Creativity Calling

By Donovan R. Walling

Please silence your cell phones now” used to be heard only in movie theaters and concert halls, but more and more it is also how classes begin in many schools — at least those that have not altogether banned cell phone use by students.

Students and cell phones: bane or boon? While many schools consider them a bane — distracting, disruptive — and have accordingly banned them from classrooms or school grounds entirely, some schools and teachers have adopted the opposite view. They ask, Can cell phones serve educational purposes? A growing number of educators are answering in the affirmative. For example, Liz Kolb, a former middle and high school teacher, offers ideas that can be incorporated into instruction in a recent book titled, *Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Instruction* (ISTE, 2008).

Kolb makes the point that “teachers use software created for educational purposes” but “seem to draw the line at everyday technologies used by youth outside the classroom” (p. 5). That is precisely the threshold educators need to cross, suggests Kolb, if they are going to connect everyday digital culture and learning. It is a real-life connection that, if teachers are willing to make it, can pay off with increased student engagement and achievement.

So what does this have to do with student-produced media? Several things. First, cell phones are the media

tool most familiar to a vast majority of students. According to studies such as the 2008 CTIA/Harris Interactive Survey, “A Generation Unplugged” (www.ctia.org), some seventy-nine percent of teens (ages 13-18) — about 17 million in the United States — have a mobile device, either a cell phone or a smartphone. Incidentally, that is an increase of thirty-six percent since 2005. Mobile communication is so ubiquitous for this age demographic that these students have been termed “Generation M” — M for mobile, i.e. “unplugged.” Therefore, simple availability of this tool gives it enormous potential for educational use.

Second, communication — student-student, student-teacher, teacher-parent — is a facilitative factor in the successful development and use of student-produced media. The CTIA/Harris study, which surveyed more than two thousand students with cell phones, found that the phones had a profound effect on students’ communication. Fifty-seven percent of student respondents agreed that using cell phones “improved the quality of my life.” Absolute essentials were using the phone to make and receive calls (forty-six percent) and to send or receive text messages (thirty-nine percent). Taking pictures with a cell phone camera (nineteen percent) and sending or receiving pictures (seventeen percent) also got shares in the essentials category.

Third, cell phones increasingly include media production tools. Vir-

tually all mobile phones now have a built-in camera. And the capability to produce high-quality images is increasing, even among low-cost phones. Students on the lookout for images to integrate into media they are creating can capture those images on the go and without specialized equipment. The images can be sent phone-to-phone to study partners or downloaded to a computer for enhancement, adaptation, or other uses. Cell phone video cameras also are now emerging on a popular scale. While downloading video to a cell phone or smartphone has been available for some time, increasingly mobile technology is merging video camera, digital camera, and phone into a single device.

Fourth, smartphones, such as BlackBerrys and iPhones, offer more extensive features, including better connection to the Internet, thereby helping students to use their phones as mobile computers to locate and collect information for school media projects. Cell phones were launched in 1983, while the first smartphone did not come along until the 1990s. According to CTIA, most teens have a conventional phone. But about fifteen percent have a smartphone. As manufacturers address affordability issues, it is likely that percentage will grow, just as the overall percentage of teenage cell phone users has grown exponentially over a short time.

It is noteworthy that most of the student-media uses to which cell