Syllabi Genre Analysis:
Examining Technology's Role in the Classroom

by
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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University, in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

April 2016

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Examining Technology's Role in the Classroom

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Abstract

Mobile technology and electronic devices have become such staples of industrialized, twenty-first-century society that they have even infiltrated classrooms. Because instructors recognize this infiltration, technology policies have become part of the conventions within the genre of syllabi. For this project, I examined the role that technology plays in the classroom as outlined in syllabi. To do this, I conducted a textual analysis on the technology policies of twenty-seven syllabi collected from upper-division English classes at Middle Tennessee State University. I found that while some syllabi ignore electronic devices and do not actually have technology policies, most other syllabi forbid using technology in classrooms; however, exceptions to these policies are made, such as for emergencies or taking notes. As technology will not be going away, I suggest that more research be conducted on incorporating technology rather than banning it and that more lines of communication be opened about technology use in classrooms.

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Introduction:

My first semester in college, I had a professor who said that if a student's cell phone rang during class, he would make that student sing the ringtone in front of the class before he would throw the phone out the window *and* deduct points from the student's grade. At the time, it struck me as being both harsh and hilarious. Now, living in a world inundated with even more digital technology than there was three years ago, I am surprised by what has changed and what has not: cell phones still ring in classes, threats are still issued, and grades are still docked.

This semester is my final one, and in just this semester alone, I have three English classes in which I sit beside classmates who use digital technology in the form of individual electronic devices for personal uses during class. In one class, I sit sandwiched between a woman texting on her phone and a man using his computer for Facebook and Tumblr. In another, I am stuck beside two women on their phones for all of class, shopping, texting, scrolling through Facebook, playing games, or on Pinterest. Other students doing these unfocused things in class is very distracting to me, and I often find myself wanting to ask them why they are even in class.

These experiences with technology use in classes made me wonder, just what are the technology policies in upper-division English classes at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU)? Other studies have asked similar questions: about how to form technology policies (Becker), about how students and instructors feel concerning mobile technology in classes (Bayless et al.; Benham et al.; Dykstra et al.; O'Bannon and Thomas; Tessier), and about how mobile technology is used in classes (Tindell and Bohlander); however, no study has been conducted on an English department. Although

upper-division English classes are the only ones that I have taken in my major at MTSU, I decided to center my research on them for another reason, as well. Many of the other studies on technology in classrooms focus specifically on business or technology departments, whereas upper-division English at MTSU is not particularly technology-focused. Thus, studying technology policies from this perspective can provide a different view and yield different findings.

For this research, my site of study is one of the universal artifacts of the classroom: the semester syllabus. As Carolyn Miller states, "Genre refers to a conventional category of discourse . . . interpretable by means of rules" (163). The syllabus is its own genre, with its own conventions, such as contact information and course schedule. Central to my study, technology policies can be a convention of a syllabus and, subsequently, their own sub-genre. Syllabi and technology policies alike are textual artifacts that inform students of what to expect in any given class. To continue the conversation regarding classroom technology use, going straight to the artifacts themselves only makes sense. Moreover, of the studies I looked at before conducting my own, only one of them brought syllabi into the mix. Thus, by analyzing syllabi, my research will contribute to the literature on the genre of syllabi as well as that of technology policies in classrooms.

Literature Review:

Mobile technology and the twenty-first century are nearly synonymous terms, so the inundation of such technology in classrooms is not surprising. In a 2014 study of over 400 students, every single student surveyed possessed a mobile device (Benham et al.

149), so instructors should presume that every student in every class will have some sort of electronic device, be it laptop, smart phone, or tablet (Becker 1). This presumption was proven true in a study of over 250 students, wherein 95% had their phones with them in class, 97% texted before class, and 92% texted *during* class "at least once or twice" (Tindell and Bohlander 3).

