TEACHING AND TECHNOLOGY

by David Vinson, PhD

Using Communication Technologies to Create More Diverse, Inclusive, and Engaging Learning Experiences

In consideration of the vital role that communication technologies play in our private universities and colleges, my thoughts drift to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, an absurdist, post-war drama that grapples at length with the challenges of communication. The plot (and really, it is an anti-plot) is deliberately simple: two homeless tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, are stranded at the side of a road. They believe that someone called Godot will come to help, only Godot never arrives.

Audiences have always been divided on Godot's meaning. In 1957, for instance, the play was staged for a single night at San Quentin State Prison in California. Many of the prisoners saw Godot as "the outside," a metaphor for liberation, both of mind and body. Literary scholars often view Godot as a stand-in for God, but the absent figure is also perceived in political, psychoanalytical, philosophical, and autobiographical terms.

The mystery of Godot is central to the play, but what it stages in a literal sense is the breakdown of communication that takes place between Vladimir and Estragon. The conversations between the two suffer from miscommunication, repetitiveness, forgetfulness, long silences, disagreements, and ample instances of confusion.

When I teach *Waiting for Godot*, students are indeed divided about Godot's meaning. But what's fascinating is that the same students almost unanimously agree about the play's relevance to their own lives: that communication is *hard*, an ongoing struggle; that miscommunication is more common than any of us likely realize; that even when two parties agree, the exact details of the agreement may be lost between them.

On-Campus Communication Technologies: Normalizing Smart Classrooms

Private universities and colleges across the country are grappling in their own ways with communication-related challenges. The challenges are wide-ranging, spanning our entire campuses—inside the classroom; on our green spaces; in our libraries, sporting complexes, recreation and wellness centers, cafeterias, and dormitories; and of late, also wherever we may work remotely, as we continue to navigate the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WiFi networks, the Internet of Things (IoT), and other advanced technologies have enabled colleges and universities across the country to transform into digitally connected campuses that are benefiting students, faculty, and their surrounding communities. As a result, modern-day campuses promote enhanced student learning as well as an improved quality of life, lower operating costs, greater security and safety, increased environmental sustainability, and so much more. Our campuses are becoming "smarter" by the day.

For instance, the percentage of smart classrooms at Le Moyne College (Syracuse, New York) is at 100, meaning that every classroom on campus offers smart technology, which in turn makes communication and learning experiences more versatile, accessible, and potentially more engaging. At the very least, the classrooms at Le Moyne all include a central computer, a video-data projector, and a central control system.

Northeastern University in Boston can also boast a 100% smart classroom rating, which is all the more remarkable given that the institution houses 195 classrooms in total.

Other private institutions such as Tulane Business School (New Orleans, Louisiana), St. Edwards University (Austin, Texas), and Skidmore College (Saratoga Springs, New York) also offer smart classrooms at a 100% rating.

What we're seeing is the increasing normalization of smart classrooms. New desires are emerging as a result, whether in faculty (who enjoy the increased pedagogical options) or students, both prospective and current.

Accommodating Students' Needs with Innovative Communication Technologies

Through our own experiences, we each understand the virtues of technology—that it can be a driving force in education; that it can improve both the manner and the clarity of how we communicate with one another. There is an ethical component to bringing communication technologies, as well.

For instance, with students who may require special accommodations, whether due to specific challenges of the mind or body, communication-related technologies in the setting of the classroom allow for different learning modes, varied assessments, as well as individualized learning options. Technology empowers these students, allowing for a more fulfilling and more extensive breadth of learning experiences.

Accommodations may range from high-tech to low-tech, and the effect is to streamline communication. A student with visual impairments may request, for instance, a "low-tech" test reader. However, other students with similar needs may prefer "high-tech." One such option is audio-supported reading, which allows

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students to access texts in a variety of ways. With screen-reading software, students can listen to a text at the rate that best suits them.

Students who are hearing impaired or deaf may need a stenographer to instantly translate the spoken word into English text. But there are tech-related options also, those such as programs designed to capture what is spoken in the moment, translating the words to a computer screen or any other compatible display.

