

Communicating with the Tech Savvy Student of the New Academy

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Information technology communication platforms such as the Internet—particularly the World Wide Web—and the digital video and audio mediums have evolved from communication imperatives for the professional and business realms into the realm of the personal. The current "typical" undergraduate student has both a level of information technology savvy and a personal desire to embrace these technologies that is not typically shared by his/her college professors. The net generation or "Net Gens" as described by Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) has grown up with the personal computer and spend more time each day using screen media such as computers, television and video games than they do reading. "Born around the time that the PC was introduced, 20 percent began using computers between the ages of 5 and 8. Virtually all Net Gen students were using computers by the time they were 16 to 18 years of age" (p. 2.2).

Not only are Web-based communication platforms such as personal Websites, blogs and instant messaging embraced by the Net Gens as personal communication tools but the Net Gens also have no trepidation about sharing photos and personal information on publicly accessed Websites such as myspace.com, friendster.com and facebook.com. In fact it is considered a status symbol to be sponsored by a friend for inclusion on a site such as facebook.com and to have a large number of high "ratings" for photos displayed on a personal Website found on friendster.com.

Net Gens are also typically logged onto to their instant messaging (IM) client 24/7, which allows them to keep in constant contact with others online and to also share their current availability status such as "busy," "away," and "on the phone" (Farmer, 2005). More importantly, it has been shown that "members of this younger generation are likely to have their computer on and be connected to IM with one or more chat conversations active, have an MP3 player with earplugs attached to their head, be eating a snack, and oh yes, have the cell phone nearby" (p. 50). The Net Gens certainly have a highly developed ability for multitasking.

So, how do college educators take advantage of the Net Gens embrace of information technology and new media communication strategies in terms of delivering course materials and eliciting student response and feedback to the course? It would seem that developing courses that integrate information technology communication strategies into the courses would provide the "carrot" that may increase both student participation and understanding.

For the past four years, I have wrestled with different possibilities for integrating information technology into the curriculum: using information technology communication platforms in courses across the curriculum, developing specific information technology courses that provide any and all undergraduates with possible electives and the development of a minor that emphasizes new communication technologies with the hope of eventually developing a bachelor degree that appropriately integrates communication theory with a hands-on approach to new media and communication technology.

In terms of available resources and overall feasibility, I have served as the College of Arts and Science Dean's advocate in helping faculty members integrate new communication technologies into their existing courses. In terms of specific courses related to the communication technologies embraced by the Net Gens, I have proposed a communication minor. In the sections that follow, I provide more information on ways to use technology across the curriculum including some of my own attempts. I also provide an overview of a communication minor that is currently being considered at the University of New England as a joint offering of the Department of Business Administration and the Department of Sociology.

Communication Technology across the Curriculum

While it makes sense to group the Web, blogging, IM and other new communication platforms as technology, these various information technology communication tools aren't considered technology by Net Gens; "this younger generation views computers to be technology no more than their parents would the telephone" (Farmer, 2005). So, integrating blogging or podcasting or the use of digital video diaries into a course isn't going to necessarily illicit much of a "wow" from the students as much as an "it's about time" response. However, when you consider that many veteran faculty members do not completely feel comfortable with entering grades online or even using email, integrating tech tools commonly used by students into a course does provide some "classroom capital" due to the fact that you may be the exception rather than the rule. You can then leverage that capital to engage better student participation in the course.

While we must face the fact that there will be a learning curve for faculty members as they begin to use new technologies and new media in the classroom, one of the simplest places to start is the substitution of a visual media-based report for a written class assignment. Microsoft PowerPoint provides an excellent platform for student reports. Students not only have to arrange the material so that the presentation has a beginning, middle and end but the ability to include media such as pictures, sounds and video draws upon the Net Gens innate visual savvy. I use the term visual savvy rather than visual literacy because students can't necessarily express their understanding of the various visual mediums. The Net Gens ability to process visual (and audio) information quickly and their ability to use visual information to support their ideas and feelings must be a product (one would assume) of the huge number of hours they spend on the Web viewing (and on certain Websites critiquing) photo and video content (Huang 2005).

