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Author(s): Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher
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Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

Doing the Right Thing with Technology

Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher address a high school's need for an updated technology policy. The school community engaged in open discussion about appropriate and courteous uses of technology, and with the revised policy teachers increased integration of technology into the curriculum.

We were standing in line at Starbucks one morning before school and were shocked by the behavior that the cashier had to endure from a customer talking on a cell phone. When the employee politely asked, "What can I get for you today?" the man held up his index finger to quiet her. Looking at the length of the line, she said again, "Sir, I can take your order now," to which he barked back, "I'm on the phone! Just hold on!" Clearly the customer valued the phone conversation much more than his interaction with the cashier. The customer's behavior was downright rude, acting as if the question the cashier was asking about the order was unreasonable and meant to interrupt his phone call. We could hear one side of the conversation and didn't think it was all that important.

We mentioned this interaction at the faculty meeting and discovered that our colleagues all had stories about inappropriate uses of technology, including a number of examples in which the human standing in front of the technology user was treated discourteously. As educators, we had to ask about our part in the creation of this behavior. What had we done, or failed to do, to create a generation of people who treated each other so poorly when they had new technology in their hands? And more importantly, what could we teach students now to foster technology use that doesn't neglect human interactions?

Our questions, in part, caused us to consider our school technology policy. As with those of most high schools, our technology policy focused on prohibition (see fig. 1). The roots of the policy came from a time when only a few students had cell phones, iPods, cameras, and the like at school. Today, that's not the case. We asked our students, 60 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and every one of them had at least one of these devices on their person every day. Our colleagues were frustrated with the amount of time they spent asking students to put cell phones and MP3 players away. The administrators were frustrated at the increased time they had to spend disciplining repeat offenders. And some parents weren't happy when their children had these expensive devices taken away from them in school. We realized that prohibition alone wasn't working and that we weren't teaching students appropriate uses of technology. We also realized that we were missing out on an excellent opportunity to integrate technology into our school curriculum.

FIGURE 1. Common Technology Policy

Cell phones are permitted, provided that the student has submitted a signed permission slip to the office, but are prohibited from being used during the academic day. Cell phones must be turned off at all times and placed in a safe and secure environment. Cell phone violations will result in confiscation of the cell phone and a parent or guardian notification to retrieve the cell phone from the school. MP3 players are not to be used during the school day and should be left at home. If brought to school, they should be placed in a safe and secure environment.

Courtesy: The Basis for a New Policy

In a series of conversations with our colleagues, we clarified our thinking about the use of technology. We believe that technology has positive uses in the English classroom, but we were concerned about the amount of time students are distracted from learning because of their technology. We realized that we needed a policy that would allow us to move from confiscating technology to teaching students how and when to use technology. In short, we were not teaching students to do the right thing with the technology they had.

As a faculty, we agreed to replace the technology policy with a courtesy policy (see fig. 2). In doing so, we recognized that we might be frustrated as students learned to use their newfound freedoms. We also recognized that an investment in this policy could change the climate of the school as students were provided feedback about their actions rather than punitive consequences for violating rules. We had made a huge step toward teaching students to do the right thing, especially in interacting with other people.

We adopted the policy and presented it to students as part of their student handbook. We shared the policy and its rationale with families. And quite frankly, students cheered for the new policy. They could not believe that we would allow them to send text messages and listen to their music between classes, during lunch, and during class when doing independent work. They also understood the agreement— they could use their technology when it wasn't discourteous to a teacher or peer. As Alex said, "Yeah, I get it. When you're talking or I'm in peer editing, no texting. But I can listen when I'm working on the computer doing my homework."

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FIGURE 2. Courtesy Policy, Health Sciences High and Middle College

Courtesy is a code that governs the expectations of social behavior. Each community or culture defines courtesy and the expectations for members of that community or culture. As a learning community, it is our responsibility to define courtesy and to live up to that definition. As a school community, we must hold ourselves and one another accountable for interactions that foster respect and trust. Discourteous behaviors destroy the community and can result in hurt feelings, anger, and additional poor choices.

In general, courtesy means that we interact with one another in positive, respectful ways. Consider the following examples of courteous and discourteous behavior.

