

The Digital Umbilical How Clear Missions Guide Electronic Technology Policies

By Christopher A. Thurber, Ph.D.

History Repeats Itself

In 1916, when Alexander Graham Bell visited Camp Marienfeld in South Carolina, he remarked to its director, C. Hanford Henderson, "It may surprise you, but I congratulate you on the fact that you have no telephone." Clearly, Bell's vision of a healthy camp included a chance for people to free themselves from electronic technology and cloister themselves from the outside world. These freedoms allowed campers and staff alike to focus on sports, campcraft, and aquatics. It also permitted maturation and the rapid cultivation of new friendships. Today, Bell's vision is shared by some and not by others. And the proliferation of technology has changed the question from "To have or not to have technology?" to "How can camps integrate technology thoughtfully?" Like any tool, electronic technology can be used or misused.

The Laces Lesson

Camps have always used technology. The boys who attended the Gunnery Camp in 1861 wore shoes with laces. Those laces were pieces of technology. What parent, director, or camper — then or now — would debate the merits of laces? Sure, there are alternate footwear fastening technologies, such as Velcro®, buckles, and air pumps, but most hiking and athletic shoes still use the technology of laces. They work, they last, and they immediately teach us two things: (1) Technology — in so far as we're talking about innovative gear — can be very useful; and (2) It is not technology per se, but electronics (as Bell cautioned) that may sustain or detract from a camp's mission. To these two lessons, I hasten to add the following: (3) Inventions have always seduced people with promises of a better life.

Mission=Goals+Methods

With these three lessons in mind, all camps must examine their mission by asking: What are our goals and how do we achieve them? In the business world, this is called a prospectus; in the advertising world, it's a value proposition; and in camping, it is in vogue to call this approach intentionality. The idea is not as trendy as you might think. At the turn of the last century, progressive educator John Dewey wrote, "To profess to have an aim and then neglect the means of execution is self delusion of the most dangerous sort."

With Dewey's admonition in mind, it is evident that no intelligent debate about the place of electronic technology in camp can be had, nor any sound policy be made, unless a camp first articulates its mission. A sample secular mission, with both goals and methods clearly spelled out, might sound like this:

At Camp Traditional, our goals are to have children be physically healthy, make friends, develop independence, behave unselfishly, appreciate the natural environment, learn new athletic and artistic skills, and gain a sense of personal and community responsibility. We do this by leading by example, participating with campers in a variety of healthy risks, initiating challenging and rewarding group activities, encouraging camp and community service projects, allowing campers to choose how they spend some of their time, and nurturing supportive relationships between campers and their cabin leaders.

Each camp's mission statement will be different, and it may also incorporate a religious component. But all missions must include goals and methods. To be a useful foundation for a technology policy, it must also reflect reality. It must be what the camp actually does, rather than some collection of lofty platitudes or marketing slogans. Now is the time to write or revise your mission, as necessary.

Mission Advancement

From this point, constructing an electronic technology policy is possible, though not always straightforward. The idea is not simply to create a list of forbidden devices. That's folly for two reasons. First, new devices come onto the market each day and what's hot today will be junk in two years. Second, there are so many hybrid devices, such as a music player that takes photos, that separating the authorized from the outlawed gets tricky. Instead, the idea is to ask, "How can electronic technology advance the camp's mission?"

Begin with Bell's own example. He invented that piece of technology, but he clearly was not seduced by its novelty. Yet the telephone, like its newer cousins, also allowed wonderful connections between people separated by great distance. It helped build relationships. Today, things like digital photographs, which can be instantly posted or sent to family members, are a source of great joy and help keep people's lives connected.

In addition to all the positive uses of new technology, we also witness people hypnotized by its sparkle. Attracted to the cachet of the latest, greatest, smallest, wireless, multitasking gadget and to the promise of an easier, sexier, faster life, people are actually drawn away from others. In the extreme, they become reclusive or so immersed in working or playing with their gadgets that they may neglect their families, their spiritual life, or their physical health.

Busy Signal

Want an example? This summer at the beach, I watched a father "on vacation" check his e-mail on a handheld device while his four-year-old daughter frolicked alone in the waves. When he switched to making a phone call, he turned around to get better reception and put a finger in his nonphone ear. No surprise that he didn't see his daughter get smashed by the next wave or hear her cry for help. It didn't matter, because another parent scooped the girl up and brought her ashore. The dad flashed an appreciative grin and finished up his call.

This experience disturbed me on so many levels: as a father, as a camp waterfront director, as a psychologist, and as a fellow human being alive on the planet. But what is to blame? Technology or the person using it? After all, I have a cell phone. I check e-mail. I'm using a computer to write this. I send digital photos of my children to relatives. I love electronic technology. The difference is that, like many people, I try to apply it thoughtfully. So, I turn my phone ringer off during therapy sessions, I put an away message on my e-mail when I'm on vacation, and I don't talk on the cell phone when I'm driving. OK, I lied about that last one, but I do try to use methods that advance my goals rather than endanger them. More and more camps are now doing the same.

Optimal Experiences

After considering the partial table of pros and cons (see page 47) yourself, I recommend you invite (now, during the off-season) the rest of your senior staff to join the discussion and debate. Heck, you could even open an online chat room just for that purpose! Most camp directors stand to learn something new about how electronic technologies are currently used by their campers and staff.

