E-Coaching

COMMUNICATION AND THE INTERNET

by

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Any of us who've lived through any part of the 20th century have witnessed quantum leaps in what could arguably be dubbed the "Century of Communication." The previous one hundred years bore witness to the birth of the radio, television, computer, and finally, the Internet. As speech communication professionals, we must aid our students' use of information technology, without letting them be dominated by these tools. The old adage rings true with new technology: a little time invested early will save a great deal in the long run.

Rules Still Apply

The Internet allows people to instantaneously share information in ways that were previously never imagined.

The wise character of Morpheus cites that the "dream world" in the science fiction film *The Matrix* is based on rules that dictate behavior. Our "infoculture" has advanced so quickly; we struggle to keep up, which results in the constant arbitrary manipulation of traditional rules of communication. I, for one, receive far too many e-mail messages fraught with lack of capitalization and punctuation (no, it is not e e cummings poetry!). Does pressing the "shift" key really take that much more effort and time?

With lack of face-to-face contact, we also are more apt to write things in e-mail messages we would never say directly to another person, and unlike putting the angry letter in a drawer or circular file, it is so easy to just hit "send." Once that's done, it's too late to turn back.

As educators, we need to help our students tame their use of technology and not let it dictate their behavior. Up until now, technology has developed at a pace that we could handle. Now, we need to catch up to it and (as the computer command says) "undo" some of the bad habits our students have developed.

Show Me the Way

Leading by example is a common pedagogy among forensics coaches. By delegating responsibilities to students, we help them mature into responsible young adults. In a world where students are busier than ever with a multitude of extra-curricular activities and jobs, they must balance their time carefully. Scheduling forensics practices has become increasingly difficult, so I have embraced information technology as a supplemented means to connect with students on a new level.

I call the phenomenon "e-coaching."

One night, a student e-mailed me to ask for some advice on tweaking the introduction and transitions on her poetry program. After choosing from the options she offered, I thanked her for taking the initiative to contact me. The depth of thought in writing we were able to achieve in our e-mail exchange was much more valuable than the occasional telephone consultation I previously had with students.

Since that night four years ago, I have corresponded with students hundreds of times. Sometimes, it's just a message to let me know that the student can't make it to a meet – which catches me before I send in my registration and incur drop fees. E-mail enhances communication between me and my students, especially since I'm an "out-of-the-building" coach.

E-mail is also a great way for me to review my students' early drafts of Student Congress legislation and original speeches. With legislation, I can make whatever minor formatting and grammatical adjustments are needed, and send it in with registration to tournaments. I then provide students with copies of both, and explain what I did to correct their mistakes. Students usually learn from these, making my job even easier thereafter. With original speeches, I can either e-mail back line-by-line comments or print a copy out and then meet with the student to discuss the draft. And, I always point out those e e cummings capitalization and punctuation errors.

The forensics community, particularly debate, has recognized the Web as a vast source of evidence to assist in building credibility in persuasion. Search engines, reference sites and indexes continue to be refined. This same power can be harnessed in interpretation events. NFL rules obviously require literature to come from bound, published sources. So, while I discourage my students from pulling their pieces directly from the Internet, using the Web to search for literature – especially great works – is invaluable. Bartleby.com is one example of a site where students can often find complete works online, and then cross-reference by collection to find the bound version in the library.

Getting Connected

Many teams have their own Web site, where they post a calendar of meets, information about events and their rules, and links to other helpful Web sites. After

doing this for a number of years, our team has graduated to a "portal." Portals are sites on the Web that are both starting-point and information clearinghouse. One such portal, "Yahoo!" was the Web's first comprehensive index, and continues to evolve in the services it offers.

At the beginning of this school year, I set up a Yahoo! Group for my team, which includes an e-mail message list, interactive calendar, file download area, link page, voting polls, and a chat facility. I post our tournaments, practices and other team events on the calendar, which can send automatic e-mail reminders to the students. In the file download area, I've posted event rules, permission slips, forms, meet invitations and maps, and instructional materials for students to read. I use the polls in a more unconventional way: as a means for students to sign up for various events and tasks. I set up the poll to log who votes for what, and I can then print out the results.

Yahoo! is far from perfect as it offers features that appeal to the widest possible audience. But it does allow me to make the group "private," which protects our students' and team's sensitive information. I was also able to designate my student officers as group "moderators," giving them the authority to delete inappropriate posts and help me maintain the site. After overcoming the necessity of creating a Yahoo! profile, reaction by students has been quite positive. Our mutual favorite feature is the ability to send mass e-mail messages with reminders to the team. While it took a handful of hours over a few weeks to initially set up, the benefits of the group pay great dividends in convenience in the long run.

Not Just for Members Only

The most significant problem with the use of the Internet to streamline team communication processes is the "Digital Divide," the gap between technology "haves" and "have-nots." While a great majority of my students have a computer at home, some of those do not have Internet access; most do not have high-speed broadband access; and a handful still do not have computers. That said, almost all of the students have been taught how to use the vast resources of the Web to their advantage, and are fairly resourceful in finding times and places to use computers, including school labs and the public library. Still, it is important to be sensitive to the Digital Divide and not rush to make Internet applications the *de facto* standard.

The Internet allows people to instantaneously share information in ways that were previously never imagined. As NFL coaches, we have already realized the streamlined miracle of recording students' merit points online, now using the back of outdated, tedious paper forms to print debate evidence on. But just as we must be cognizant of forensics as a means to our students' more successful futures and not an end in competition itself, we must remember that the Internet is a means to streamlining process, but not itself the full process of communication. In the words of historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Science and Technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition and myth frame our response" (New York Times Magazine, July 27, 1986).

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