Electronic devices are not just noticed by their owners, though; "[e]very call or message is a distraction to someone" (Bayless et al. 120). In Deborah R. Tindell and Robert W. Bohlander's study, 97% of students reported noticing *others* texting during class (3), and, in a 2010 study of 3,616 students, text messaging was the most commonly occurring rude behavior in class (Bjorklund and Rehling 17). Out of twenty-three of the rudest possible behaviors in class, texting came in tenth place (Bjorklund and Rehling 16). Similarly, a ringing phone was considered the third rudest behavior (Bjorklund and Rehling 16), and many instructors believe noise to be "the most challenging distraction overall" (Bayless et al. 131). However, when asked if texting should be allowed during class, over 60% of students said yes, provided that it was not disrupting others (Tindell and Bohlander 6). Conversely, in a 2013 study of over 400 business students, most felt that having laptops in class "would only marginally enhance the classroom experience and learning effectiveness/efficiency" and that it would *detract* from class to make laptops mandatory (Dykstra et al. 43).

Although making electronic devices mandatory in classes is not common, the trend of mobile technology being utilized within classrooms is undoubtedly increasing. Bring Your Own Device, or BYOD, is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as "[t]he practice of allowing the employees of an organization to use their own computers, smart phones,

or other devices for work purposes." Although this definition does not encompass students, the BYOD movement certainly has, and Robert F. German claims, "[I]t is impossible to read or listen to any higher education discussion for long these days without hearing the subject mentioned" (10). In fact, BYOD's reach extends all the way from kindergarten through graduate school, and it spans the globe, as well. A quick internet search of the term "bring your own device to school" nets nearly 60 million results, ranging from the North American continent, Eurasia, Australia, and even some surprising places, such as Trinidad.

In regards to higher education, various institutions, from community colleges to private universities, are tackling the idea of BYOD and the difficulty of incorporating it in such a way that it is not an "interference-to-learning . . . [but] an aid to learning" (Becker). Nevertheless, in a 2014 survey of 451 business students, over 75% said that mobile technology is banned in their classes (Benham et al. 146). There is hope, though, that "teacher support for the use of mobile phones in the classroom may be shifting" (O'Bannon and Thomas 15). Unless those teachers are over a certain age, that is. Surveying over a thousand teachers, Blanche W. O'Bannon and Kevin Thomas found that those over the age of fifty did not desire or endorse electronic devices in class nearly as often as did their younger counterparts, likely because teachers over the age of fifty did not have smartphones themselves (15).

For some instructors, mobile technology in their classrooms may not have anything to do with their choice. Although students might like to make the policies regarding electronic devices used in class, the decision, so far, does not rest with them. Institutions can create school-wide BYOD policies, and instructors have to abide by their

institution's policies, even in regards to classroom conduct (Becker 2). However, for many institutions that do not have BYOD policies, they prefer to leave faculty with the freedom to decide their own technology policies (Tindell and Bohlander 2). Thus, it is not hard to imagine that classroom technology policies will vary from school to school, even within a given region. As I discovered, in those schools without institution-wide policies, technology policies will also vary from class to class, even within any one major.

To those wanting to establish a BYOD policy or simply to incorporate mobile technology into their classes, the struggle is real. Although there is "a world of possibilities related to innovative instruction" when using mobile technology in the classroom, there remains the difficulty of utilizing such "power in a way that truly is beneficial for learning in the classroom" (Bayless et al. 122). Through creativity, trial and error, and plenty of patience, one English teacher in a Virginian middle school found the recipe to successful technology incorporation. Students bring their electronic devices to her English class, reading material for class on them and even listening to music while they write in-class assignments (Deputy 31 and 33). The school has a new BYOD policy, and the teacher is eager for the day when students will be allowed to bring in their personal laptops to practice typing (Deputy 34).

Another English teacher, this time in Iowa, engaged students in class discussion virtually, "using a Twitter-like technology," so that more than a single student at a time could add to any discussion (Bayless et al. 125). This method is the classroom equivalent of utilizing 'live-Tweeting' for a television program as a way to "greatly increase the amount of discussion generated on the topic" (Bayless et al. 125). In larger classes, using such technology, rather than distracting students, could actually help them stay focused

because they would be able to engage in the class without having to wait for a turn to speak.