Courteous
> Saying *please* and *thank you*
> Paying attention in class
> Socializing with friends during passing periods and lunch
> Asking questions and interacting with peers and teachers
> Asking for, accepting, offering, or declining help graciously
> Allowing teachers and peers to complete statements without interruption
> Throwing away trash after lunch
> Recycling all materials and placing all trash in appropriate bins
> Cleaning your own workspace
> Reporting safety concerns or other issues that require attention to a staff member

Discourteous
> Using vulgar, foul, abusive, or offensive language
> Listening to an iPod during a formal learning situation such as during a lecture or while completing group work
> Text messaging or talking on a cell phone during class time
> Bullying, teasing, or harassing others
> Corporal punishment
> Hogging bandwidth and/or computer time
> Not showing up for your scheduled appointments or completing tasks
> Failing to communicate when you're not coming to school

At HSHMC, it is expected that students treat each other, the faculty and staff, administration, indeed any adult, with respect, courtesy, and cooperation. Further, HSHMC teachers will treat one another, the students and their families, and the administration in courteous ways.

Consequences for engaging in discourteous behavior may include reparations, restoring the environment, meetings with faculty or staff, meetings with administrators, the development of a behavioral contract, removal of privileges, and/or suspension/expulsion from the school.

Policy Implementation: Feedback Is the Key

Instead of hiding technology in their backpacks, our students are regularly seen using their technology at appropriate times. They listen to music during passing periods and text message and talk with one another. Interestingly, we are also hearing from families that their children send them text messages during the day. One parent sent us an email to say that her son sent her a text message because he was proud of the grade he had received on his comparative literature essay.

Another student, Heather, has had a more difficult time following the courtesy policy. Her parents have had problems with her use of technology for several years and have been frustrated that she continued to make poor decisions about when and how she used her cell phone. The family would take away the cell phone or turn off the text-messaging feature for a period of time as punishment. Eventually, her privileges would be restored and Heather would comply for a while, but soon she would return to her old ways.

When the courtesy policy was first implemented, she performed admirably for a few weeks. However, we each spoke to her on separate occasions in the span of a few days when we saw her sending text messages during class. We reminded her of the courtesy policy and encouraged her to comply. Heather's failure to do the right thing with her technology required that we have a conversation with her mom. We developed a plan of action with Heather and her family that included daily meetings to discuss courtesy. In response to the meeting, Heather's mom sent us the following via email:

> Thanks for your kind words. Looks as if she is not being forthcoming with us, but on the other hand, she will now be forced to own up to this just like with the schoolwork and she will begin to realize that she was taking advantage of the school's very democratic environment. I agree with you! Even though I know sometimes I am too trusting and I try too hard to give her privileges she cannot handle at the moment, I would rather she learn how to handle them even with some failures along the way. I want that to be true with everything that requires trust, from money to driving a car and dating. We keep reminding her that she has to handle these smaller responsibilities before those

are remotely a possibility. Even letting her out with the girls last night was a big deal for us based on previous issues, and she did really well.

> Thanks again and good luck with our little technology beastie!

Daily meetings with Heather resulted in some excellent opportunities for conversation. We discovered that she was struggling to fit in with a group and had recently changed her identity from a "Goth kid" (into dark music and rejecting conventional definitions of popularity) to a "scene kid" (into live music shows and MySpace). She was anxious to develop a new circle of scene friends and had been receiving text messages from a girl in another class. Heather was insecure about her social position and worried that if she didn't respond, she would damage this new relationship. This opened the conversation to deeper discussion about peer pressure and the minefields of the high school social landscape.

Technology and English Instruction

Watching students use technology for personal reasons with such ease led us to another question. Could we use more technology in our classes? Given that all of our students, 48 percent of whom are English language learners, have cell phones and that the majority of them have MP3 players, we decided to capitalize on the courtesy policy and increase our technology integration. Our first step was to obtain additional iPods for students to check out if they didn't have one of their own. We used grant funds for our smaller learning community to buy loaner iPods. How far we had come from banning technology to checking out iPods to students!

We added The Classic Tales Podcast to our list of required readings (Harrison). This free audio file provides listeners access to interesting classics. Recent postings included "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe, "The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs, and "The Magic Shop" by H. G. Wells. We discuss these in class as they are posted and make connections between the classic tales and the texts we are reading at the time. Besides being free and audio files, the great thing about this is that we never know what will come next. The Classic Tales Podcast provides students with access to interesting stories that they

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can listen to on the bus, while exercising, or while walking across campus.

