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Basic Course Forum: Adaptation

Capitalizing on the Inevitable: Adapting to Mobile Technology in the Basic Communication Course

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Introduction

It is undeniable that college classrooms have evolved. Students are reliant on, and connected to, friends, family, and endless amounts of information through convenient, affordable, and mobile technology (Kuznekoff & Tisworth, 2013). Although Wei and Leung (1999) reported students found classrooms to be the least acceptable public place for cell phone use, this has not deterred the classroom from becoming “deeply saturated” by mobile devices (Kuznekoff, Munz, & Tisworth, 2015, p. 344). Instructors report technology challenges their “beliefs about the nature of learning and their role in the classroom” (Fairchild, Meiners, & Violette, 2016, p. 99). Despite student and faculty perceptions about technology in classroom, Burns and Lohenry (2010) found 94% of students owned a cell phone and Elder (2013) reported that an astounding 99% of students admitted using their cell phones during class with the average student using his or her cell phone between 3 and 7 times per class (Duncan, Hoekstra, & Wilcox, 2012). Instructor reactions to mobile technology have often manifested as anger and annoyance characterized by statements about students’ disrespect, sense of entitlement, incivility, and has resulted in technology policies and outright prohibition (Burns & Lohenry, 2010; Campbell, 2006). As “one of the biggest challenges that instructors face,” it is critical to facilitate a discussion about ways to adapt to this challenge (Kuznekoff et al., 2015, p. 344).

Adapt to mobile technology in the Basic Course classroom

A snapshot of the basic course across institutions provides insight into why these difficulties may be even more prevalent in the basic communication course. Approximately 90% of basic courses are still being offered in the traditional face-to-face format and less than a third of instructors report using social media or mobile technology as an instructional strategy or resource (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). Further, Morreale et al. report that as few as 5% of basic course instructors reported teaching social media skills to their students. Indeed, the majority of participants reported that their basic course programs were only moderately on track “in light of the importance of communication skills in the global and technologically mediated 21st century” (Morreale et al., 2015, p. 350).

The most common issues and constraints associated with mobile technology in the classroom include distracting students who are multitasking, or dividing attention and doing more than one thing at once (Chen & Yan, 2016). Some students admit to using their phones for entertainment during class (Gilroy, 2004; Leung, 2007) or cheating (Katz, 2005). Scholars report decreased learning attributed to cell phone use during class (Duncan et al., 2012; Froese et al. 2012; Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013) and lament the inability of students to multitask or sustain attention given the attempts to focus on course content, instructors, and peers while simultaneously using mobile devices (Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013). Chen and Yan’s (2016) review confirmed that multitasking with phones affected learning, but argued that this could be prevented and that there are intervention strategies to alleviate this concern. That is, whether instructors view the prevalence of mobile technology as a constraint or an opportunity, instructors must adapt their approaches to instruction. By doing so, instructors will be better able to a) prepare students to be professionals, b) use technology to enhance learning, c) build better relationships with and between students, and d) keep basic course research relevant.

First, many basic communication courses identify themselves as a course that helps students transition to college and as preparatory for professional and corporate settings upon graduation (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Jones, Edwards, and Reid (2009) highlighted that “the latest generation of undergraduates have grown up in a world of pervasive digital technology where widespread ownership of mobile devices has provided an infrastructure that these students rely on” (p. 201). Thus, it comes as no surprise that technology will not disappear from classrooms or when students enter the workforce. Burns and Lohenry (2010) argued that “cell phone

etiquette for the classroom spills over into the clinical arena and workplace” and by embracing it in the college classrooms, we continue to achieve overall goals of workplace preparation with our students (p. 809). In fact, giving students opportunities to practice these digital skills during class makes them better job candidates in a modern society (Chen & Yan, 2016; Kiddie, 2014; Kirkwood, Gutgold, & Manley, 2011) in which the “use of smartphones in the workplace will continue to accelerate” (Kiddie, 2014, p. 68). Basic course scholars agree, stating that “in today’s hyper-mediated environment, such skills are even more vital to personal and professional success” (Valenzano, Wallace, & Morreale, 2014, p. 363).

Second, and parallel to the learning outcome driven nature of the basic communication course, instructors can use technology to decrease multitasking and providing opportunities for student learning. Elder (2013) found no detrimental effects on student performance when they multitasked and argued that students are getting better at multitasking. In the event that students can’t successfully multitask, then instructors can effectively incorporate the technology that poses the attentional threat. In support of this, Kuznekoff et al. (2015) found when students used their phones for content related to class, they performed significantly better on recall and note taking than those who used phones for non-relevant multitasking. Thus, it behooves instructors to incorporate technology that is on task and allows students to practice multitasking. For example, students in Jones et al.’s (2009) study reported text messaging from the instructor regained their attention, helped them acquire time management skills, or prompted them to take action. To aid in incorporating mobile technology, instructors may ask students to create knowledge, initiate dialogue, and engage in active learning on Twitter (Prestridge, 2014).