In an introductory environmental biology course at the State University of New York, the professor split the class up into groups, making each group use mobile technology (Tessier 25). The groups were asked specific questions that they would not know without looking up—such as, "How many pounds of garbage does the average American produce each year?"—and asked to get the pertinent data from their electronic devices (Tessier 25). The professor discovered that, with this system, students "were engaged in the content of the course" and rarely needed to be reminded to stay on track with their technology (Tessier 26). Upon surveying the students, the professor further found that, by utilizing their electronic devices, students learned more, liked class more, were more encouraged to attend class, and felt more successful (Tessier 26). Overall, with this method, "students [did] not view cell phones as a distraction problem" because they were busy using them to learn (Tessier 28).

Purdue University created "its own back channel system of communication," cleverly named Hotseat (Bayless et al. 125). With this technology, which can be downloaded onto any electronic device or simply used on the web, students can join class discussion and share comments or pose questions (Bayless et al. 125). Instructors can see everything that is said and can even respond during class, if desired, and Hotseat also features the option to be anonymous, so that discussion can be freer (Bayless et al. 125).

Despite these creative efforts to incorporate mobile technology effectively into classrooms, some professors remain static in their decision to ban personal technology from their classrooms, although some consider this kind of all-out ban to be a "very 'high

school'" attitude (Bayless et al. 128 and 132). Such stances on electronic devices in the classroom can be seen easily on syllabi. In a 2013 survey of 55 business faculty, 47% had technology policies outlined in their syllabi, while 29% had none but thought it could be of use, and 24% said that a formal technology policy was not necessary (Bayless et al. 128). With technology only continuing to grow in popularity and power, it is highly possible that BYOD policies could only continue to grow, causing that 24% to become quickly outdated.

Although their peers consider it to be an example of rude behavior (Bjorklund and Rehling 17), students are using their mobile technology even during classes (Tindell and Bohlander 3). As the frequency and use of mobile technology increases, so do the ideas of BYOD policies for learning spaces rather than just work places. Instructors who believe in BYOD are actively trying to find ways to incorporate mobile technology into their classrooms without detracting from learning: no easy task. Yet, there are dissenters, those instructors who do not want, need, or believe in personal or mobile technology in the classroom. In a program as literature-heavy and text-centered as English, at a university without an institution-wide policy on classroom technology, how do faculty feel about technology and how are they transmitting those feelings to students?

Methodology:

To determine what the technology policies are in upper-division English classes at MTSU, I collected syllabi from upper-division English courses that I have taken or am currently enrolled in. In addition, Dr. Kate Pantelides assisted me in forwarding an email (Appendix A) to professors requesting that they send syllabi from upper-division English

courses at MTSU. This collection method provided the easiest access to faculty technology policies and allowed me to examine every technology policy from the perspective of a student who would be reading the policy in that syllabus. In total, I collected 27 syllabi for textual, content analysis. For the purposes of anonymity, I labeled each syllabus with a sample number (1-27), rather than with its corresponding English course number.

To help guide me in dissecting and comparing the syllabi, I developed a heuristic. In fall of 2015, I conducted a pilot study as part of a class that I was taking at the time. Then, I only had nine syllabi, all only from classes that I had personally taken. In analyzing those nine syllabi, I noticed certain patterns, such as how electronic devices are referred to and exceptions for using electronic devices in class, which helped me to develop the questions of my heuristic. Upon collecting all 27 syllabi, I compiled them into a word document. Going through each syllabus, I asked each one every question in my heuristic. I recorded the answers in Table 1, below. During this process, I noted anything interesting about the syllabi, such as the use of bolded type or an inclusion of humor. However, upon analyzing the larger quantities of syllabi that I collected for this project, I realized either that parts of my heuristic were too specific and would not work for more syllabi or that they were unnecessary and did not actually aid my analysis. Thus, for this study, I combined and eliminated a few questions, so that only seven remain.

The following include the seven heuristic questions, followed by Table 1 displaying syllabi responses.

1. Are faculty referring to specific devices (such as cell phones or laptops)?
2. Are faculty referring to electronic devices as a whole?

