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TEACHING IN THE AGE OF INSTANT COMMUNICATION

By Thomas Clark

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Richard Lanham asserts that the “democratization of education” has accompanied the advent of the postmodern age, with a transition from books to electronic media as the center of humanistic tradition. As a result, students today live in a rich media environment, spending much of their time communicating with text and instant messages, email, and cell phones, as well as downloading and playing music on I-pods and exchanging information with their Facebook friends.

Lately, I wonder how old fashioned some teachers appear to current students when they use lecture-only formats just as teachers did over a century ago; use PowerPoint slides that look no different than the overhead transparencies they replaced, ignoring this medium’s capability of showing animation, photographs, videos, and of playing music; and give presentations as the “sage on the stage” rather than as the “guide by the side” who embraces diversity by remaining objective and encouraging students to engage in open dialogues that analyze all sides of an issue where they feel free to reveal feelings, explore assumptions, and find common ground.

To meet the challenge of engaging students in their own media rich environments in my Management and Entrepreneurship classes, I use more of the vastly richer interactive technologies through which the students are engaged in peer-to-peer communication outside the classroom. These include in-class technologies, such as PowerPoint, video, and Blackboard items, and online technologies, such as discussion boards and forums. These enliven my classes by making them more relevant to student sensibilities, more engaging, and more responsive to multiple learning styles.

I am increasingly using film, one of the richest media sources available. For example, *Children of Gaia*, a video highlighting four seriously disabled adults speaking in their own voices, makes a deep impression on students. The film allows them to see and hear how each subject has overcome disabilities to participate in sports, the arts, and internet communication—demonstrating that many disabled people have talents equal and superior to fully-abled people. In a way no lecture on workforce diversity could, *Children of Gaia* creates empathy for its subjects, as viewers observe them mastering their environments with patience, good humor, and self awareness. Comments in small groups and subsequently in discussion boards

confirm the impact of this film by helping students see the disabled in a positive light.

Fast time tools vs “slow time” tech

At the same time, I am also sensitizing students to the limitations of instant communication, “fast time” tools that are rapidly replacing “slow time” written and oral technologies. I ask students to practice discernment by understanding the importance of communicating in fast time in some situations and slow time in others. I teach that what Lanham calls CBS writing—clarity, brevity, and sincerity—is appropriate for often recurrent, noncontroversial messages such as requesting information, providing information, summarizing results, and reporting on a project’s status, all of which can be done efficiently in a one-way, fast time medium such as e-mail.

I also point out that students should be thoughtful and deliberate when dealing with complex and sensitive issues such as strategic planning, market analysis and branding strategies, as well as interpersonal issues, such as planning communication for disciplinary and exit interviews, performance reviews, and meetings to address employee concerns. These require careful consideration, with feedback, review, and reflection being built into the decision-making process. To bring this point home, my students read a case study concerning the shock and disappointment of over 1000 workers whose management informed them of their dismissals via terse e-mails rather than in more contextually appropriate face-to-face meetings which would have allowed for fuller explanations of the decision and for feedback from the employees. This case study illustrates an important point: that effective communication reflects a careful understanding of purpose, audience, and situation, and as such, is supported by a thoughtful choice of the appropriate medium of communication, an understanding of the needs and expectations of others, and the use of accurate facts, good reasons, and sound inferences.

In short, as I have looked at myself through the eyes of students, I am increasingly adopting the use of rich media teaching tools while encouraging students to consider the advantages of slow time communication in this age of instant information. ■