

Curriculum Plan for Action Speaks: 1973 The First US Mobile Phone Call

What is Action Speaks?

Action Speaks is a 16-year-old live panel discussion and radio show heard in over 300 markets. Action Speaks looks at contemporary issues through the lens of history by focusing on under-appreciated dates of the twentieth century and their subsequent effects that have served to change life, politics, and values in America.

Introduction to topic:

This panel discusses the positives and evils of the ubiquitous technology of the mobile telephone, which saw its advent on April 3, 1973 when the first cell phone call was made by an employee of Motorola in New York City. In the nearly 40 intervening years, phones have evolved from being unwieldy 2-pound bricks to small items that easily fit into a pocket. At the same time, one would be hard-pressed to find a mobile phone today that only makes phone calls. We use cell phones to view e-mail, access the internet, send text messages, play games, look at maps, and literally thousands of other apps. The speed with which this technology has developed and spread begs questions about how society behaves in the face of new gadgets (with plenty of historical examples to be drawn from technologies as varied as the printing press to electricity to television).

The panelists discuss the changes cell phones have introduced into society. Most obvious to this seems interpersonal interactions: is it rude to check your phone when you're having a face-to-face conversation with someone? Is it possible for people to be present, or are our minds always occupied with who or what we might be missing? The panel discusses not only the cell phone's social implications, but also the changes in the way our brains function – do smart phones make people stupid? Finally, the panel explores how work patterns and the organization of people's lives have adapted to being constantly "connected."

Central Themes of Discussion

Social vs. individual technology/gadgets	Productivity
Social norms of interaction	Downtime
Focus and Distraction	Connectivity
Health/environmental effects	Globalization
Analog vs. Digital	Imagination and Creativity

The panelists heard in this discussion are:

- **Linda Raftree**, the Social Media and New Technology Advisor for Plan International. Linda is based at Plan's US Headquarters in Rhode Island, but spends most of her time in Africa supporting the use of new media and technology tools in Plan's community development programs, including human rights, advocacy, health, sanitation, education, violence prevention, gender, civic education, and emergencies. Before joining Plan USA in 2001, Linda lived and worked in El Salvador for 10 years managing child media, child protection, peace and reconciliation, and disaster programs.

- **William Powers**, the author of *Hamlet's BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*. A former staff writer for The Washington Post, he has written for *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times* and many other publications. He is a two-time winner of the National Press Club's Arthur Rowse Award for best American media commentary. *Hamlet's BlackBerry* grew out of research he did as a fellow at Harvard University. He lives on Cape Cod.
- **Dr. Sharon Kleinman**, professor of communications at Quinnipiac University. She is the editor of *The Culture of Efficiency: Technology in Everyday Life* and *Displacing Place: Mobile Communication in the Twenty-first Century* and is currently writing a dictionary of media and communication. She holds a B.A. in English and American literature from Brandeis University and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Communication from Cornell University. An avid mountain biker and yoga practitioner, she lives in New Haven, Connecticut.

Some additional books for information about this topic are:

- *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, by Carolyn Marvin. Oxford Press, 1988
- *The Shallows*, by Nicholas Carr. W. W. Norton, 2010
- *New Tech, New Ties How Mobile*, by Rich Ling. MIT Press, 2008
- *Magic in the Air*, by James E. Katz. Transaction Publishers, 2006
- *Mobile Communication*, by Rich Ling and Jonathan Donner. Polity Press, 2009
- *Cell Phone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How it has Transformed Everything*, by James Levinson. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004
- *American Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940*, by Claude S. Fischer. University of California, 1992

Web address for an **online Mp3** of the entire panel discussion (about 1 hour in length):

<http://actionspeaksradio.org/audio/as2010-w3-cell.mp3>

New Vocabulary (used in selected clips):

inhibitor	consequence
adaptation	productivity
habitual	diaspora
individualism	globalization/globalism
mobility	digital
“Swiss Army Knife of life”	analog
prioritization	optimist
superficial	downtime
subconscious	early adopter

Pre-selected Clips by topic:

Beginning-1:25, Introduction. Audience reactions and opinions about their own cell phones.

4:23-5:33, Adaptation in the brain

6:58-8:31, 8:47-10:37, 42:05-44:00, Individual vs. Social. Which technologies are designed to individualize? Original goals of phones. Social commitment. Loud conversations.

12:57-15:40, Distraction. Priorities of social interaction, becoming slaves to a device, changes in abilities to focus.

