

Chapter 2

Defining Terms and Selecting Metaphors to Understand Technology in the Classroom: A Semantical Discussion

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ABSTRACT

The words we use to describe technology in the college classroom matter and should be carefully selected and defined at the onset of any fruitful discussion of the subject. This chapter frames the discussion of technology in the classroom by defining and redefining salient terms, as well as exploring metaphors through which technology in the classroom can be more deeply understood. The constructs of phubbing, presence, interpersonal attraction, immediacy, and rapport are discussed; additionally, tool, text, system, ecology, and drug are evaluated as potentially instructive metaphors. Ultimately, this chapter aims to not only describe mobile technology and its effects in the classroom, but also to aid the reader in examining his or her own thought processes in understanding it. The presence of technology in the classroom is a complex, multifaceted, and still emergent phenomena, and warrants robust consideration on the part of each individual instructor.

WORDS MATTER

The public arena hums loudly and steadily with discussion, pronouncements, and debates about language. Public apologies are dissected on social media, and word choices within them carefully analyzed. Individuals present their preferred pronouns on their office doors and email signatures. Nations wring their hands over whether to use a word like “genocide” to describe a dark chapter of their history. Similarly, the words we employ to describe technology in the college classroom matter. What words should we use? What, exactly, do they mean? And what metaphors best help us to make sense of the complex and interrelated phenomena affecting instructors and students alike? This chapter is an attempt to provide a

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basic linguistic framework from which future discussions may fruitfully build, beginning with a definition of what is likely the most important construct related to technology in the college classroom: phubbing. Subsequently, related and similarly important constructs are defined and described with particular attention to the college classroom. Finally, the metaphors of tool, text, system, ecology, and drug are each assessed with regard to their utility for aiding instructors in better understanding how technology functions within the modern classroom.

DEFINING TERMS

Classroom Phubbing

Smartphones and other mobile technologies have become a ubiquitous feature of the modern era. The past decade has seen the number of internet-connected devices surge past the number of humans on earth, and industry projections suggest continued rapid growth in the adoption of smartphones among consumers (“Cisco Visual Networking Index,” 2017). As these devices have permeated society, researchers and cultural commentators alike have struggled to understand what effects they may have upon the individuals who use them and society as a whole. Recent research has begun to coalesce around the term “phubbing,” a portmanteau of the words “phone” and “snubbing” which describes the snubbing of someone else with one’s phone. This chapter posits that phubbing is perhaps the most significant construct intersecting technology and the college classroom setting. Researchers have found that college students utilize technology to high degrees (Wang et al., 2015), and instructors are already struggling to implement efforts to curtail the usage of technology in their classrooms (Tatum et al., 2018). Before fully considering what salience phubbing may have to the classroom, the word itself must be clarified and redefined.

Redefining Phubbing

Since the original creation of the term “phubbing” by a group of linguistic specialists meeting at the University of Sydney (Pathak, 2013), various refinements have been offered in the academic literature. One prominent definition of phubbing is that of Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, who have been pivotal in broadening and deepening the understanding of phubbing in the academic literature: “the act of snubbing someone in a social setting by concentrating on one’s phone instead of talking to the person directly” (2016, p. 9). While the definition above is parsimonious and representative of other definitions in the literature on the subject, definitions like this one must be refined and expanded for use in the instructional context.

Many prevailing definitions of phubbing, exemplified by Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas’ above, feature at least five noteworthy shortcomings. First, phubbing is often conceptualized and subsequently studied as a phenomenon that exists between only two individuals. For instance, Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas’ definition describes “the person” (2016, p. 9), implying that phubbing is an act by an individual to another individual. In reality phubbing may be more complex, and may involve more than one phubber and/or phubbee, resulting in multiple individuals being phubbed (e.g., a classroom of students phubbing their instructor); this reality is more easily identified in definitions provided elsewhere by Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, as well as others.

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