

# Communicating Across Boundaries

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## INTRODUCTION

Directing a Technology Innovation Challenge Grant as well as a Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology (PT3) Project, plus 35 years of experience in student and teacher education has led me to conclude that teachers need know-how in communicating across boundaries. These boundaries can be found, for example, between teachers and students, teachers and the administration, teachers and parents, and teachers and the political system. The three most important competencies necessary to achieve communication "across boundaries" are: 1) using modern technologies to communicate, 2) the ability to learn from students, and 3) the ability to become agents of change.

## MILLENNIUM SKILL 1

### **The Ability to Effectively and Efficiently Use Online Communications**

The millennium teacher must be able to communicate with all of education's stakeholders in effective and efficient ways. This includes using e-mail, fax machines, cell phones, instant messaging, video conferencing, listservs, bulletin boards, forums, chat groups, Web page postings, and any other present and future technology that will benefit the teacher's communication abilities.

Not only do millennium teachers have to know how to technically utilize these tools, they need to know how these tools can be used to make their jobs more efficient. File management, use of templates, use of electronic address books and lists/calendars, and controlling spam are some of the skills necessary to save their time and facilitate better communication.

The millennium teacher also needs to know how to teach students to communicate well, especially on the Internet. Just knowing how to use these electronic tools, however, does not guarantee that students will communicate well. The majority of communication

currently taking place on Internet forums, chat groups, e-mail, and instant messaging is being done by Generation Y (present K-12 students). Yet, schools and teachers seldom address how these students can improve the quality of their online communication. Places on the Internet where students "hang out" often are places for trite, hateful, pornographic, and/or foul language. There is little in the way of substantial discussion, and certainly not much that a teacher would accept to fulfill a school assignment.

Teachers, other educators, and politicians must share the blame with students for the lack of substance found in online communication. Online communication skills are seldom addressed by teachers and are not part of any standardized curriculum or assessment. Most adults do not recognize that students are now, or will be in the future, spending much more time on the Internet than with books or handwritten communication. Even with 1.3 billion people and 7 billion Web sites on the Internet, schools and teachers often do not recognize this as an important millennium skill. Usually, only lip service is given to learning and teaching these skills.

## MILLENNIUM SKILL 2

### **The Ability to Learn From, and With, Students**

For the first time in history, K-12 students have more knowledge about a subject that is a central focus of our society than their teachers. That subject is technology. Increasingly, teachers will have to learn from, and with, their students. When teachers and students learn together, better learning occurs. Not only do students and their teachers get to know each other better, a sense of trust develops that allows for the achievement of every learning goal.

Too often, teacher preparation in the use and integration of technology involves learning technology skills. What really needs to be learned is how to tap into student strengths with technology in order to improve

the learning process through the use of technology. There is too much emphasis in professional development, for example, placed on teachers having to know more than their students; this is wrong. The millennium skill of learning from, and with students, is critical if we truly want to prepare our students to voice their own thoughts, face challenges successfully, and learn according to their own needs.

### **MILLENNIUM SKILL 3**

#### **The Ability to be a Change Agent and Teach Students to Become Change Agents**

Schools are quickly becoming places where change is not appreciated or tolerated. Scripted lessons, outdated standards, and non-relevant testing are more often becoming the norm. Teachers and students are told what to do by their district, state, and/or federal agencies and institutions, as if they, themselves, have no sense at all. Worse, teachers and students are saying little to change this situation. Teacher preparation programs desperately need to train educators in how to speak up and become agents of change.

Technology can be a catalyst for change for both students and educators. Unfortunately, most technology skills that teachers learn and implement have to do with grading and attendance issues, curriculum mapping programs, programs to help kids get better grades on

tests, and the like. There is very little learning about e-mail, discussion groups, electronic publishing, and so forth. Technology is considered only a tool. The millennium teacher also needs to learn how to utilize technology to create change, a positive school culture, a stronger democracy, and a better world.

It is sad to hear teachers and students complaining about their fate and then saying there is nothing they can do about it. Forty years ago, if a school newspaper refused to print a student's article, the student would type the article on a ditto machine, run-off copies, and distribute them anyway. Today, even with word processing, laser printers, Kinko's, Web pages, and such, students and teachers cannot seem to find ways to get their messages to the public. What could be historically the most powerful generation of students and teachers is much less effective because they do not have the skill or the know-how to utilize modern technology as a way to make their voices heard and/or to affect positive change.

Not only do millennium teachers need to know how to utilize modern technology to be powerful change agents, they need to be able to teach their students these skills. Too often students are viewed as objects of change. They, too, need to be change agents. It is reprehensible how little "say" students have about their own education. Seldom do students serve on curriculum committees, on site-based councils, on school boards, and even on technology committees. Teachers need to prepare students for these roles in order for students to truly be able to invent their lives.

*This work was previously published in the Encyclopedia of Distance Learning, Volume 1, edited by C. Howard, J. Boettcher, L. Justice, K. Schenk, P. Rogers, and G. Berg, pp. 297-298, copyright 2005 by Information Science Reference, formerly known as Idea Group Reference (an imprint of IGI Global).*

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