Tips for Deepening Students' Abilities with Digital Communication

In the new COM sequence, teachers are asked to develop students' skills in digital communication. At heart, this expectation stems from the view that, even if students are "digital natives," they are not necessarily critical users or consumers of digital media. As a result, the COM sequence encourages teachers to strategically develop students' abilities to compose, critically analyze, and present information through electronic media.

Rather than expecting students to develop a broad framework for approaching every imaginable aspect of digital communication, COM courses encourage teachers to take a *selective* approach, by choosing a handful of digital communication topics and then working to improve students' thoughtful skill and consideration of those academically relevant and/or discipline-specific issues.

What are some ways that a COM course might develop students' understanding of digital communication?

- Develop students' strategic use of common word-processing and presentation programs. (O1, O3, O5)
- Broaden students' ability to evaluate and create discipline-relevant graphics. (O3, O5, O6, O7)
- Broaden students' awareness and use of applications for finding, organizing, and citing secondary research. (O2)
- Broaden students' awareness and use of applications for gathering primary research. (O2)
- Broaden student strategies for note-taking and synthesizing reading. (O2)
- Broaden student strategies for using and managing common electronic communication technologies. (O3, O4)
- Broaden students' ability to gather, participate in, and make use of discipline-relevant social media. (O1, O3, O5)
- Develop students' skill with technologies for collaborative work. (O4)
- Develop students' ability to navigate, comprehend, and produce multi-media texts. (O1, O3, O5, O6, O7)
- Develop students' understanding of appropriate strategies for participating in online discussion, including approaches to extending their presence beyond text-only contributions. (O3, O7)
- Explore the ways that "unstable" digital communications affect notions of permanence or certainty. (O3, O5)
- Discuss the differences between face-to-face and digitally-mediated discussion formats, in terms of gender/race, power, privilege, and comprehensiveness. (O1, O3)
- Identify the strengths of various modes of communication, such as paragraph-based text, lists, graphics, videos, and hypertext. (O1, O3, O5)
- Recognize the changing meaning of "reading" in digital settings, and exploring methods for effectively reading and researching in those settings. (O2, O3, O4)

A fuller framework for considering issues of digital communication

Stuart Selber, in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, argues that communication technologies are inseparable from communication activities. Therefore, he sees discussion of digital environments as a necessary component of efforts to promote students' disciplinary ways of communicating. Specifically, he describes three specific literacies that might be embedded into good communication instruction; of those, the first two seem especially relevant for communication-across-the-curriculum courses.

1. "Functional" literacy (computer as tool)
2. "Critical" literacy (computer as cultural artifact)
3. "Rhetorical" literacy (computer as hypertextual medium)

In COM courses, instruction and practice in digital communication ideally encourages students to both become more *capable* as well as more *critical* users of technology. Selber provides the following parameters, which may help instructors identify additional types of digital communication topics that might make sense in their own classes.

Parameters of a Functional Approach to Computer Literacy (Selber, 2004)	
Parameter	**Examples/Clarifications**
Educational goals: A functionally literate student uses computers effectively in achieving educational goals.	Formats/genres; advanced features of software programs; style sheets for collaborative work; bookmarks and tagging; accessibility options
Social conventions: A functionally literate student understands the social conventions that help determine computer use.	Impact of organizational culture on appropriate linguistic features/formats; perceptions of online spaces; varying etiquettes of online spaces
Management activities: A functionally literate student effectively manages his or her online world.	Alternative reading strategies; limitations of Google; approaches to automating communication tasks (like email sorting or RSS feeds)
Technological impasses: A functionally literate student resolves technological impasses confidently and strategically.	Causes (and solutions) to computer anxiety/phobia especially related to self-efficacy belief, race, gender, etc.

In addition to these functional considerations, Selber also argues that critical computer literacy is valuable in that it helps student see computers (and other digital technologies) not merely as neutral tools but also as artifacts that have been shaped by humans and therefore reflect the assumptions, power dynamics, and biases of their human creators. Instructors are encouraged, when possible, to push students towards an understanding of this critical dimension of digital communication.