

How Technology is Changing How We Teach Psychology

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Just as psychology is an evolving science, the conditions under which we teach our discipline are also continually changing. Effective introductory psychology teachers must not only keep abreast of changes in their subject matter, they also must be attuned to changes in community, regional, national, cultural, technological, and global environments and events that have implications for how and what they teach.

Of course, one of the most notable and powerful factors directly influencing how we teach centers on advances in electronic technology. Technologies such as PowerPoint, Blackboard, “Clickers,” Facebook, and Twitter have transformed how we organize, synthesize, and present psychological information to our students, whether they are in the classroom, an Internet café, or at home. Because many teachers believe that our students are facile with and, indeed, enjoy using these technologies, they also believe that by integrating the latest or “coolest” technologies into their teaching, they can forge a stronger connection with their students and, in the process, engage them more deeply in our subject matter. As teachers have embraced these electronic technologies as content delivery mechanisms, they’ve also had to adapt their individual teaching styles to these formats. For example, no longer do many of us create lectures based on the development and articulation of a series of carefully crafted integrative arguments. Instead, we present our subject matter as a series of carefully crafted bullet points interspersed with color photographs and sometimes streaming video.

Electronic technologies have changed things on the other side of the lectern, too. Rather than picking and choosing what they jot in their notes from their teacher’s lectures, students feel compelled to write down every single word that appears on the PowerPoint slides. Technology has also changed student behavior with respect to what they are doing when they are not copying their teachers’ slides. Sit in on a class in almost any U.S. college classroom and you’ll see a host of electronic technologies in action: students checking their e-mail, surfing the Web, texting a friend, posting a message on a Facebook wall, and twittering their followers.

Thus, the current state of college and university teaching has become a race for students’ attention — teachers and their messages are competing against information provided by students’ laptops and cell phones. Inevitably, teachers must ask themselves what changes they can make in their teaching, both substantively and stylistically, to succeed in the race to capture and maintain their students’ attention. The answer to that question is a prime mover in shaping the nature of college and university teaching into the foreseeable future. In turn, how we answer that question has huge implications for just how well we teach our students about the past, present, and future of psychology.