Students with other physical disabilities can benefit from hardware such as adjustable tables, which in turn allows for easier access and more mobility while communicating with professors and fellow classmates.

For students with learning disabilities or attention deficit disorder (ADD), hearing protectors may help to reduce distractions when studying in a large area. This positive outcome reflects a form of communication, albeit an unobvious one: by limiting external distractions, students can engage and interact with the text, which of course is a key starting point for many learning experiences.

Similarly, creative spaces may benefit all students, not merely those in need of particular accommodations. Communication can be enhanced with small discussion areas, individual and pupil-directed learning zones, and learning galleries that can be updated to fit the topic being taught on the day.

The Communicative and Pedagogical Benefits of Gamification

From apps and e-textbooks to organizational platforms, there's no shortage of tools that can make communication easier inside the classroom, and in turn transform traditional learning experiences to more versatile and accessible ones.

Some educators are turning toward classroom "gamification," which entails the use of competitive scenarios as well as the distribution of points and rewards to make learning the coursework and materials more engaging.

A common strategy is to use digital storytelling, which can make learning more exciting and even relatable to students, at least some of whom self-identify as "gamers." Similarly, this mode allows for interactive learning lessons that can reduce passivity in the classroom and also create healthy, fun forms of competition.

At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (Troy, New York), Dr. Lee Sheldon began modeling his classroom on a multiplayer online game. Students created avatars, formed guilds with classmates, and completed quests to earn experience points. In essence, he created a digital, customizable classroom management system built on role playing themes.

In his book *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game*, Sheldon explains that by embracing new learning modes that integrated multimedia platforms, he witnessed a drastic boost in attendance. He also saw the average grade of students rise from a C to a B under this system of gamification.

Adapting Pedagogy During the COVID-19 Outbreak at Sarah Lawrence College

Due to the wide-scale disruption caused by the COVID-19 outbreak this past spring, educators were compelled to swiftly rethink how to communicate with students most effectively. For many, assignments had to be revised or scrapped entirely. But such challenges led to exciting opportunities, to those that promoted alternative models for communication and learning.

At Sarah Lawrence College (Yonkers, New York), most SciMath students present their conference work in class and may create posters for a Science Symposium Poster Session. Due to the outbreak, neither were possible. SciMath faculty decided to try something new, to ask students to create short summaries of their conference work in blog format. This empowered students to practice within the medium of the blog presentation format, and to integrate links to outside sources, from primary literature to YouTube videos to videos showcasing their novel ideas.

As explained in "Sarah Lawrence Together: Creating New Ways to Connect," students in Joseph Forte's art history class on the Art and Architecture of the Baroque were scheduled to have an exam on April 17 of this year. But Professor Forte decided that since a traditional written exam was too complicated by remote work, he would try something new, which he called the Pandemic Portfolio. Students were given the option to submit a portfolio containing a variety of learning possibilities, each facilitating different ways to think about how we communicate our ideas with one another. Some of the options included painting a still life "in the Dutch manner of how we live today"; painting a landscape or interior that captures the present moment; painting a portrait in the style of Rembrandt; or illustrating four images and providing a page on each explaining how they reflect the Dutch style and the present moment.

At Sarah Lawrence College, students enrolled in Ann Heppermann's course on Narrative Journalism in the Age of S-Town and other Serialized Podcasts were fortunate in that completion of their final project was relatively unaffected by the need for remote learning. Their project, which entailed creating their own Podcast and sharing the work on Soundcloud, signals yet another creative learning opportunity, a means of harnessing communication skills with the aid of audio technology.

Communication Technologies as an Apparatus for Change

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Moreover, innovative institutions recognize the transformative outcomes that can result from embracing communication technologies, enabling frictionless, intuitive, and even touchless experiences that are driven by a digitally connected community.

Institutions are reshaping how they meet the needs of the higher education community by using communication technologies. We each are united in the goals of fostering growth, learning, and better communication skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.