Using a separate forum, such as a focus group with local families, you might also want to solicit the opinions of campers and their parents. (Maybe you already get some of that on your end-of-session evaluations.) Beware, though, of becoming market-driven in the process. Lots of campers will tell you they want unfettered access to all kinds of dazzling technology, but they have a myopic view, driven mostly by a desire to be entertained in ways to which they have become accustomed. And some parents will tell you they want unfettered access as well, but they are driven by a natural, overbearing desire to stay in constant, if virtual, contact with their progeny. This kind of digital umbilical is developmentally unhealthy.

Throughout these conversations, keep an open mind, keep your mission in sharp focus, and keep reminding yourself

that anything you bring to camp should make it better. Keep asking, "How would the use of this technology bring our campers closer to the optimal camp experience?" And remember that true partnering with parents is about discussing the rationale for your policy, not about ceding to their every demand. You are the camp professional.

Digital Detox?

So thorny is this issue that many camp professionals acquiesce by saying, "We didn't need any of this electronic junk back in the day. We certainly don't need it now for our campers to have a good time." That's a solid argument in a lot of ways, but it misses a key point: The population of children attending camp today is different than it was twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred years ago. These boys and girls have been brought up using electronic technology for communication, education, entertainment, and relationships.

Any camp that wishes to provide some pure outdoor experiences, devoid of electronic technology, must be ready to deal with campers' "technology separation anxiety." Some children will need assistance refining their conversational, writing, and social skills; others will need help as they experience withdrawal from daily screen time; still others will need support as they adjust to not talking with their parents on the phone throughout the day.

Write and Share

No matter how strong the gadget withdrawal symptoms are, all campers can survive the transition from home to camp. But before you have them unplug, to whatever extent you require, you owe it to all your camper families to explicitly state your electronic technology policy. A sample policy might read like this:

Consistent with our goals of promoting self-reliance and new social connections, we limit the use of electronic technology at Camp Traditional. Campers are not permitted to bring electronic devices of any sort. Exceptions are flashlights, wristwatches, and prescription medical devices, such as nebulizers. Each cabin leader brings music and a stereo for the cabin's collective enjoyment during rest hour, free time, and after lights-out.

Consistent with our goal of having campers maintain a connection with home, parents are permitted to send substantive e-mail letters in addition to traditional letters. These will be distributed once a day during mail call. An appropriate frequency for either form of correspondence is about twice a week. Campers are encouraged to reply with traditional letters and postcards.

As with missions, every camp's electronic policy will differ. If a camp posts photos on their Web site, for example, the policy should state how many and how often. Such a camp should also proffer the caveat that not every camper will appear in every posting, and although some may not be smiling, that does not indicate a problem. In any case, be explicit and be consistent with your mission.

Infractions

Now, what to do with those parents who don't read your materials, or those who do, but pack a cell phone for their child anyway? Or what about the camper who sneaks in the personal video game, digital music player, or digital camera? Well, if you've publicized your policy, the easiest response is to confiscate, label, and store equipment in a safe place, as it is discovered. No big deal. On visiting day or on closing day, you can return it directly to the parents. Some camps will include a copy of their policy with returned equipment.

So that parents are not tempted to break your technology rules for perceived safety reasons, offer all families the reassurance that (1) you will be in touch with them in the unlikely event their child has a problem; and (2) you have a disaster response plan that does not require campers to possess any electronic devices of their own.

If your new policy restricts usage more than in previous seasons, it's best to give all camper families ample warning. Consider a gradual rollback of devices over the next couple of seasons.

Most important, you need the buy-in of your staff. That is why inviting them to be part of the policy development is essential. They will undoubtedly be called upon by both campers and parents to justify both the inclusion and the exclusion of various electronics. Also, remember that you can't make all of the people happy all of the time. Expect some detractors. Some staff and some families may feel so strongly — either that they want a camp more technologically connected or protected — that they will actually go looking for another camp. Ultimately, if your camp is doing what it does best, the staff and families best matched for your camp will find you. Be resolute.

Wireless Interpersonal Networking (WIN)

Camps were initially conceived by visionary educators and other youth development professionals who were striving for a different experience for children. Different from schools, different from neighborhoods, and different from home. Those pioneers recognized the value in temporarily sequestering a diverse group of children with experienced leaders who could function as their surrogate caregivers and who could challenge them in new ways.

Of course there were early debates about just how rustic a camp should be. In the 1880s, Ernest Balch, who directed Camp Chocorua, chastised Winthrop Talbot, who directed Camp Harvard, for hiring a professional cook. Balch called this ". . . unseemly and useless in a boys' camp, considering there should be no servant caste . . ." There are still debates about how rustic a camp should be, only now we hear about Blackberry's®, iPods®, and Trios™, objects completely unknown a mere decade ago.

The challenge for camp directors is to keep camp relevant in this modern age. The good news is that with a thoughtful application of technology, that goal is achievable. Camps are also uniquely suited to teach children a revolutionary new skill called "Wireless Interpersonal Networking." This is what will help them do well in a college admissions interview, maintain healthy relationships, and get promoted in their new job. What is Wireless Interpersonal Networking? It's having a completely free, real-time, face-to-face, authentic conversation with another human being. This is such a departure from their usual existence that for most campers it will be what they remember best about your camp.

References:

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