

# Why Can't I Do It Here?: Using Students as Policy Educators and Enforcers

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## ABSTRACT

Making incoming students aware of university computing policies is often taxing. Beyond the challenge of awareness is the difficulty in enforcing computing policies, especially in residence halls, where many students have the attitude of “I did it at home. Why can't I do it here?”

In this paper, the authors discuss how Northwest Missouri State University's Client Computing Department employs a three-pronged strategy to increase student IT policy awareness through the use of students as teachers during one month each summer and two whirlwind days in the fall, and through residence hall training, bulletin boards and newsletters. Additionally, the authors expand upon how these same students are used to deploy and enforce university computing policies, which are necessary for ensuring the security and stability of the campus network.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

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K.8.3 [Personal Computing]: Management/Maintenance

K.3.2 [Computers and Education]: Computer and Information Science Education – *Literacy*

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## Keywords

Management, Supervision, Customer Service, Communication

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## 1. INTRODUCTION—OVERCOMING THE “WHY CAN'T I DO IT” MINDSET?

How to teach and promote ethical technological behaviors is challenging on a college campus, since students, particularly incoming students, often have the “I did it at home” attitude, asking “Why can't I do it here?” This belief is often strengthened by the fact that students at Northwest Missouri State University are charged a nominal technology fee for use of the campus network and computing facilities. Consequently, many students erroneously believe that because they are “paying” for it, they have the right to use the network and campus computing equipment in any way they please. This is especially significant when one considers that most of these students do not have the kind of educational knowledge or background that would aid them in making appropriate decisions with regard to the technology now available to them.

Northwest's Information Systems Department has been continually confronted with the challenge of serving the campus community with uninterrupted network services while at the same time “policing” that community in an effort to restrict recreational activities that put the network at risk. Client Computing, which is the user side of Information Systems, deals in a person-to-person fashion with campus network users and has had the responsibility of helping to shape and deploy policy.

One of the greatest challenges for Client Computing is reaching incoming students who are the most likely to commit network policy infractions primarily through simple ignorance of policy or the negative impact of their actions on the network. A way to resolve this situation is to have students be responsible for teaching each other, which is an effective tool for improving the campus climate and ensuring the stability of the campus network.

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [men and women] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other . . . Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.

- Pedagogy of the Oppressed [3]

According to author Doug Johnson, who wrote *Learning Right from Wrong in the Digital Age: An Ethics Guide for Parents, Teachers, Librarians, and Others Who Care about Computer-Using Young People*,

When students start using technology, particularly computers, they're operating in a virtual world where they find it harder to decide which behaviors are right or wrong. Most of us would never shoplift, but software piracy is widespread. That's because many people don't see their online actions as having the same significance as actions in the real world.[1]

Persuading students to see their online actions as having the same significance as actions in the real world is crucial to the stability of a campus network. For instance, sharing folders with movies or songs to the entire campus, while seemingly harmless, can eat up bandwidth and slow down normal academic operations. How to persuade students to change their perception of their online actions without them "tuning out" the messenger can be challenging, particularly when students may see the messenger as a representative of an oppressive administration and part of the problem. Thus, Client Computing made the decision to turn to the students themselves as a conduit for spreading policy awareness in a more palatable fashion.

## **2. WHY USE STUDENTS AS TEACHERS**

It has been the Client Computing Department's experience when dealing with students that they are far more receptive to learning policies from their peers who can more readily relate to and empathize with their perspectives and problems. Peer-to-Peer communication has proven more productive, because the majority of students tend to perceive such interaction as advice rather than as a lecture.

Of course, using students as IT educators is not a new concept. According to the *Associated Press*, about fifty colleges and universities across the nation pay or grant free tuition to undergraduates to serve as technology mentors for technology cautious professors. For example, at the University of Vermont, faculty needing technology assistance can ask to be connected with computer-savvy students through the university's Technology Collaborative Action Team, a program operated entirely by student staff members. [2]

With many such examples of the successful use of students as educators, Client Computing made the decision to expand the role of student staff to more effectively reach incoming students. The program described below is a continuation of Client Computing's efforts, begun in 1987, to incorporate student assistance into user support.

## **3. THREE-PRONGED IMPLEMENTATION MODEL**

In an effort to best serve students, while at the same time assuring network stability, Client Computing continually investigates and analyzes the changing needs of both its department and those using university computing facilities and network resources. Over time, Client Computing developed a three-pronged strategy to more effectively educate campus users about the technology at their disposal and the ramifications of inappropriate behavior with regard to that technology. This strategy included revamping freshman computer training to include campus computing policies, developing an active association with the campus SOAR

(Summer Orientation, Advisement, & Registration) program and establishing a new student position in the freshman residence halls.

### **3.1 FIRST PRONG—REACHING FRESHMAN BEFORE THEY MOVE TO CAMPUS**

In an effort to try to educate students on Northwest IT resources and policies prior to their even moving into the residence halls, Client Computing made the decision to take advantage of SOAR. As an introduction to the campus environment, SOAR presents information to incoming freshman on the academic and technological services and resources available to Northwest students.