I use PowerPoint presentation assignments in nearly all the classes I teach, which range from Introduction to Personal Computer Applications to Communication Dynamics in the Organization and Leadership. I have found that students benefit from the overall structure that PowerPoint provides in terms of brief bulleted lists and the visual possibilities offered by each slide in the presentation. Students are often better able to organize their ideas and provide a more coherent and linear presentation of the facts than they would if the assignment had required a short paper.

With specific PowerPoint projects as a starting place to introduce some of the possibilities of integrating the Net Gens' abilities with the visual and audio mediums into the classroom, there is also room for the use of information technologies on an ongoing basis, particularly Web blogs (blogs) or instant messaging (IM). While discussion boards have been in use for years in both the corporate and educational worlds, discussion boards typically require a server and administrative personnel. And although Web-based communication platforms that provide students email, current news (about the college) and typically access to specific course discussion boards, blogs provide greater flexibility and are already familiar to the Net Gens (Dyrud et al., 2005). The use of blogs can be effective in any course; Dyrud used blogging as a way to post effective and ineffective writing found in his business communication student's written assignments, with the blog providing an easy to use platform for critiquing the passages that were uploaded by Dyrud to the blog. To protect students from direct criticism Dyrud takes pains to disguise the writer of a posted piece. "Often, especially for poorly written material, I make some changes to disguise the writer; because sensitive students may find the public display of their work embarrassing and belittling."

Instant messaging can be used to actually hold online courses or can be used as support technology. For example, I have found that providing students with the ability to use instant messaging to contact me during office hours, allows them to ask me a question from their dorm room rather than walking over to my on campus office. Students make use of the IM option as much as they do regular email, in person visits or the telephone.

The fact that instant messaging can be run concurrently with any number of applications (and that the Net Gens have a penchant for multitasking, Farmer, 2005), means that it provides the possibility for running a real-time discussion while students view Web content. The Web content may be in the form of information on a blog or PowerPoint slides that have been saved in HTML and uploaded to a Website. Since Net Gens have no problem using more than one technology at a time, it actually provides a number of possibilities for faculty and student interaction that is not possible in the typical classroom.

The hottest new media technology, certainly in terms of the level of desire held for this item by the Net Gens, is the iPod. Digital music particularly the MP3 file, is revolutionizing the way that music is purchased and shared. The fact that it is extremely easy to take audio files in any format and convert them to the MP3 format, means that lecture material and review notes could be shared with students via downloadable audio files. Net Gens are quite familiar with the concept of podcasting (Shen, 2005) and I have found that students will download audio lectures or other course materials that are provided in the MP3 format. I have also had students "script" assignments that were then recorded both as individual and group projects using a small digital recording setup that was purchased using internal university grant funds. Completed projects could then be shared with other students as podcasts and I can grade the finished projects at my leisure using my computer or a MP3 player.

Taking the concept of the blog and the podcast one step further, I decided to create short video review sessions for some of my hands on information technology courses, including a course required for all business administration majors at the University of New England: Introduction to Microcomputer Software Applications. This course covers a number of applications and a lot of geography in terms of basic computer technology. I decided that short review sessions that included "talking head" material along with hands-on demonstrations would provide students with a quick way to review key concepts and key application features. The talking head portions of these video review sessions were created using a Logitech USB camera (with microphone). The camera provided adequate video and sound and required no additional lighting. I can sit at my office PC and record as needed.

The hands-on portion of these video review sessions were created using Camtasia Studio 2, which is a screen capture program that records screen activity. Camtasia also includes a simple video and sound editing program that can be used to edit the screen capture videos and splice the talking head video into the production. Simple titles can also be added to the video as needed. The videos can be saved in a video file format such as .avi or packaged as an executable file.

Taking the concept of simple video productions to package information, I turned the concept 180 degrees and asked students to create video blogs or diaries in the context of an Introduction to Mass Media course discussion related to how the Web, particularly user content in the form of blogs and amateur video, has changed news reporting. Students were provided with a Logitech USB camera and asked to keep a video journal for a week. The assignment stressed that they were to provide a review of each day including how they day went and any exciting happenings that may have occurred during a particular day.

The students proved to be quite comfortable in front of the camera and produced both insightful and interesting video journal entries. It would seem that the Net Gens experience with IM and in some cases the use of Web cams makes video journals and logs an ideal communication medium for them.

