

“Meeting Them Where They Are: Millennials, Technology, and Academic Etiquette”

Cara L. Davies, Ph.D.

University of Findlay
College of Health Professions
330 College Ave., Findlay, OH 45840
United States of America

Christine M. Denecker, Ph.D.

University of Findlay
College of Liberal Arts
1124 Cory St. A, Findlay, OH 45840
United States of America

Abstract

The modern University classroom has become an area in which the use of technology is no longer considered “novel” and, in fact, is becoming increasingly demanded by both students and faculty. While many would agree that these developments have had significant impact on pedagogical techniques, and perhaps learning outcomes, new research is exploring the perceptions of students and faculty in regards to the presence of technology in the classroom. Students and faculty often have very different perceptions regarding what is “appropriate” use of technological modes of communication, both inside and outside the confines of the classroom or laboratory environment. This paper explores these perceptions, and includes tools for faculty to use in preparing a course populated by the “Millennial” student.

Keywords: Millennials, Technology, Academic, Pedagogy

Introduction

On any given day in any given American University classroom, faculty can find students “tuning out” from the day’s lesson and “tuning in” to their latest electronic communication devices. With their earphones hid under hooded sweatshirts, their tendencies to text message under the desk, and their need to check Facebook mid-lecture, millennials often frustrate and challenge professors with their seeming dearth of academic technological etiquette. At the same time, students of the millennial generation—a multi-tasking crew raised on computers and all forms of social technologies—often lack an awareness of how or why their professors want to alter, shape or would even care about their technological interactions in academic spaces. The resulting tensions often go unaddressed which, in turn, has contributed to further misunderstandings between professors and students and to lost classroom time. An answer to this dilemma can be found, though, when professors (and the universities) meet students where they are in terms of social technological etiquette in an academic setting with the goal of bringing students where the academy would like them to be.

Born after 1981, and considered the largest generation since the Baby Boomers, millennials began populating college campuses in 2000 (“Meeting the Needs of Millennial Students,” 2008). These students have been “[r]aised amid a barrage of information” and “are able to juggle a conversation on Instant Messenger, a Web-surfing session, and an iTunes playlist while reading *Twelfth Night* for homework” (Carlson 2005). How effectively these students can multi-task, though, is certainly “a matter of debate” (Carlson 2005). Still, multi-tasking is inherent to millennials’ lives as are their social technologies, such cell phones, Facebook and MySpace accounts, laptops, and ipods which allow them to “stay connected” to family and friends with the click of a mouse or a button. In addition to being social multi-taskers, this generation is also “high achieving” and “feel[s] pressured to succeed” (“Meeting the Needs of Millennial Students 2008). These pressures can be traced to the push for standardized testing as well as to heavily packed academic, athletic, and performance schedules (“Meeting the Needs of Millennial Students 2008). Given the technological context and expectations of millennial students’ lives, it is no wonder that they find checking email, text-messages, or Facebook updates while listening to a professor’s lecture a good use of time. Specifically, researchers from Oklahoma State University have recently explored student's attitudes regarding their own in-class texting behavior.

In particular, David Ballard, a Ph. D. candidate and Dr. Donald French have come to the conclusion that students have very different ideas about texting in an academic setting than their professorial counterparts. In his presentation at the 2008 National Association of Biology Teachers Conference in Memphis, Tennessee, "Active Learning vs. Text Messaging -- Duel for the Mind of Biology Students", Ballard indicated that through observation he recorded how many students texted during class time, for how long, where they sat in the classroom, and what was happening in the classroom during the time the texting occurred. Then he gave the students a survey that asked such questions as: "Did you text today?". Many students who had been "caught" texting by Ballard responded "no" to the question if they were responding to rather than initiating a text. Put another way, if a student were replying to a text that was sent to him or her and not initiating the text, then that student did not count the communication as "texting another". Obviously, some of this misreporting could be intentional. However, this same phenomenon was observed in several different classroom periods among many different students. An important point to glean from the research of Ballard and French is the difference in interpretation between professors and students regarding "what is texting" and "when is texting appropriate." It seems clear that if there is a significant difference in the way students and professors define what it *means* to text, a serious difference would follow regarding when texting would be appropriate, or not, in regards to classroom conduct.