Conducted during the month of June, SOAR brings groups of incoming freshman and their parents to campus for a day of activities and informational sessions. Among the many activities of the day is registration for Fall trimester classes. At that time, students are given a copy of the Client Computing Computer User's Guide and their Northwest username and password, which gives them access to many online services including e-mail. The User's Guide contains the campus computing policies and guidelines. Throughout the day, SOAR leaders, who are students themselves, are available to answer any questions or address any concerns the students and their parents may have, including those dealing with technology.

Prior to the start of SOAR, representatives from the Client Computing department meet with SOAR leaders to brief them on any current computing issues or major changes in campus computing policies. SOAR leaders are also given the opportunity to discuss any concerns or questions they might have regarding IT resources, processes and policies.

Client Computing representatives also man a booth during the SOAR Fair to answer computing questions and hand out to interested students and parents quick-reference guides dealing with personal computers and campus policies. By reaching these students and their parents at SOAR, many potential problems can be averted.

### **3.2 SECOND PRONG—STARTING FRESHMAN OUT ON THE RIGHT FOOT ONCE ON CAMPUS**

Since freshman and transfer students have typically been the most likely candidates to commit network and computing equipment violations and abuse at Northwest, Client Computing felt it was imperative to find an effective avenue to educate new students about campus computing policies before they even began their coursework. Consequently, Client Computing decided to overhaul its Freshman Computer Training as the second prong of its three-pronged strategy.

Freshman Computer Training was initially designed to train students on how to use basic university computing software, such as word processing and email. However, Freshman Computer Training is now an important tool used to communicate computing policies to freshman and transfer students, as well as

instruction on how to use Northwest's information technology resources. Policy topics include, but are not limited to, what types of personal electronic equipment are not allowed on campus; e-mail issues including mass mail policies and chain and hoax messages; the mass e-mail deletion schedule; copyright issues including MP3s, Kazaa and other file-sharing networks; the sending of copyright protected material via e-mail, web page, or messenger services; and the disciplinary action process for Campus Computing violations.

The computer training session leaders are returning students and are comprised of Client Computing Computer Lab Consultants and PERTs (Peer Educators in Residence for Technology). Why use Consultants and PERTs as computer trainers? One of the duties of both consultants and PERTs is to communicate computing policies to the students.

The computer training sessions are held the week prior to fall classes starting and are 45 minutes in length. In several computer labs, the trainers conduct 6 concurrent sessions for a total of 12 hours over a two-day period.

### 3.3 THIRD PRONG—STAYING CONNECTED WITH FRESHMAN

The third prong of the Client Computing strategy was to try and continue to stay connected with freshman once they moved into the halls of campus housing. By opening a line of communication with these new students, Client Computing hoped to enrich the students' campus computing experience by providing a liaison between them and Information Systems, which would allow the department to become more fully cognizant of the computing issues and problems experienced by new students. To facilitate the exchange of information, a new student position was established in Spring 2004.

The innovative PERT position was initially developed to deploy students in the freshman residence halls as network policy awareness educators. The position quickly expanded to include other duties, such as the configuration of personal computers on the Northwest network.

The PERTs begin the education process within their residence halls through the use of bulletin boards, newsletters and other creative programming ideas. In addition, the PERTs act as policy enforcers when policy violations are reported by the network administrators or other campus staff. The first step of enforcement is to contact the policy violators and inform them of the violation. Once the student has been informed of the infraction, the PERT then helps the student resolve the situation, which may include configuring the student's personal machine correctly or helping them to remove viruses and update their anti-virus protection.

First or second time policy violators are required to attend a Computing Ethics/Policies Workshop, which the PERTs conduct on a regularly scheduled basis. If students have a valid University excused reason for not attending the workshop, such as a conflicting class time, the PERTs then contact those students and conduct one-on-one Computing Ethics/Policies Workshops with them.

Approximately 32 students were found in violation of campus computing policies during the 2003-2004 academic year. Of these, two were granted an appeal and 23 completed the Computing Policies/Ethics Workshop. The remaining seven individuals will complete the disciplinary process at the beginning of the fall 2004 trimester.

However, the PERTs are so much more than mere policy educators and enforcers. They are a flesh-and-blood, in-house, computing resource for freshman students living in campus housing. Overall, the response to the PERTs has been extremely positive. Students can not only seek them out with regard to computing policy questions, but also to assist them with computer related problems.

## 4. CONCLUSION

As Internet-based learning technologies are used with greater frequency to supplement university classroom instruction, a continuing concern facing Client Computing and educators everywhere will be how to help students embrace and use these technologies for achieving their educational and career goals, while promoting good computing conduct.

It is well known that a student's perceptions of technological ease and efficacy, as well as the accessibility of competent assistance, can positively influence student attitudes towards technology. As students experience more frequent positive technology encounters, they perceive it to be easier to employ and more useful. Therefore, they are more likely to use it both academically and personally.

Similarly, a student's perceptions of the ease and efficacy of interaction with a policy educator can influence their opinion of the legitimacy of technological restrictions and regulations. More importantly, if that interaction is perceived as positive rather than negative, it is more likely the student will support these administrative boundaries and policies.

There is an old saying perhaps best articulated in the Walt Disney movie *Mary Poppins* that says a "spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." Deploying students to educate students is one small but significant way that Client Computing is trying to sweeten an often-bitter pill for many incoming students to swallow—"Just because you did it at home, doesn't mean you have the right to do it here. More importantly, it doesn't mean it was ever legal to begin with."

## 5. REFERENCES

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