
Speaking My Mind

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Technology Can Drive a Teacher Right through the Roof

I was showing my high school students a quilt my grandmother made, and they asked me how she had the time to make ten quilts, raise five children, brew homemade root beer, plant the vegetables, and cook all the meals. Isn't it obvious? She did not have voice mail, e-mail, pagers, and car phones. She was not constantly interrupting her life to flip on her computer, pick up the telephone to run through a series of messages, or



feel guilty about a call she didn't return.

The worst mistake I made was to get voice mail at home. For the first time, I had to return calls. Before having voice mail, I had never known who had called nor did I care. Now, I arrive home in a frenzy after teaching all day. I throw down my books and pick up the phone to retrieve my messages. Then I have to decide whether I am going to call the person right back, wait until after dinner when I start grading papers, or put off responding until the next day, when there will be more messages waiting. I cannot pretend I did not get the message—each one is recorded by the phone company. And people leave such long commentaries. Recently, a friend called back three times so that she could extend her monologue. C'mon.

This year, for the first time, my colleagues and I were generously given voice mail at school. Our individual numbers have been printed in a newsletter mailed to all the parents in the district. Now, when I grab my coat to go home, my eye catches a red light, blinking, blinking. Do I leave the message for the following day? No, I throw my books down (the same books I throw down later at home) and access my voice mail. I scribble the message, after listening to it twice to catch the phone

number, and lose the paper before I even walk out the door. I will hear from the caller again the following day.

So that I can communicate even more effectively with my 120 colleagues at the school and 700 more in the district, I am also connected to e-mail at work. The computer waits for me, watching all day. When I least suspect it, a small rectangle pops on the screen, telling me someone is trying to reach me. I try to answer each message during my preparation-free twenty-five-minute lunch break before my thirty-two poetry students march in for class. The only problem is that I keep dropping crumbs on the computer as I type and eat bagels at the same time. I hear this is bad for the health of the computer.

Whenever my sister in North Carolina asks me for my home e-mail address, I lie and tell her I don't have one yet. When am I supposed to write to her—after I get home and return my voice mail messages, during dinner, or after dinner while I am working? Maybe I can give up one of my sleeping hours. I am not productive during this time anyway.

Friends tell me that the answer is a car phone. I can get all my business done on the way to and from work. Don't they know my driving skills

are limited? At 6:45 a.m. I can barely see the road, let alone carry on a conversation and turn the corner with only one hand on the wheel. I need all of my faculties for the task at hand. Besides, isn't it an American tradition to drive to and from work listening to a DJ and snappy music?

Would a pager make my life less hectic? Don't these annoying beepers clipped to everyone's belts just replace the wad of macho keys that people used to display? Whenever I see people get beeped and watch them run to a phone, I am reminded of the old Superman TV show where Superman dashed to a phone booth to change. But he had an excuse to be in such a hurry—he was usually saving a city or catching a bus full of children. Though my administrators tell me that students are not allowed to have pagers at school, students still have them handy so that their employers, parents, and friends can get hold of them in a second. I may actually give in and buy a pager so that I can beep my students in the evening: "Johnny, are you doing your homework?"

Recently I was at the home of a woman whom I hired to read student papers. We were having a professional meeting, when all of a sudden her pager went off. She terminated the meeting and said she had to go because her five-year-old son wanted her to pick him up at school right away. Now I know my memory is not 100 percent accurate, but I am sure that my mother was not always on time to get me after church school, even though the nuns ended class at 2:30 sharp every Wednesday afternoon. If I had ever beeped my mother, I could have kissed goodbye any chance of seeing my chauffeur again.

Technology has changed my life forever. Unlike my grandmother, I cannot honestly say to another human being, "Oh, I didn't know you were trying to reach me." Maybe I'll just escape. I'll hide in a car wash, bake in a sauna, or tell my boss I'm leaving for a short walk but keep on trekking. And if I must return, I'll leave a message that I have gone to Costa Rica; then I'll work on a quilt or write a poem. That's what Grannie would have done.

Visit Laurie's website at <http://photofeathers.net/>.