A cogent point in this discussion seems to be these students' distinct separation between their social use of technology and the academic world in the spaces where the two overlap. In other words, there may be a perception among millennials that their social networking technologies and classroom academics are activities that they can compartmentalize as different areas of thought—one having no effect on the other, even as they are conducted simultaneously. To the professors who teach these students, though, this inclination to multitask in class bespeaks a generation that lacks etiquette as well as respect for the academy and its "elders." For example, much attention has been given to Syracuse University professor Laurence Thomas, who has a strict no-texting policy in his courses. If students are caught texting, he will end the lecture and leave the room. Not surprisingly, Thomas's actions have sparked heated debates regarding appropriate classroom behavior of both professors and students, with equal numbers weighing in with strong opinions. One sympathetic individual (presumably a professor) wrote in response:

You have no idea what it's like trying to teach people and do something positive for them, only to have them completely ignore you and disrespect your work by sending text messages or playing tic tac toe during class. It's ridiculous. Not only is it clearly affecting this man's work, but it is affecting the students that he is trying to teach as well" (Jaschik 2008).

Others have sided with the students, saying:

"We the students are the customers, the consumers, the ones who make the choice every day to pay attention or not. . . Laurence Thomas gets paid whether his students text in class or not. Does he think that this is the first time this has happened on any college campus? Had he acted like nearly 100 percent of the other college professors in this country, he would have shrugged it off and continued with his lecture, which he is getting paid to do...He needs to get over himself here" (Jaschik 2008).

Both responses suggest a lack of communication and understanding between millennial students and their professors about appropriate and inappropriate use of social technologies in academic settings. While some of the blame might be placed on the current consumer mindset prevalent on many university campuses (as seen in the response above), placing blame seems counterproductive to ameliorating the situation. Instead, attention should be given to how to remedy this disconnect of student awareness and professor expectations. This disconnection between awareness and expectations that occurs in millennials' social technological interactions with their professors inside the classroom often appears *outside* classroom walls as well. Specifically, collective groans can be heard from university faculty who receive student emails that seem inappropriate in tone, are filled with text-speak abbreviations, or appear oblivious to the unspoken hierarchical boundaries between professor and student. As with the classroom frustrations, individual professors' responses might range from annoyance to outright anger; however, regardless of those knee-jerk reactions, little in the way of constructive change and communication is likely to evolve without professors building an awareness of this technological "generation gap" ("Meeting the Needs of Millennial Students" 2008).

Once this awareness has been built, then professors can begin to construct bridges between where their students are in terms of social technologies in academic spaces and where the professors would like those students to be.

Academicians should also be cognizant of an additional reason why social technological communication outside the classroom often breaks down between students and professors: without non-verbal cues, communication may be marred by misunderstanding or error in regard to tone or subtleties of meaning. By definition, communication is a shared process of agreeing on meanings for verbal and non-verbal symbols; furthermore, between 55% and 95% of all meaning is communicated non-verbally. Thus, those email and text exchanges between professors and students often go awry based on a lack of non-verbal cues. When this is coupled with the students' aforementioned lack of awareness of academic hierarchy and appropriate student-professor etiquette, it is no surprise that miscommunication sometimes results when students and professors "communicate unseen".

Much research has been done on the psychological and social ramifications of "communicating unseen". For example, John Suler (2004), in his article, *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, explores the various methods of social disinhibition that are created when individuals communicate without face to face interaction. Suler identifies what he calls the "online disinhibition effect", of which one of the manifestations is a "minimizing of authority". He states:

According to traditional Internet philosophy, everyone is an equal: Peers share ideas and resources. In fact, the net itself is engineered with no centralized control. As it grows, with a seemingly endless potential for creating new environments, many people see themselves as independent-minded explorers. This atmosphere and philosophy contribute to the minimizing authority (Suler 2004).

This effect can have serious ramifications in academic communities where authority can be seemingly nebulous, especially when professors and students are communicating outside classroom walls. Thus, familiar email salutations, such as—"Hey, is our paper due Friday?" and abbreviated messages in text-speak—"dropped off my paper @ ur office. gtg. ttyl&r" ("Dropped off my paper at your office. Got to go. Talk to you later") may seem inconsequential to the student who is contacting a professor outside classroom walls.

Furthermore, back in the classroom, student-centered pedagogies that are Frierian in nature also contribute to this atmosphere of "minimized authority" as instructors either become co-learners to some extent with their students or at the very least shift the focus of the classroom from the lectern to more interactive, dynamic, and student-focused discussions and activities. The result is a space where authority is diffused and students begin to perceive their instructors in less authoritative and more collegial terms. And while the learning environment and camaraderie of such a space often sparks energetic and engaged learning, the muddying of roles and the academic hierarchy tied to those roles may manifest itself in email and text communications with no discernable demarcations of authority or attention to etiquette given the time or place of these communications. Add to that a sense of ownership as seen in the student's response to the Laurence Thomas issue ("We the students are the customers, the consumers, the ones who make the choice every day to pay attention or not. . . . Laurence Thomas gets paid whether his students text in class or not"), and the possibilities for disconnect between professors and students are magnified.

