# BRING YOUR OWN EXCITEMENT

*By Wendy Stephens and Sarah Fanning*

## IT'S TIME FOR NEW WAYS OF THINKING

At the National Association of Secondary School Principals National Conference in 2009, Dr. Kipp Rogers, then principal of Passage Middle School in Newport News, Virginia, and now director of secondary instruction for York County (Virginia) Schools, presented a session on the whole-school integration of cell phone technology in his building.

That was a turning point in our local thinking. Previously, we had focused on purchasing classroom response systems to share among our departments. Dr. Rogers showcased several smartphone-based applications to replicate polling interactivity without the initial capital outlay or recurring expense of batteries. He also discussed the offline applications of cell phones, including using the calculator, camera, and calendar functionality, and showcased the text-based Google search and dictionary definition features. All of this led us to revisit the handy devices so many of our high school students already possessed.

In our cash-strapped district we are never going to be able to provide a device for every student in the building. It is already a challenge to keep teacher computers operational. Our district policy allows students to bring devices into schools. However, students are officially not allowed to use them during the school day. We sought an exception from our district administration to begin experimenting with these devices for instructional purposes. Several teachers were enthusiastic about incorporating them into their teaching. The first experiment involved a social studies elective using a backchannel to post observations about World War I as students watched the film *The Lost Battalion*.

### A VERY ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE

The next year, we decided to participate in the first national Digital Learning Day project. Our school has a relationship with the Alliance for Excellent Education, which helped sponsor the event, and it gave some credibility to our desire to incorporate a range of technologies, particularly student-owned devices.

We laid the groundwork for BYOD ("Bring Your Own Device") with a mandatory professional development session embedded in the school day. The librarian had done a workshop for a district technology conference two years prior on using smartphones in the classroom, and she updated that for the faculty. Teachers were given hands-on experience with live polling, finding definitions, and retrieving search results. Because of the enthusiasm and the many creative ideas teachers had when presented with the capabilities of the mobile devices, the four sessions ended up being longer and more interactive than we had anticipated. Teachers shared previous experiences, including allowing students to use cell phones as calculators in algebra, which one teacher said required some additional vigilance but had been an overall positive experience. We discussed the fact that, if students could cheat on a test via text messaging, that assessment was probably not the most authentic sort. Only a couple of members of our large faculty were hesitant about the idea of turning students loose online outside of the school network.

The administration spoke to each group, punctuating the expectation that teachers would seize this opportunity to think outside the normal strictures of the classroom and do something truly innovative.

On Digital Learning Day the excitement was palpable. Students emerged from their first block classes buzzing about their learning. The faculty was invited to spend their planning period watching a nationally televised webcast that showcased the same types of activities they were already implementing. Our state superintendent of education, Dr. Tommy Bice, was featured in the webcast. He announced that in Alabama the entire month would be devoted to digital learning. We welcomed the opportunity to extend the rich, instructional experiences for our students for another twenty-eight days.

### LIMITED BANDWITH? GO MOBILE!

Only district-owned devices are allowed on the wireless network in our school, so even teachers are unable to use personal hardware. Don Knezek, former CEO of ISTE, proposed that schools invest in multiple wireless networks to separate those handling district business from those oriented around student-owned devices (Schachter 32). We knew that many students have access to cellular data. One of our math teachers had a student bring in a mobile hotspot. Through this hardware, all students in the class were able to get online, even with laptops. The teacher contrasted the quality of engagement and interaction in that class section with that of another section where students pooled cellular-capable hardware. He said having one-to-one online access made an appreciable difference in the quality of learning in his classroom that day.

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class to landscapes for art composition, we have never seen more enthusiasm among our students than during our digital learning push. These technologies allowed our classroom conversations to be more inclusive. As Principal Eric Sheninger reported about BYOD initiatives at New Milford (New Jersey) High School, "In a typical classroom, a teacher will ask a question and maybe a few students will raise their hands to answer, but with Poll Everywhere, every student has to answer the question" (Puente 64). The feedback from our faculty and students was entirely positive. One parent said it was the first time her tenth grader had ever enjoyed school.

### SETTING BOUNDARIES
As long as there have been schools, some students have chosen to misuse the available tools. Teens will push the boundaries with language, images, and innuendo through whatever medium. But educators haven't banned crayons, pencils, or pens just because a student might inscribe a textbook with profanity or a lewd image. Recognizing the distinction between the behavior and the materials with which students choose to express themselves was a fundamental element of our implementation of BYOD in our building. The administration stressed that it was the inappropriate conduct which should be addressed, as with any other infraction, rather than the means students used to violate school policy.

### ADDRESSING EQUITY
Our faculty worried about students who might not have hardware of their own, but they were surprised about the technology their students did possess, regardless of their economic backgrounds. In fact, as has been

demonstrated by national research, many teens, especially from minority groups, are more likely to have web-enabled cell phones than Internet access at home. Some teachers expressed concern that they did not know how to use the range of devices their students possessed, something that has been called "the heterogeneity challenge" of BYOD programs (Norris 94). But we were actually eliminating the initial learning curve by promoting technology with which students themselves were already quite comfortable.

In his presentation on cell phone technology integration, Rogers proposed an excellent solution for students who might not have cell phones of their own. Once his initiative was underway, he found many people willing to donate their older devices to the school. These phones could be employed offline at no expense, and with minimal pay-as-you-go expenditures they were useful for polling and searching. Lake Travis (Texas) Independent School District found another solution. Equity was ensured with a bond issue to fund devices for low-income families, and middle-income families were able to purchase or lease devices from a variety of vendors at a negotiated discount ("BYOD Strategies" 34). Some cellular service providers have started gearing products for education settings by offering data-only plans (Williams 29).

### BUILDING TRUST
We combined much of the evidence of the excitement and the innovative student work from Digital Learning Day in a short film to share with our district. It won the Digital Learning Day follow-up video contest in the Teacher Implementation category, demonstrating that, with appropriate

professional development led by a tech-savvy librarian and significant administrative support, students could use their own technology tools to enhance their work in myriad ways and provide teachers with formative assessment data. Students also learned transferable skills, including text-based searching and dictionary features to support their own independent and everyday life learning. And, by modeling appropriate and productive uses of technology, teachers actually gained credibility for their own skills among these digital natives.

While the use of student-owned hardware is still not officially sanctioned by our district, teachers are working with the tools and concepts they picked up through our Digital Learning Day experience. For example, one biology class recently took advantage of app-based instrumentation to monitor the local environment. These were the same tools, the teacher asserted, that working scientists use.

Now, instead of operating under a mandate that links communication to criminality, we choose to trust our students to remain engaged and on task, and they have not disappointed us.

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