

Essential Digital Literacies for Speech Language Pathology Students

Context

As program director of the Master of Science in Speech, Language, and Learning (MS SLL), I have the privilege of preparing stellar graduate students to become exceptional speech language pathologists. Essential to their eventual professional practice is their ability to effectively use digital tools for information access and storage, scheduling, record keeping, and professional branding. It has become increasingly clear that certain digital skills assumed to be present in our students are sorely lacking. During my time at Northwestern, I have slowly incorporated direct instruction regarding certain digital topics. For example, I have a Northwestern librarian join us to discuss electronic reference management. Soon I realized the students needed instruction on electronic database use, an essential skill for accessing the research that is the foundation of evidence-based practice.

It seemed as if every conversation revealed another layer of unexpected knowledge gaps in digital literacies essential to the workaday world. This year, I surveyed my incoming students and found a profound dearth of knowledge of basic digital terms (RSS, domain name, etc.), basic digital tools, and tools and apps for personal knowledge management. Additionally, they demonstrated an alarming lack of awareness of how to present a professional persona on the Web.

Illustrating this, out of 66 new incoming graduate students in the MS SLL program:

- 85% did not know what RSS was.
- 97% did not use a RSS feed reader or aggregator.
- 87% had never made a Google Scholar alert.
- 93% did not subscribe to a single electronic journal table of contents.
- 85% did not use an electronic reference management system.

I am not alone in seeing a need for instruction on these topics. Students were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed that direct instruction would benefit them professionally in the following areas:

- Electronic tools for time management.

- Electronic database use.
- Google Scholar alerts.
- Electronic tables of contents.
- Reference managers.
- Professional social media use.
- RSS feeds and aggregators.
- Tools for saving digital information.
- Crafting an online presence.

Depending on the tool or topic, 56% to 91% agreed or strongly agreed that direct instruction would be beneficial to them professionally.

Project & Objectives

In addition to the required coursework, our students participate in a weekly Noon Conference during which a variety of professional issues are addressed. While I have infused some of these issues into the Noon Conference curriculum, covering all of these topics would limit my ability to include speakers to address other professional issues in the clinical milieu. As such, I am currently crafting a series of online modules using Canvas to address these necessary digital literacies. These modules will be added to the Noon Conference curriculum beginning Fall 2016 and will span the duration of the program.