Partnering to Build a Communication Technology Minor

The alternative to attempting to integrate new communication technology mediums in courses across the curriculum, which not only requires buy in from a majority of the faculty and a major commitment by the educational institution itself, is to construct a minor course of study that embraces new media and Internet communication technologies and can be delivered by an existing department.

While an argument can be made to group Internet communication technologies with information technology courses, the practical application of these technologies is also well suited for a business communication track. At many small colleges there is neither a information technology degree program nor a communications degree program. This means that any exploration of communication technologies needs to find a home that can host a series of courses related to communication technology and theory. The fact that many business programs do provide support for some information technology courses and business communication courses, particularly theory courses, makes business departments a viable choice for hosting a minor that is related both to technology and communications.

Having already made a commitment to information technology as it relates to successful business practices, the Department of Business Administration at the University of New England decided to create a minor in communications that emphasized communication theory, communication technology and the impact of new communication technology on society. Since the Department of Business Administration already had a number of information technology courses on the books, the minor really only needed courses that provided courses that looked at new communication technologies through the lens of a sociologist. The minor includes courses offered by both the Business and Sociology departments and uses a rotating schedule that allows students (from any major) to easily complete the 18 credit-hour minor (six courses) during their four-year stint at the University.

The description of the minor follows:

The proposed Minor in Communications is an interdisciplinary program that provides students pursuing any major in the College of Arts and Sciences with a diverse approach to the study of communications and new media production. Students are exposed to communication studies in both a sociological and technical context that allows students to develop an understanding of mass media and new media such as digital photography, video and audio. Designed to provide literacy in communications, the minor also provides students with a look at how communications and communication channels such as the Internet (particularly the World Wide Web) are greatly influenced by society, government and institutions.

In creating the minor it was important to articulate both the rationale for the minor and also provide a clear list of objectives for the minor. The rationale and objectives follow:

The proposed Minor in Communications would examine questions about society and communication practices in ways that combine the best of the liberal arts tradition with critical attention to the newest media and computer-related technologies. Students will explore communications theory and also learn how to communicate effectively using a full range of media channels. While each course in the minor would detail more specific subject-matter goals, the core learning outcomes and goals for the minor courses would be as follows:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and evolution of communication and the role of societies and institutions in shaping communications.
- Become familiar with the various forms of expression and communication and develop an understanding of communication principles and how they relate to modern communication venues such as digital and new media.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications.
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and digital information including audio and video.
- Apply tools and technologies used in the communications professions.
- Provide students with hands-on practice and an appreciation for media delivery channels such as digital audio streaming on the Internet.
- Think critically, creatively and independently.

The mix of courses for the minor, all of which are 3 credit-hour courses, was created by selecting existing courses that met the goals and learning outcomes established for the minor. Additional courses were also created to round out the minor's exploration of new communication technologies. Pairs of courses were created for some of the subject matter providing students with the choice of taking a Sociology or Communication course that cover the same the core topics. The fact that substitution of courses from different departments was allowed for the minor spread the workload of delivering the minor courses across more than one department. The course list and the substitutions available follow:

- COD 110 Introduction to Communication (new course) or SOC 180 Visual Sociology (existing course)
- COD 210 Understanding Media (new course) or SOC 255 SGA: Globalization of Technology (existing course)
- COD 220 Communication Dynamics in the Organization (existing course) or SOC 260 Cross Cultural Communication (existing course)
- COD 300 Photo and Video Documentation (new course) or CITM 302 Fundamentals of Web Design (existing course)
- COD 310 Digital Video and Audio Production
- COD 410 Writing for Digital and New Media

The minor is currently making the "rounds" through the various faculty governance bodies as it makes its way toward approval. Bundling courses in a minor not only makes the individual courses more attractive to students since they can be "sold" as a package but the establishing of a minor does allow an institution to begin the process of looking at the equipment and infrastructure that is required to teach new technology courses as well as looking at strategies for keeping faculty members as up to date with new technologies as the students that they teach. Short of launching a full-blown communication degree emphasizing new media and communication technology the delivering of a minor provides faculty with a chance to gauge the success of "cutting edge" coursework and provides Net Gen students with an opportunity to use technology that they find second nature as means of expression and edification in their classes.

References

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