21:38-27:24, Need for alone time; productivity expectations. Loss of depth in relationships and inner life. Blurring of personal and work lives.

50:30-53:33, Conclusion. Where will we be in 50 years with cell phone technology? Comparisons to other technological advances.

Integration into the classroom:

School-age children have grown up their entire lives in a world with cell phones, and most of their lives have been spent getting acquainted with smart phones. While the longer panel discussion addresses (sometimes only in passing) other varied topics like the influence of cell phones in less-developed countries, their usefulness in social activism, or the personal privacy issues associated with tracking devices in phones, the pre-selected clips focus on the social implications of increased cell phone use.

Because most students are likely to have a cell phone of their own, the topic should lend itself easily to real-life applications and analysis. Action Speaks could serve as a jumping-off point for a larger lesson plan, or as a digression or diversion from the standard classroom structure. The following is a suggested outline for a one-hour class period, followed by some additional supplementary materials to offer the possibility to expand some topics.

- I. Introduction (10-15 minutes)
 - a. Assign the following homework one or two days before you plan to do this lesson. Have each student keep a log of how often they use their cell phone in one 24-hour period. If the student doesn't have a cell phone, have them observe a parent or friend who does. They should take note of when that person uses the cell phone, for how long, and for what purpose.
 - b. As an introduction to the topic, compile these responses on the board, totaling how frequently they use their phones and what apps or functions they use most often.
 - c. Ask students if they remember what the context of their cell phone use was. Were there other people around? Where were they? Did their phone interrupt any part of their routine over that 24-hour period?

- II. Action Speaks Audio Clips (20-25 minutes)
 - a. Briefly introduce Action Speaks to tell the students the source of the material.
 - b. Play the first introductory clip of audience members' opinions about their cell phones. Take 5 minutes or so to hear opinions about the responses, whether students agree or disagree and why.
 - c. After the introduction, have the students take out a sheet of paper to keep track of points made during the discussion that describe positive aspects of the cell phone and negative aspects. They can take very simple notes, but should have material to refer back to for the concluding activity.
 - d. Play selected clip(s).

- III. Discussion and Wrap-Up (10-15 minutes)
 - a. Give students 3-5 minutes to add their own opinions to their pro/con lists. They should write at least 5 opinions.
 - b. Form small discussion groups where students share their notes with each other. Have them discuss which points/topics they felt were most convincing or most interesting.
 - c. Concluding discussion question: Do cell phones take up too much of our time?

Additional Activity Suggestions:

1. Brainstorm ideas for ways to prevent "over-connectedness." (i.e. days/times of day where you don't check your e-mail or use your phone; specified times to be outside).
2. Compile guidelines for positive usage of cell phones (i.e. in-person interactions come first; places where cell phone use is inappropriate).

Additional Materials

Steve Laswell, "What does Over-Connectedness Cost You?" 23 August 2010. From *Next Level Coaching*.

<http://www.nextlevelexecutivecoaching.com/2010/08/communication-what-does-over-connectedness-cost-you/>

Thematically relevant, but somewhat long, this article contains some interesting statistics about modern connectedness (how often people check e-mails, etc.). Also some interesting links within the article to other sources.

"New Generation of Communication: Texting versus Talking." 11 June 2009. From *HireAHelper's Everything Home Blog*

<http://blog.hireahelper.com/2009/06/11/new-generation-of-communication-texting-versus-talking/>

Simple but concise article about some of the pros and cons of texting as a primary mode of communication. Written from a younger perspective with simpler language. Could serve as an example editorial article for students to write their own opinion essays.

Michael Deacon, "Texting is Making English a Foreign Language." 12 August 2009. From *The Telegraph*.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/6017629/Texting-is-making-English-a-foreign-language.html>

Perspective on texting from older, British journalist, commenting on the problems with "text speak" and whether or not it's dumbing down the population. Could be used as jumping off point for discussion about why/how abbreviations get used and how/if students differentiate when they communicate in other written forms.

Does texting have adverse effects on a person's ability to communicate in other manners?

<http://debates.juggle.com/does-texting-have-adverse-effects-on-a-persons-ability-to-communicate-in-other-manners>

Similar in theme and arguments to the 2 previous articles, this site displays them in a debate fashion, with "Yes" and "No" columns. Students could conduct their own debate about their opinions on this question, or others. (i.e. if it's appropriate to text/use a cell phone when at the movies/on a date, etc.)