If it is understood that these unseen communications can lead to "minimized authority" and that technology, pedagogies, and a consumer mindset have combined to create an imbalance between expectations regarding the use of social technologies in the academy, then professors may take a more objective approach to tackling the technological dilemmas they face with their students. In other words, instead of taking multi-tasking in the classroom or misguided emails or text messages personally, professors can begin to see these incidents for what they are--forms of miscommunication or a misalignment of expectations. The answers then lie in understanding student needs and expectations and clearly communicating professor needs and expectations. Assuming students will know how to properly use (or not use) technology in academic settings or academic exchanges is naive and wishful thinking; it is up to universities and sometimes professors in particular to establish these guidelines.

The onus for remedying this disconnect is on the professors; it is up to them to establish the guidelines. What professors must realize is that as with the subject matter they teach, proper etiquette of social technologies in the academy is a learned behavior not an inherent one. They must also put the situation into context: a large percentage of current university faculty are likely Baby Boomers (1943-1960) or Generation Xers (1961-1981) who have witnessed and even participated in great advances in technology.

Still—as is true of all generations—they feel the need to “correct” the errors of the generation that follows them (“Meeting the Needs of Millennial Students” 2008). Namely, these errors include when it is appropriate or inappropriate to use social technologies in the classroom and what is appropriate or inappropriate communication from students to professors via these technologies. Professors can begin to ameliorate these “errors” by taking writer Scott Carlson’s advice when he urges professors to “learn to accept divided attention spans” (2005). Simply put, if professors recognize that students are accustomed talking on the phone, while playing a video game, while watching television, then these same professors may be less affronted by the student who slips in his ear buds to listen to music while working on his assignment in composition class. That is not to say that the professor must permit or condone the behavior; instead, it suggests that understanding the behavior (meeting students where they are) is the initial move in deciding how to deal with the behavior.

Although some in Academia may argue that it is not the responsibility of professors to “teach” their students appropriate technological behavior on the academic front, perhaps that thinking should be revisited. Not only do professors need to teach their students proper social technological etiquette, they can also do so in a way that is mutually satisfying to both them and their students. There has never been a better time to explore the possibility of bringing professional and academic communication out in the open as a necessary and teachable skill. In addition, since the Millennial generation has grown up with modes of communication available to them that were not present even as recently as twenty years ago, they expect, and even arguably demand that not only their peers but their superiors embrace these mechanisms of communication, too. With that said, it is not suggested that professors bend to the wills and even whims of students; instead, what is useful is the idea of finding common ground and even preparing or prepping that ground in order for professors and students to effectively work, communicate, and utilize social technologies inside and outside the classroom.

A perfect place for prepping that ground is in freshman orientation seminars or in a First Year Experience course, which many colleges and universities offer to students. Freshman orientation and specifically First Year Experience (FYE) courses are noted for acclimating students to the university environment by introducing students to the resources that the university has to offer, including the library, student union, support services, and other facilities. It seems that such venues may also be appropriate spaces for discussing in and out-of-classroom social technological behavior between students and faculty. With that said, the current lack of social guidelines for these types of interactions must first be broached. One step for building guidelines would be to borrow from face to face social rules and interactions in order to create new ones in technological spaces.

For example, in order to acquaint students with appropriate general guidelines for building academic relationships with professors, instructors in Ohio Northern University’s (ONU; Ada, Ohio) freshman seminar courses meet with groups of students and give them handouts regarding “appropriate” interaction and discourse with professors. This is followed by role-playing. Initially, some students are shy or don’t want to participate, but by the end of the interaction they are usually laughing and will participate actively. Overall, the handout in conjunction with the role playing help them understand, by seeing and by doing, what elements of behavior and interaction professors find appropriate or offensive. More importantly, the activity allows students to experience what “good” interaction looks like. And while the current ONU model does not include instruction on in and out-of-classroom social technological etiquette, the possibilities of integrating such guidelines seem efficacious.

While the freshman orientation or First Year Experience may be the most logical of choices for initially discussing and modeling social guidelines for technological use and interaction, professors should also be willing to take the initiative to clearly communicate their expectations regarding as part of their individual course instruction. This reiteration of expectations is particularly critical given the fact that societal norms (in this case technological etiquette) must be reinforced in more than one setting in order to be effective. Along with modeling, consequences can be utilized as a means for encouraging a particular social behavior. In his books, *Coping With the Disruptive College Student: A Practical Model* (1994) and *Coping With Misconduct in the College Classroom: A Practical Model* (1999), Gerald Amada indicates that the most effective way of stopping unwanted or inappropriate classroom behavior is by outlining clear expectations. While Amada is speaking of general classroom discipline, his point can apply to expectations of social technological interactions as well. Simply put, stating clear technological etiquette guidelines in one’s syllabus and then pointedly referring to these guidelines on day one of a course can go a long way in establishing wanted student behavior.

