feelings and increased engagement with others:

“It did make me enjoy walking into class and knowing I would at least have those extra points. It gave a sense of small accomplishment to myself personally.”

“This activity really made me feel more connected to the class as a whole.”

“Not having my phone at my disposal motivated me to be more engaged in the classroom and with the people around me.”

“Not having people constantly text made class more inviting.”

“In all honesty, this class made me realize not only how codependent I am on technology, but the social and personal barriers put up by having our cell phones out....I realized if I cannot go without my cell phone for one hour, there is a serious problem....I think this activity did more than allow us to overcome the fear of cell phone separation anxiety, but finally get off a screen and communicate and learn interpersonally and socially.”

“I think our society needs a ‘breather’ from technology sometimes, so I really enjoyed the extra credit activity.”

Students indicated that they appreciated the option to not participate:

“I thought it was great that students had the option to participate or not because, sometimes there really are emergencies going on in students’ lives when a cell phone is necessary to be with them at all times.”

Some students wrote about far-reaching benefits to the activity:

“They may think it’s just for extra credit, but in reality it’s helping them out in more ways than they think.”

The main reason for me to participate in this activity in the first place was to gain the extra credit but I have seen the difference that not having a phone during class has made.”

MY THOUGHTS:

I knew I was totally distracted and frustrated when I saw cell phones being used during class, but I really didn't know how many students were sitting there waiting for texts to arrive, and I certainly had no idea how I would feel when the phones were finally gone! I was amazed at my own reaction to this activity. The first day I did the activity with my classes I felt like I had traveled back in time. Having taught for years before cell phones appeared in college classrooms, I realized I had forgotten what it felt like to teach with students' attention focused in the classroom rather than on the phone under (or on top of) their desks. I immediately noticed the increased number of students who appeared to be paying attention to lecture and taking notes, as well as looking around at other students who were participating in class discussions. I immediately slipped back into expecting these long-lost behaviors as the new given, and I don't see any reason why I need ever go back to wrestling with cell phone issues. I concluded that I was very happy and content to award up to 25 extra credit points for the attention of the class and for students' attention on their work all semester long. I felt I had my classes back, just like it was many years ago, with students actually listening to me and each other and participating, a wonderful feeling. Reading the students' essays and reviewing the results of the questionnaire confirmed in my mind the value of the activity. Interestingly, now when I see a student not participating in the activity and openly using a cell phone during class activities, I somehow find it easier and less distracting for me, perhaps because I know this was their decision and everyone knows they have passed up extra credit.

Also, one totally unexpected thing happened: After a few days I found I was walking into my classes and all the cell phones were already on the table in the front of the classroom! I would not have believed this would ever happen, and it happened in all my classes although I never said anything about putting phones on the table before I enter the classroom. After reading the student essays, I am wondering if the students had come, on some level, to look forward to their brief visits to a different way of life.

POTENTIAL ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTATING THIS ACTIVITY:

Although a request may be made, students are unlikely to actually turn their cell phones off, but will likely configure them to silent. Since cell phones have been found in some studies to create electromagnetic energy detrimental to health, it can be a concern that so many phones are together if some students are sitting nearby. This issue can easily be handled if the classroom is large and a table is available at a distance from students. There are devices available that can detect this cell phone energy, and such a device could be used to remind students that some phones were left on. Cell phones will register in their entirety all voicemails and text messages if the phone is off but will not register callers who do not leave a message.

Some essays stated that there were some students who didn't bring their cell phones to the front desk and merely pretended to participate. I knew this could happen, but opted for a more informal approach. However, it would be possible to have an alphabetized sign-in sheet on the desk that students can sign next to their preprinted name, for ease in noting those who don't

participate. At a minimum, students learn through experience how cheating is not right, and those who cheat may learn that they will lose their classmates' respect.

I found that there was very little extra work in preparing final exam grades. If the number of points between grades is fairly substantial, e.g., 900 points is an A, 800 points is a B, then it is only necessary to add up points as usual and look only at students' participation records if they are close to a cutoff. Since each class period when I called roll I made a special mark for each student who did not participate in the exact place in the roll book where I would mark that student's absence, it was very easy in a few seconds to know how many fewer extra credit points that student would get than the maximum possible for the class. For example, if the class participated 25 times and a student had 2 marks indicating non-participation, then that student earned 23 points.

Since participation in the activity is voluntary each day, students are free to keep their phones with them for any reason, including concern about possible home or health emergencies. One returning adult student wrote: "I have told family if there is an emergency call the school. Isn't that what was done in years past?" Of course, it was. Since students may not realize this, it would be helpful to give them this information and the main phone number of the college as well as any other appropriate number, e.g., security, to give to family members, while letting them know that in an urgent situation someone will come to the student's classroom and advise the student of the call.