3. Are faculty referring to electronic devices with a combination of questions 2 and 3?

4. Do any faculty make exceptions for using electronic devices in the classroom?

5. Are there penalties for using electronic devices in class?

6. Do any of the syllabi not address the subject at all?

7. Do any of syllabi favor electronic device use?

Results:

Table 1: Syllabi responses to heuristic

Syllabus Number	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
1	✓						
2	✓		✓	✓	✓		
3				✓			
4	✓		✓		✓		
5				✓	✓		
6						✓	
7	✓						
8		✓			✓		✓
9	✓		✓		✓		
10	✓		✓	✓	✓		
11						✓	
12	✓		✓	✓	✓		
13	✓		✓	✓			
14	✓		✓	✓			
15	✓		✓	✓			
16	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
17	✓			✓			
18	✓			✓			
19	✓		✓	✓			
20						✓	
21						✓	
22	✓		✓		✓		

Table 1: Syllabi responses to heuristic cont.

Syllabus Number	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
23	✓			✓			✓
24	✓		✓	✓	✓		
25						✓	
26						✓	
27						✓	

As seen in Table 1, only three syllabi *favor* the use of electronic devices in class, and each of them only when using electronic devices for digitally accessing the class reading material. Using electronic devices "for class readings and nothing else" is the first line of one syllabus's technology policy. However, for another, using electronic devices for "accessing course texts" is only a parenthetical addendum in the middle of a sentence about the punishment for unsanctioned use, and yet another syllabus precedes the exception of use with "if you can actually read . . . on the tiny screen of your phone." These latter examples may favor device use, but they seem to favor it as an afterthought or as something students would not choose to do, rather than accepting device use as a classroom tool.

Seventeen out of twenty-seven syllabi refer to electronic devices by their specific names, such as "cell phone," "laptop," "iPad," etc. Furthermore, twelve out of those seventeen syllabi also refer to electronic devices as a whole, creating an interesting combination. For instance, one syllabus asks that students "turn off phones and pagers, ipods and any other distracting devices." Conversely, only one syllabus does the opposite and refers *only* to electronic devices as a whole, *without* mentioning "cell phones," "laptops," or the like. The difference between seventeen, or even twelve, syllabi referring

to devices in a certain way as opposed to only *one* referring to devices in another way is especially striking.

These references indicate which electronic devices are most often seen in the classroom, namely cell phones and laptops. For certain syllabi, they indicate a desire to cover all possible bases and leave no particular electronic device to be assumed as an exception, such as "cell phones and other electronic devices." In addition, in certain cases where all possible electronic devices are listed, these references show that all technology use is threatening to the classroom environment.

Ten of the twenty technology policies feature penalties for unsanctioned use of electronic devices. In two syllabi, this penalty is to "receive an 'unexcused' absence for that class." Likewise, in two others, the penalty is a mark of absence. However, on another syllabus, the penalty is that an assignment's grade will be a zero, whereas in two others, it is being dismissed from the classroom. For another syllabus, the penalty affects the participation grade, although another alters the participation grade *and* threatens that a student's final grade could possibly be "lowered by *at least* one-third of a letter grade [emphasis in original]." Similarly, in yet another syllabus, the penalty is dismissal from the classroom *and* an 'absent' mark.

The use of these penalties indicates a strong aversion to students using technology in class, to the point where penalties are needed to support that aversion. Yet, it seems that reinforcing technology policies with penalties is not enough; instead, these policies need to be enforced by having an adverse effect on grades. For some syllabi, these adverse effects are harsher than others are, such as the difference between a mark of absence and a dismissal from the classroom, or a lowered participation grade and a

lowered final grade. The varying degrees of penalty strength mark differences in faculty personalities. However, the extensiveness of some of the penalties makes one wonder if faculty actually take the time and energy to carry out these penalties, or if they are meant more to scare students away from disobeying.