In conjunction with clear guidelines, Amada also advises that professors have well-outlined, consistent consequence methods if students do not conform to the stated expectations--as is demonstrated in the example below from a University of Findlay (UF; Findlay, Ohio) syllabus:

****A Note on Classroom Etiquette:** Please turn off all cell phones/pagers/ipods/electronic communication devices before entering the classroom and refrain from using these devices during class. This includes texting or listening to music during class. If there is a particular reason that you must have your phone or pager turned on during class, I ask that you notify me ahead of time, keep the device on vibrate, and then exit the room if you must receive a message. My pledge is to make your learning experience valuable, and I ask that your pledge to learn be demonstrated via your clear attention. The use of electronic devices is a distraction to both me and your classmates. If you choose to utilize your electronic device inappropriately while in class, you will be asked to leave and will receive a "0" for attendance as well as for all assignments for that class session.

Such a note, placed in a syllabus and then referred to on the first day of classes and consistently enforced throughout the semester may do much to alleviate the on-going problem of technological "mismanagement" in the classroom. It is also important to note that part of outlining clear expectations is to advise students what they *should* do instead of just chastising them for what they should not do. Thus, a positive spin never on the behavior/consequence system never hurts.

Clear expectations can also lessen those awkward exchanges between students and professors when their communication occurs via technologies outside the classroom walls. First, an awareness of the importance of social technological communication in students' lives might prompt professors to capitalize on these venues for building academic relationships. Christine Rosen of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. says that millennials rank "communication" just second to "entertainment" when discussing the purposes of technology (Bugeja 2006). Second, professors should consider making the effort to respond promptly to emails and perhaps even be willing to receive and send text messages regarding classroom work or academic questions when class is not in session. For those professors comfortable with Instant-messaging (IM), IMing is another great way for professors to answer questions or give student feedback especially in the evenings when professors and students may be working singularly but simultaneously on their respective projects. These exchanges can strengthen student learning not just in course content but also concurrently in the area of social etiquette. Additionally, there are tools for use in the classroom environment that can capitalize on students' familiarity with and desire to use electronic devices. "Clicker" technology can be used in courses that allow student feedback or interaction to course content. These devices allow "real-time" feedback from students in regards to certain questions or issues being discussed in class, that can then be integrated into the discussion or lesson at that time.

Still, professors should not be annoyed or insulted by students' casual salutations in emails, text messages, or IMs unless the professor has clearly outlined and/or modeled to students what is or is not appropriate in such situations. As is stated earlier, it cannot be assumed students know how to properly address and "speak" to their instructors in a digital environment; they must be taught. Therefore, when Student A texts: "Hey! i need 2 talk about class w you. When can i c u?," the professor must take a deep breath and acknowledge that A) the student is unaware of appropriate discourse between a student and a professor and B) it is up to the professor to delineate and model the boundaries of that appropriate discourse. Again, this can be done in the classroom via the syllabus, handout, or brief demonstration in class. Furthermore, if the professor enjoys a good rapport with his or her students, these "corrections" may be made on a student-to-student basis as they arise. While that one-on-one attention to changing etiquette may seem a bit cumbersome or unwieldy, the repetition will eventually catch on and student behavior *will* change.

Equipped with an awareness of generational needs and changes as well as the evolution of authority in the classroom and the implications of social technologies, professors can find ways to "meet students where they are" and, as a result, perhaps ease frustrations for both parties. Social etiquette in academic settings, especially in a technological age must be cultivated not assumed. When professors give clear guidelines to students and consistently reinforce those guidelines for appropriate social technological behavior, the opportunities for successful interactions inside the classroom and out are bound to grow exponentially.

Tips for Improving Students' Tech Etiquette in Academic Spaces:

- add a technological etiquette element to freshman orientation or First Year Experience courses
- include clear written expectations for technological etiquette in course syllabi
- include in course syllabus consequences for inappropriate technology use
- verbally explain technological expectations on the first day of class and be consistent in the enforcement of rules
- give students examples of how to address professors and other faculty via technology in an academic setting, i.e. proper salutation/communication in emails and texts
- gently remind students of technological faux pas made in email, IMing or texting environments
- strive understand students' use of technology and embrace it as a way to form good, academic communication

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