

Are iPod-banning schools cheating our kids?

Why iPods and other electronic gadgets should be required, not banned

By Mike Elgan

May 4, 2007 12:00 PM ET

Computerworld - The Associated Press published an article last week about high schools increasingly banning [iPods](#) because some kids use them to cheat.

The article, reprinted in [USA Today](#) and hundreds of other newspapers, reported one example where a school "recently enacted a ban on digital media players after school officials realized some students were downloading formulas and other material onto the players."

I don't want to second-guess the individual decisions of specific teachers and school principals. But the ban does raise questions, the most interesting of which is: Should iPods or other handheld gadgets instead be "required" during tests?

What the iPod ban teaches kids

Most high school students prepare for tests by guessing what facts might be on the test, then trying to memorize those facts to maximize their grades. Hours after the test, those facts tend to be forgotten. This is a gross oversimplification, sure, but largely true.

How much of your high school history, science or math do you still retain to this day? If you're like me, the answer is practically zero.

In my case, the single most valuable thing I learned in high school was how to touch-type (thank you, Ms. Balish!). Skills, habits and experiences, more than temporarily memorized facts, are what turn us into adults who can learn.

So many college students I've met -- even at some of the nation's top universities -- are there because they have an aptitude for memorization. Many straight-A high school students have few interests, little curiosity and zero inclination toward intellectual discovery. Our system rewards the memorizers and punishes the creative thinkers.

An iPod, when used during tests, is nothing more than a machine that stores and spits out data. By banning iPods and other gadgets, we're teaching kids to actually become iPods -- to become machines that store and spit out data. Instead, we should be teaching them to use iPods -- to use that data and to be human beings who can think -- and leave data storage to the machines.

By banning iPods, we're preparing our kids for a world without the Internet, a world without iPods, a world without electronic gadgets that can store information. But is that the world they're going to live in?

What iPods teach kids

What are those iPod cheaters doing, really? They're creatively putting facts at their fingertips using ubiquitous technology in preparation for using those facts.

Isn't that a more realistic preparation for college, career and life than teaching memorization?

When I go into a meeting, deliver a presentation, write a column or develop a report, electronic gadgets and Internet-connected PCs are always part of the process. My ability to use those devices and my ability to think critically using the universe of facts always at hand determines to a large degree the quality of my work.

Memorizing information is valuable but not as valuable as the ability to find and use information. Yet we teach the low-value skill and ban the valuable one.

When kids take math tests, most teachers require them to "show their work" instead of doing problems "in their heads." Or they require calculators. Teachers are preparing students to function in a world where pencils and calculators are generally available. Banning iPods is like banning pencils or calculators.

What's the point of creating an unrealistic scenario that involves the total absence of widely available tools? Outside the classroom and after high school, a student can "always" have access to an iPod or an Internet-connected phone or computer.

Schools need to learn, too

If Johnny can get an "A" by using his iPod, what does that tell us about the necessity of memorizing the knowledge? What does that tell us about the power of electronic gadgets?

The larger, more interesting question is: Why do we devote so much time and energy teaching kids to memorize facts we know they'll forget? We should instead teach critical thinking, creative decision-making and sophisticated information retrieval.

We should teach kids how to function in the real world -- the world they live in, not the world their grandparents lived in.

That means kids should learn how to efficiently pack a gadget or computer full of content and figure out how to quickly access and use that content to solve problems and answer questions.

We need the iPod equivalent of "open-book tests," where gadgets are required, the tests are harder and demand of the student problem solving, creative thinking and deep understanding of the ideas, not just the ability to spit out words fed to them earlier.

Kids need to learn relevant skills in order to function in a changing world. Schools need to learn, too. It's time that schools accept the fact that the Internet and little electronic info-gadgets are everywhere and here to stay. A revolution has occurred. In one generation, we've transformed a world where information is scarce and hard to find to a world where nearly all knowledge can be available to everyone, all the time.

Instead of pretending that revolution never happened, let's take advantage of it to propel students into a successful future. Let's teach them how to deal with the new problem of too much information. Let's stop banning iPods and start requiring them.

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