Nevertheless, fourteen syllabi *do* state exceptions for using electronic devices in class. Despite some overlap, the exceptions are split mostly into three different categories, including MTSU alerts, disabilities, taking notes, and life's interferences. The differences in these exceptions show the differences in what faculty think are important or what their personal experiences are. For instance, a faculty member who has MTSU alerts as an exception might think that student safety is exceptionally important or find severe weather particularly dangerous, and a faculty member who has electronic note-taking as an exception might have struggled taking handwritten notes during his or her own education. Regardless of the specific reasons behind these different exceptions, they can demonstrate faculty personalities just as syllabi in general do.

Personally, however, I was particularly surprised to note how many syllabi make exceptions for MTSU alerts, as it was not something that I had ever really considered. Five syllabi cite the MTSU Emergency Notification System as an exception for using electronic devices in class. One sample gets specific, and claims the exception of MTSU alerts "[i]f we are expecting severe weather." However, four syllabi simply name the system; interestingly, in two of these syllabi, the professor asks to be notified right away, even in the middle of class, if any alert is sent through the system.

Although I do not have any disabilities or special needs that necessitate any classroom action or changes, I imagine that, if I did, it would be nice to see a syllabus

that mentions such an exception and encourages students to inform the professor about it. Six syllabi make such exceptions. Four of those six request documentation from the Disabilities office to prove that a student does have a special need which would require using technology in class; however, one sample simply states "unless you have special needs" as its exception.

Eight syllabi make exceptions for life's interferences. These interferences include the "emergency situation[s]" listed on three syllabi as exceptions and the simple "a real, true need" listed on a fourth. Two syllabi make exceptions for "important call[s]" or "emergency call[s]." Two other syllabi make exceptions for general situations, such as being "'on call' for work or due to a pending family emergency" or even "childcare concerns," the latter of which can be a frequent problem for non-traditional students.

Lastly, five syllabi make exceptions for using electronic devices during class when they are used to take notes. Where one syllabus requires "prior permission" of the professor before taking electronic notes will be allowed, another allows electronic note-taking only "[i]f you can avoid distracting other students." Two syllabi are quite firm, and simply state, "Use of a laptop is restricted to taking class notes while in class." However, one syllabus does allow for use of a computer in place of a paper notebook for in-class writings, just in case anyone would "rather type than write."

The inclusion of many of these exceptions in syllabi technology policies demonstrates an awareness of the world outside the classroom. Faculty recognize that Mother Nature, your aging mother, or *being* a mother can all come with their own emergencies and potential class disruptions, and that technology keeps students informed about such situations. In addition, exceptions to electronic device use in class indicate

that some faculty do not see technology as only threatening, for many faculty understand how useful technology can be in class, whether for the peace of mind that it can give or for efficient, electronic note-taking.

Some syllabi use intentionally strong and strict language in their technology policies, such as that which is often used in regards to the legal system. Seven different syllabi feature these examples: "violators," "violation," "offenders," "caught," "restricted," and "will not tolerate." Furthermore, several syllabi use italics, underline, or bold in their technology policies, drawing attention to them. These style and language choices make the tone of the technology policy stronger and harsher and serve to liken unsanctioned use of electronic devices in the classroom to a punishable, criminal offense.

In the course of my analysis, I noticed several interesting things that did not fit, per se, into any aspects of my heuristic. For instance, one syllabus gets strangely specific in its requirements by demanding that "electronic equipment, including earbuds, must be stored out of sight." Another syllabus is the only one to ask for student input regarding technology policies, where other syllabi seem unchangeable and immovable. Finally, two syllabi are the only ones that I found to have added a touch of humor when they say, "Repeat offenders [of the technology policy] will be sent to the gallows." Personally, I believe that more humor in syllabi, especially in technology policies as they can often sound harsh and demanding, would liven things up and create much more memorable syllabi.

Similarly interesting, some of the syllabi that I collected do not have any technology policies at all. As can be seen in Table 1, Q6, a total of seven of my twenty-seven collected syllabi had no technology policies. However, two of these are syllabi

from D2L online classes; these classes, being online, obviously do not have technology policies, although they provide important data, nevertheless. In an online class, technology is actually *required* because the class could not exist without it. When the classroom environment starts out being dependent upon the use of technology in and for the class, it changes the entire dynamic of the class. Therefore, in an online class's syllabus, there is certainly no technology policy; in fact, technology is hardly even mentioned or, if it is, only to state that proficiency in technology will be necessary in order to succeed in the class. This approach to technology is startlingly different from a traditional syllabus, where technology is often considered threatening to the classroom environment.

