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ON EDUCATION

New Class(room) War: Teacher vs. Technology

By **SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN**

Halfway through the semester in his market research course at Roanoke College last fall, only moments after announcing a policy of zero tolerance for cellphone use in the classroom, Prof. Ali Nazemi heard a telltale ring. Then he spotted a young man named Neil Noland fumbling with his phone, trying to turn it off before being caught.

“Neil, can I see that phone?” Professor Nazemi said, more in a command than a question. The student surrendered it. Professor Nazemi opened his briefcase, produced a hammer and proceeded to smash the offending device. Throughout the classroom, student faces went ashen.

“How am I going to call my Mom now?” Neil asked. As Professor Nazemi refused to answer, a classmate offered, “Dude, you can sue.”

Let’s be clear about one thing. Ali Nazemi is a hero. Ali Nazemi deserves the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Let’s be clear about another thing. The episode in his classroom had been plotted and scripted ahead of time, with Neil Noland part of the charade all along. The phone was an extra of his mother’s, its service contract long expired.

Just as fiction can limn truths beyond the grasp of factuality, Professor Nazemi’s act of guerrilla theater, which he recounted last week in a telephone interview, attested to the exasperation of countless teachers and professors in the computer era. Their perpetual war of attrition with defiantly inattentive students has escalated from the quaint pursuits of pigtail-pulling, spitball-lobbing and notebook-doodling to a high-tech arsenal of laptops, cellphones, BlackBerries and the like.

The poor schoolmarm or master, required to provide a certain amount of value for your child’s entertainment dollar, now must compete with texting, instant-messaging, [Facebook](#), eBay, YouTube, [Addictinggames.com](#) and other poxes on pedagogy.

“There are certain lines you shouldn’t cross,” the professor said. “If you start tolerating this stuff, it becomes the norm. The more you give, the more they take. These devices become an indisposable sort of thing for the students. And nothing should be indisposable. Multitasking is good, but I want them to do more tasking in my class.”

To which one can only say: Amen. And add: Too bad the good guy is going to lose.

At age 55, Professor Nazemi stands on the far shore of a new sort of generational divide between teacher and student. This one separates those who want to use technology to grow smarter from those who want to use it

to get dumber.

Perhaps there's a nicer way to put it. "The baby boomers seem to see technology as information and communication," said Prof. Michael Bugeja, director of the journalism school at [Iowa State University](#) and the author of "Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age." "Their offspring and the emerging generation seem to see the same devices as entertainment and socializing."

All the advances schools and colleges have made to supposedly enhance learning — supplying students with laptops, equipping computer labs, creating wireless networks — have instead enabled distraction. Perhaps attendance records should include a new category: present but otherwise engaged.

In the past three years alone, the percentage of college classrooms with wireless service has nearly doubled, to 60 percent from 31 percent, according to the Campus Computing Survey, an annual check by the Campus Computing Project of computer use at 600 colleges. Professor Bugeja's online survey of several hundred Iowa State students found that a majority had used their cellphones, sent or read e-mail, and gone onto social-network sites during class time. A quarter of the respondents admitted they were taking Professor Bugeja's survey while sitting in a different class.

Naturally, there will be many students and no small number of high-tech and progressive-ed apologists ready to lay the blame on boring lessons. One of the great condemnations in education jargon these days, after all, is the "teacher-centered lesson."

"I'm so tired of that excuse," said Professor Bugeja, may he live a long and fruitful life. "The idea that subject matter is boring is truly relative. Boring as opposed to what? Buying shoes on eBay? The fact is, we're not here to entertain. We're here to stimulate the life of the mind."

"Education requires contemplation," he continued. "It requires critical thinking. What we may be doing now is training a generation of air-traffic controllers rather than scholars. And I do know I'm going to lose."

Not, one can only hope, without a fight.

The Canadian company Smart Technologies makes and sells a program called SynchronEyes. It allows a classroom teacher to monitor every student's computer activity and to freeze it at a click. Last year, the company sold more than 10,000 licenses, which range in cost from \$779 for one teacher to \$3,249 for an entire school.

The biggest problem, said Nancy Knowlton, the company's chief executive officer, is staying ahead of students trying to crack the program's code. "There's an active discussion on the Web, and we're monitoring it," Ms. Knowlton said. "They keep us on our toes."

Scott Carlin, an instructor of teacher interns at [Michigan State University](#), advises his charges to forbid personal use of tech devices in the classroom. Of course he occasionally has to pause in his own lesson to make one of his graduate students stop scrolling through text messages.

"If the students actually found some creative way to use a cellphone or a BlackBerry in a class demonstration, I'd be all for that," Mr. Carlin said in a recent interview, recalling his own years as a middle school and high school teacher. "Or if they could demonstrate how a chat room or [AOL](#) instant messenger

would help them present a project. But what I found in most cases is that it was just a fancy new way of passing notes.”

In the end, as science-fiction writers have prophesied for years, the technology is bound to outwit the fallible human. What teacher or professor can possibly police a room full of determined goof-offs while also delivering an engaging lesson?

I am reminded of a story I heard from an [Ivy League](#) junior at a social gathering last year. She and a friend walked into the lecture hall for a class and noticed two young men in a back row surfing Internet pornography sites. They called out and waved to alert the professor.

He stopped his lecture. He turned his eyes to the young women, those would-be whistle-blowers. And as the pornography show proceeded undetected, he chastised them for interrupting.

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