THE DIGITAL DILEMMA

As higher education continues to adapt to and incorporate online technology into the curricula, several significant obstacles from seemingly insignificant areas have come to light. For instance, one of the biggest misnomers that plagues our college classrooms today is the presumption that today's generation of college students are adept at using technology, especially email and various forms of classroom management systems (Desire2Learn, Blackboard, Oncourse, etc.). While it is certainly true that most students spend a significant amount of time engaged in some type of technology, there is a plethora of evidence via formal studies, anecdotal evidence, and good-old-fashioned classroom experience that suggests that many of those students are not able to demonstrate an appropriate, effective, or professional use of that technology. Perhaps the two biggest examples are what might be deemed relatively simple tasks: 1) email communication and 2) accessing and downloading attachments from a classroom management website.

Dilemma #1: The Email Embarrassment

The first issue, email communication, is more important than ever as college educators continue to incorporate the digital platform into virtual and face-to-face classroom experiences. However, I have personally experienced a steady increase in student ineptness when it comes to communicating professionally and effectively via email. And it is not just me who is noticing it. Colleagues from my own as well as other institutions are noticing the same trend. But perhaps most importantly (and most frightening) is that we are hearing it directly from the professional world. Examples include sending emails seeking information about job openings, internship inquiries, or interview requests, written in a fashion that illustrates a lack of etiquette, proofreading, spelling, punctuation, proper grammar, or formal language. It is reasonable to see a positive correlation between today's reliance on limited character usage (thanks, Twitter) and poor writing skills in numerous contexts. But even that behavior cannot be curbed unless we put a stop to it in a classroom context. Granted, using certain types of "netspeak" is reasonable and appropriate in come contexts (i.e., friend to friend), but many of

our students lack the awareness and importance of *code switching* (changing our communication choices from one context to another). So when students are used to writing in slang, colloquial, or "textspeak" hundreds of times per day, via text, Facebook, Twitter, etc., that habit naturally invades the contexts in which such communication choices are deemed inappropriate or unprofessional. For instance, how many of us have received a student email that uses no formal greeting, refers to him or herself as "i" or refers to you as "u" and then never identifies him or herself in the email, leaving you wondering which of your 100+ students just emailed you? I received an email last week that read this way:

> *wuz up prof? hey, im not sure wut are assgnmnt is supposd to look like can u help me im lost thx*

Now imagine that he or she uses this same approach to someone in corporate America. How does that also reflect on our respective institutions? By no means am I using this example as a point of ridicule, but unfortunately this has become more the rule than the exception. And while this example may seem an extreme one, I am sure many of us can identify with some aspects of the above example. And those of us teaching in the community college environment—where open enrollment standards result in more and more underprepared students taking our courses—might be experiencing such an example on a more frequent basis. And to be fair, these examples are repeated constantly on a daily basis in a social context, so why should we expect those habits to change just because they are emailing a professor or employer? If it is okay in the classroom, what would make students change it outside the classroom walls?

Resolution

The solution has become one that I never thought would have been necessary five years ago. But I made the mistake of presuming that my college students could easily and always distinguish professional and personal contexts. It is a relatively simple fix but only if time is taken to impress upon students the importance of formal online communication and hammer home the everyday applications of good online communication habits. Thus, at the beginning of each semester, I assign a simple

ten-point task. My students are required to send me an email. Sounds simple, right? Apparently not as simple as one might think. The specific assignment requirements are: 1) put the course and section number in the subject heading, 2) use a formal greeting at the beginning of the message, 3) ask a question or make a comment about anything regarding the class, 4) sign off with a formal closing and sign your name, and 5) complete the email assignment within one week.

Ideally, it would look something like this:

Subject: COMM 101-12

Hello Professor Naze,

I am emailing you to complete the required email assignment.

Thank you,

Joe Student

Basically, it is an assignment that should take no more than 30 seconds to complete. I tell them that I will respond to their message within 24 hours and indicate whether their email follows the directions and meets the criteria of a formal message. If their email needs improvement, I identify what those corrections are (misspelling, incorrect grammar or punctuation, lack of clarity, etc.). Then, they simply need to fix them and resend the email message in order to receive their ten points. This semester, I had 103 email messages from students for this assignment. Nearly 75% of the emails had to be resent simply because students did not take the time to follow directions or proofread carefully. There is an axiom in Communication Studies that basically says "One Cannot Not Communicate." Essentially, we are communicating something about ourselves all the time, whether it is through our language choice, actions, writing, speaking, or inactions. So, poor communication skills, even in something simple like an email message, communicates a lot about the sender and determines the recipient's willingness or unwillingness to engage in an appropriate way.

When I began this assignment three years ago, I had about a 70% success rate. But as the "Twitterverse" and its ilk continue to pervade everyday interactions, our ability or inability to "switch codes" from one context to another manifests itself. Thus, each semester, the initial success rate has gradually decreased for this assignment.

However, the payoff has been worth the time and effort. Once students respond with an appropriate email (sometimes it takes multiple efforts), they receive their ten points, and I impress upon them to use that same formality in future emails the rest of the semester.

Dilemma #2: The Classroom Management System Conundrum

The second problem stems from the increased reliance on classroom management systems (CMS). Personally, I very much like using a CMS in my courses as it allows the classroom walls to expand to the virtual world where students have access to course materials, assignments, handouts, and grades 24/7, all while saving on department printing costs. I make it a point to post all assignment directions, handouts, grades and syllabi on our CMS, but I also go over them in class—thanks to the benefit of my "smart classroom." However, I reinforce to students the importance of printing the appropriate document, reading it carefully, and bringing it to class on the day it is to be discussed.

Resolution

On the first day of class, I put the course syllabus on the "big screen" and go over it with my students. Then, I assign a simple ten-point task: log in to our CMS, find the syllabus under the appropriate link, print it, and bring it to class within one week. If they do that, they receive ten points. This accomplishes two things that typically otherwise would become obstacles later in the semester: 1) it verifies that the syllabus in his/her possession, and 2) it verifies that he/she is able to navigate the CMS successfully.

The "So What?"

These two assignments, though relatively simple tasks, will serve several important purposes for getting students on the right track at week one: 1) reduce poor and annoying communication habits, 2) give students an opportunity to score easy points right away, 3) put the onus on students to take responsibility for their success inside and outside the classroom, and, most importantly, 4) set students up for success.

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