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By Rocco Staino -- School Library Journal, 04/28/2010

A software app may have educators telling students to take out their cell phones rather than put them away. It's Wiffiti, which takes its name from Wi-Fi and graffiti, and it's been used by thousands in sports stadiums, concerts, gallery openings, corporate conferences, and both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. Now it's making its way into the classroom in a big way.

How does it work? Imagine a dynamic bulletin board in front of your classroom that lets students and others from any location write on it by texting from their cell phones. The messages appear on the screen within seconds for viewing by the entire class.

Teachers can register on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr, or create an individual free account on the Wiffiti Web site. Then all they have to do is customize a screen and give students a code where they can send their texts. Those without cell phones can still post to the site using their computers.

Many teachers are already using Wiffiti for brainstorming activities, to receive answers to homework questions, and to encourage students to text in languages other than English. YA librarians and media specialists are also using it to recommend books.

Lisa Nielsen, an educational technologist for the New York City Department of Education, recommends using Wiffiti for students to "share their ideas regarding an acceptable use policy" or to give each other weekly shout-outs.

Teacher and author Liz Kolb, a pioneer of cell phone use in the classroom, says in a blog post that Wiffiti has become her favorite brainstorming tool.

"The best part of this tool is that students can brainstorm from their cell phones to a live screen on the Web," she writes, adding that there are a lot of teacher "controls" for Wiffiti, such as "approving" messages before they are posted or not allowing content with inappropriate words. Teachers and librarians can also keep the screen private or share it with the public.

Another way Kolb recommends using the app is with storytelling. "If students take a field trip to a local museum, they could text their observations, notes, or what they learned during their field trip to the class Wiffiti screen and then back in class they could discuss their experiences," Kolb writes. Since Wiffiti works with Flickr, the background images on Wiffiti could come from Flickr and students can also post their images from their field trip to Flickr.
select one as the background for the class Wiffiti screen.

Another example comes from the Traveling with Technology Blog, which talks about a teacher asking students to use their cell phones and Wiffiti to teach the dreaded subjunctive in a Spanish class.

"Using some prompts on a worksheet I gave them and Wiffiti.com, the students created sentences," the blog reads. "I had the projector on in the front of the room, so all of their text messages appeared immediately. Then, they critiqued each other's sentences and copied down the ones they liked on their worksheet."

The Teacher Tech blog by Lydia Leimbach of Hall-Dale High School in Farmingdale, ME, recommends using Wiffiti for questions and backchannel chat during a lecture or lesson. However, she cautions that using the software requires students to learn self-control and focus. "I wouldn't use it as a class-long project [because] the posts tended to get off topic once an initial post was made," Leimbach writes.

Many educators are saying that texting in the classroom is almost a no-brainer, considering the recent report "Teens, Cells Phones, and Texting" by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, which states that "Cell-phone texting has become the preferred channel of basic communication between teens and their friends."

"Since students already text message almost continuously throughout any day, now they can use it for an educational purpose," says Liz Colb, author of Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Education (ISTE, 2008).

Obviously, teachers should check with their local school policies about the use of cell phones in the classroom before using Wiffiti.