Relatedly, there is also evidence that instructor incorporation of mobile technology could enhance and facilitate self-directed and self-regulated – formal and informal learning. It is important to note that studies which found decreases in learning focused on students’ use of cell phones to socialize, escape, play games or engage in off-task behaviors (e.g., Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013; Leung, 2007). However, students who can self-regulate do not experience these same negative outcomes (Wei, Wang, & Klausner, 2012). As Wei et al. argued, instructors should employ strategic use of mobile technology to engage students with on-task behavior and to create sustained attention which has the potential to improve learning outcomes. Tessier (2014) conducted a study where textbooks were completely replaced with simply asking students to seek course-related information using their

phones. When using mobile phones in this on-task way, students showed no declines, and in some cases, showed marked improvement in grades.

Third, mobile technology can help to build connectedness inside, and outside, of classroom. Mobile devices are often used to gratify both personal and coordination needs (Leung, 2007). Mobile devices can facilitate relational development, group meetings, healthy group and peer dynamics, and work on group projects (Frisby, Kaufmann, & Beck, 2016; Kaufmann & Frisby, 2013). For example, Johnson, Maiullo, Trembley, Werner, and Woolsey (2014) required students to use selfies to break the ice and build relationships with peers. Jones et al. (2009) found text messaging with first year students increased connectedness, and retention scholars highlight connectedness with peers and faculty as critical (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Tinto, 1997), aligning well with the primarily first year student population enrolled in basic communication courses (Morreale et al., 2010). Mediated relationship building can also help students connect with teachers which can influence motivation, affect, and classroom climate (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Further, relationships can be built with those outside of the classroom and in the discipline by, for example, inviting remote guest lecturers (Eaton, 2003).

Finally, the basic course research agenda should adapt to mobile technology in the classroom. Campbell (2006) argued that there was little research on cell phones in the classroom. While the amount of research devoted to this issue has increased, the possibilities for research, especially as a pedagogical opportunity in the classroom, are ripe for instructional communication, communication education, and basic communication course directors and scholars. This type of research won't only bring our classrooms into the digital age as an argued necessity (Kirkwood et al., 2011), but it will also bring our research into the digital age. The use of mobile devices in the classroom provides opportunities for basic course scholars to collect ecologically valid real time data for embedded assessment and publication. Consequently, basic course administrators can make course delivery, design, and assessment decisions based on empirical evidence. Thus, increasing scholarly attention to this area will not only benefit our discipline, but allow for our policies, pedagogy, and training to be based on empirical data. For example, what technology rich activities can enhance community, learning, and skills performance? What technologically guided activities most mirror those skills desired by employers? The capabilities of mobile phones and wearable devices is also changing rapidly, and may soon offer new ways for researchers to offer affordable and accessible interventions

targeting speech anxiety, rehearsal, and competence during communication exchanges.

Practical adaptations in the basic course

Taken together, there are several strategies that basic course instructors can employ to prepare students for the professional world, increase learning, and build relationships. For example, students can be required to post articles related to course content, using mobile phones to watch relevant TED Talks, or to record practice speeches and respond to peers' speeches. These assignments allow students to use mobile technology but encourages on task behaviors both in and out of the classroom, thereby increasing learning and behavioral performance. Students may also be asked to condense a speech purpose and/or thesis down to a 140 character tweet, tweet about speeches viewed in the media, search Twitter for socially significant ideas for persuasive speech topics, or provide Twitter feedback to their classmates. Basic course instructors can also use mobile technology to break the ice with and between students, encourage dialogue throughout the course, and to build and maintain rapport. While this is certainly not an exhaustive list of ways to engage students using mobile technology, these are certainly some cost effective and low preparation ways for instructors to begin the adaptation process.

Conclusion

Campbell (2006) stated, "it is important not to lose sight of the constructive uses of the technology in educational contexts" (p. 291). As mobile technology, and student reliance on mobile technology, becomes increasingly pervasive in higher education, the role of basic communication instructors in embracing and capitalizing on these changes to engage students and better position the basic communication course, becomes critical. Valenzano et al. (2014) argued that changes to general education, and often by association, the basic communication course often happen "more glacially than rapidly" (p. 361). However, changes revolving around mobile technology in our classrooms is not an area where we can afford a glacial change. The myriad of ways in which we can use this opportunity for positive outcomes and will allow for our basic course to not only survive, but thrive and will, in turn, benefit the students.

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