As with cell phones, we found that we had to explicitly teach how the courtesy policy applied to the use of MP3 devices. We used the analogy of power tools as devices that could be used to build, but in other circumstances they could be disruptive and damaging. (Since our school was still being remodeled during the early weeks of school, the students were familiar with the difficulty of listening when drills and other power equipment were being used in the building.) Students agreed that an iPod could be a useful tool but that listening to this device when a teacher was actively teaching, or when working with peers in a collaborative group, was discourteous. Teachers and students negotiated when an MP3 player could be used, such as during independent reading (but not during tests and quizzes). Further, it was decided that if a teacher or classmate initiated a conversation with someone who was listening to a music player, the courteous response would be to immediately remove the headphones.

We have also found that we can text message students from computer Web sites. After obtaining parent permissions, we started sending reminders, interesting facts, and prompts via students' cell phones. For example, we might send a text message that says "Remember to read for twenty minutes tonight" or "The writing prompt tomorrow will focus on character—think about it before you go to bed" or "For class tomorrow, find out how many plays Shakespeare wrote during his lifetime." At times, we even sent "pop quiz" questions in the days before a major test. After one such test on literary devices, Luis told us that it was "kinda weird" to get a text message from a teacher, but "it really did help 'cause I never knew when I had to think about irony, or motif, or anything."

Extending Courtesy to Web-Based Learning

Our school uses the Blackboard e-learning platform to create online content for all courses. Students attend face-to-face classes and then extend their learning through reading, writing, and viewing experiences created by their teachers. Each day, students have an assigned period to complete online work, which includes discussion boards, forums,

readings, quizzes, and such. They can also use Blackboard at home to complete their assignments.

Once again, the courtesy policy plays a role during this period. Students are expected to use computer time for school assignments and must regularly access the Internet. Students have learned that certain functions consume a large amount of bandwidth, slowing the access speed for others. Therefore, students are asked not to listen to online music and instead use their MP3 players. In addition, they use headphones when viewing assigned audio file content so as not to disturb the learning environment for others.

Technology Access Promotes Learning

Technology use played a significant role in the English honors-credit option Kevin was working on. The honors project required him to create a presentation that conceptually tied a piece of literature to a nonfiction work and a digital source. He had read *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and was moved by the protagonist's fear and sense of isolation, and he knew that he wanted to discuss the theme of overcoming fear. Intrigued by an interview with Joseph Medicine Crow in the Ken Burns World War II documentary *The War*, Kevin began to research the man who may be the last Crow war chief. He began with several Web sites about Medicine Crow and found his autobiography. He learned that in order to become a chief, one must complete four acts of bravery (coups): lead a war party, touch a living enemy, capture his horse, and steal his weapons. Medicine Crow achieved all of these in his Army service in the European theater during World War II. Kevin later located a short, wordless, animated film called *Angst* by Emiel Penders on YouTube. Kevin felt that the story of a boy who must confront his fears to save his dog provided just the visual representation that he needed to link Melinda from *Speak* to Joseph Medicine Crow.

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Although Kevin may have been able to visit YouTube and other Web sites outside of school, he wouldn't have been able to do so in the company of his teacher. Kevin's access to technology in school,

while more permissive than most experience, allowed him to develop a sophisticated honors project within the school's learning environment.

Courtesy: A Way of Life

While we have entered the information age, school policies have struggled to keep up. Many schools operate with a "prohibition-style" technology policy and then spend quite a bit of time trying to enforce it. Our concern grew out of recognition that merely banning technology would do little to teach students how to use it responsibly and that they would not have learned to do the right thing. Our courtesy policy is a work in progress as new situations arise. However, we have found that the basic premise—that classmates and teachers are entitled to courteous treatment—has

served as a touchstone. The irony isn't lost on us. In an age where courtesy seems as antiquated as a horse and buggy, we are finding it to be a useful vehicle to carry us into a rapidly changing world.

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Nancy Frey and **Douglas Fisher** are teachers at Health Sciences High and Middle College and, with Carol Rothenberg, co-authors of NCTE's *Language Learners in the English Classroom* (2007). *email:* nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu; dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Frey and Fisher share how they and their school changed their policies involving students and technology. As citizens of a highly technological culture, we know that students see—and often use—technologies daily. But how do those technologies translate to the classroom? "Paying Attention to Technology: Writing Technology Autobiographies" asks students to pay attention explicitly to the technologies they use. Students brainstorm lists of their interactions with technology, map these interactions graphically, and then compose narratives of their most significant interactions with technology. By writing technology autobiographies, students explore what their stories reveal about why we use the technologies we do when we do. Educators can use this information to see how they can best integrate or accept those technologies in the classroom. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_ view.asp?id=325

See the NCTE Web site (http://www.ncte.org/about/over/nty) and INBOX e-newsletter for NCTE announcements!