Additionally, one syllabus, as previously noted, does mention the parenthetical addendum that students are allowed to utilize laptops if their preference is more to "type than write" for in-class assignments. Likewise, another syllabus is from a writing workshop class just as the aforementioned one is. This unique type of class could be the reason why this syllabus does not have a technology policy, although it does not feature any addendums as the above-mentioned syllabus for using electronic devices to do in-class writings.

For three syllabi, it is unclear why there is no technology policy. Without questioning the faculty members of those syllabi, it is impossible to know their reasoning behind forgoing a technology policy when so many others have not. Perhaps the faculty are so laid back or unconcerned that they do not mind if students use electronic devices in class. Perhaps the technology policy was accidentally left out, a typo of sorts. Perhaps technology use in classrooms is so unapparent that a technology policy does not occur to

these faculty members. Perhaps it is not even a problem for these faculty's classes, so they see no need for such a policy. Or perhaps they choose to ignore the inundation and influence of technology by leaving the policy purposefully out. Further research on syllabi *without* technology policies could answer these questions definitively, provide insights into how classes without technology policies fare as opposed to those with them, and offer other instructors enough information to decide if they want to include or forgo a technology policy.

Conclusion:

Even without uncovering the mystery of missing technology policies, it is still obvious in many of the syllabi I studied that digital, mobile technology is threatening to the classroom environment and can even hijack it. But technology is not simply going to go away. And students are not simply going to stop owning it or bringing it to class. Nevertheless, based on my findings, many upper-division English syllabi at MTSU do not want students to have technology in class, although the syllabi acknowledge exceptions. These syllabi also feel a need to spell out what is considered technology, as well as to assign penalties for using that technology when 'not allowed,' so to speak.

Based on the results of my research, I recommend that faculty include more humor in their syllabi, overall, but specifically for their technology policies. When something attempts to dictate behavior as technology policies do, people tend to shut down or forget it. However, humor in a technology policy could not only make that policy more memorable, but it could also keep the policy from sounding too harsh or too much like a command. In addition, faculty can encourage students to address their

preferences for technology use in class, which can demonstrate that students' opinions matter, as well as helping engage students by making them a *part* of class rather than an unconcerned observer. Similarly, students can be involved in focus groups talking about technology use in classrooms; likewise, faculty can work across departments to see how others handle technology and what works for others or does not. Ongoing conversations about technology can help students and faculty discover new ways of thinking Overall, faculty can work smarter and not harder by finding ways, as others have done, of dealing with classroom technology other than just forbidding it or all-out ignoring it.

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Appendix A:

Greetings, MTSU English faculty!

My name is Erica Newman, and I am a senior, majoring in English. I am working

on an undergraduate thesis for the Honors College, and I need your help. My thesis is on

faculty technology policies within upper-division English classes here at MTSU. In order

to conduct my research, I need to study technology policies, as found in syllabi.

This is where you all come in. I am hoping to have at least thirty syllabi to

analyze, so I would be eternally grateful if you all would send me copies of the syllabi for

any upper-division English classes that you teach or have taught. If you think that your

technology policy is the same across more than one syllabus, that's okay and please send

them anyway because I will sort through them. If you think that you do not have a

technology policy in a syllabus, that's okay, too, because it is still important for my

findings.

Also, I just want to note, every syllabus will be made anonymous and receive a

sample number so that it is not connected to you, personally, at all. If you are interested

in being a part of the most essential aspect of my research and are willing to help me,

please either respond to this email with digital copies of any upper-division English

syllabi that you have or drop off any paper copies at Dr. Kate Pantelides' office, PH 387.

Thank you, in advance, and know that I appreciate you!

Sincerely,

Erica Newman