

Telecommunications Lesson Plan Essay  
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Teaching With Technology I: Telecommunications and Databases  
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*“Science and Technology multiply around us. To an increasing extent they dictate the languages in which we speak and think. Either we use those languages, or we remain mute.”*

J.G. Ballard (English novelist)  
Introduction to the French edition of *Crash* (1973)

As we move deeper into an electronic age, students and teachers must seek out new technologies which can enhance or improve the learning experience. Teachers and students must view the use of telecommunications as an essential tool for gathering information and communicating. This lesson plan seeks to incorporate the use of this tool, and an often overlooked advantage of the use of e-mail into interviewing and biography writing.

As an information resource, telecommunications, and, more specifically, the Internet, offer the greatest access to information yet seen in our civilization. While some of the information that is available is arguably less than appropriate for use in research, there is much more that can be found that is of great value. Where once our sources were limited by those on hand in the local library (access to which was geographically limited as well), we now have, quite literally, the world at our fingertips. The ease by which we can access this information cannot be overstated. It certainly represents a revolution in information availability. This resource was used in the initial research phase of our lesson. The Internet provided students with a broader range of material than what might be available to them using the library/media center alone.

Telecommunications, however, does not simply give teachers and students access to what many call ‘the worlds’ biggest encyclopedia’. Teachers and students need to be shown that the Internet is a communication resource and, more importantly, an interactive resource. Douglas Rushkoff, in his book, *Playing the Future*, quotes Mark Andreessen (creator of Mosaic, a precursor to the Netscape Navigator web browser) as saying, “The Internet is simply a communications medium. It reflects society....the fundamental nature of being human is always reflected in the communications medium. But the Internet will change how people communicate, how they conceive of themselves as a part of the world”. The message here is clear and it is all too often overlooked: The Internet is not just the ‘world’s biggest encyclopedia’, its greatest value is as a communications medium. Students in our lesson were able to collaborate on the lesson, in the roles of interviewer and subject, over a great distance. This is something that might have been possible using ‘snail-mail’ but hardly practical because of the time it would take. Whether the one-to-one communication of e-mail or the one-to-many aspects of newsgroups, telecommunications allows the communication of one’s thoughts, feelings, questions, and

answers to others immediately. We should not just be gatherers of information. We should look upon the realm of telecommunications as a means of providing information as well. Not simply with the web page, which does not allow for the easy interaction between people, but through the more personal avenues of e-mail.

There is also an ‘affordance’ of telecommunicating that can be quite beneficial in questioning and role-playing. Donald Norman, in Things That Make Us Smart, defines an affordance as “[a technology’s] possible functions”. He goes on to state, “We tend to use objects in ways suggested but the most salient perceived affordances, not in ways that are difficult to discover.” The affordance of telecommunicating that has been employed in this lesson is that of anonymity. While there are those who point to the fact that telecommunications makes us less ‘real’ to the other person as an avenue for deceit or worse, this aspect can be used to an advantage at appropriate times. The anonymity inherent in electronic communication, as opposed to direct, face to face interviewing, allowed the students the freedom to ask questions and pursue lines of questioning that they might otherwise have hesitated to follow. This medium alone hides everything personal about the questioner. Face to face questioning quite obviously reveals much about the person asking questions. Phone contact and even written communication can be revealing as well. E-mail removes all but the questioner’s name. This aspect of electronic communication is further used to advantage in the role-playing of the Elizabethan characters. Behind the curtain that e-mail provides, students who would ordinarily feel inhibited are able to immerse themselves in the roles they have assumed. Without the fear of being laughed at, the characters can more fully develop.

The use of telecommunications in the classroom should not be viewed as a departure from curriculum or an extraneous activity. It is a resource, a mode of communication with advantages over so-called ‘traditional’ communications. Teachers and students alike can, and should, take advantage of this medium and begin to incorporate it into teaching as well as learning.