

## Tomorrow's Professor Msg.#203 Teaching With An Online Public Forum

Folks:

Online public forums are gaining popularity in a number of courses, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Such forums can provide significant opportunities for dialog, particularly among students who are reluctant to speak up in class. How well do such forums work in other respects, how difficult and time-consuming are they to operate, and are their potential down-sides to such efforts? The posting below, which examines some of these questions, is from a new book, *Interactive Learning: Vignettes from America's Most Wired Campuses*, David G. Brown editor, International Center for Computer-Enhanced Learning - Wake Forest University. The article is by Jean Goodwin assistant professor Northwestern University. Published by Anker Publishing Company, Inc., Bolton, MA Copyright ? 2000 by Anker Publishing Company, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

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 UP NEXT: A Shared Mission Partnership with The National Teaching and Learning Forum

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

----- 1,469 words -----  
 TEACHING WITH AN ONLINE PUBLIC FORUM

From: *Interactive Learning: Vignettes from America's Most Wired Campuses*, pp.127-129  
 By Jean Goodwin, Northwestern University

Contemporary Problems of Freedom of Speech is an upper-division course enrolling about 80 students annually. The course acts as an informal capstone, joining the diverse disciplines within Northwestern's School of Speech. Its goal is to get students to develop their views on the functions of speech in our common life. The class proceeds by the case method: examining different sorts of problematic speech-violent speech before abortion clinics, harassing speech on campus, sexual speech online-and considering what, if anything, should be done about it. The primary readings are the arguments made by the Supreme Court in deciding similar cases. And the primary method is to induce students to start making arguments for themselves.

### EDUCATIONAL THEORIES:

Students at Northwestern are articulate. Among their friends, in conference with teachers, in small discussion sections, they readily assert and argue for their opinions. All these interactions, however, typically take place under conditions of intimacy. The people involved know each other well, already comprehend and often share each other's views, and can rely on a basic level of mutual trust and understanding. What Northwestern students, like most traditional college students, have rarely encountered are situations of publicity. These are situations where they must interact with their fellow citizens-people they don't know but with whom they share a common life. One task of college teaching must be to initiate the student into the skills needed for civic life-the skills of publicity. These include the ability to present oneself in a way that demands respect, the ability to defend one's position against a broad range of criticism, and the ability to respond to views very different from one's own.

My goal for the last three years has been to use a technology with minimal constraints to enable students to address a public: each other. The online public forum aims to establish conditions as close as possible to those that prevail in public life generally. The Individual has to address and respond to people unaccountably different from her, facing a real risk of misunderstanding and being misunderstood.

COMPUTER-ENHANCED TECHNIQUE: THE ONLINE PUBLIC FORUM

The syllabus directs students to the local USENET newsgroup that will serve as the public forum for the class. It advises students that they should post to the forum forcefully (i.e., taking a position on any free speech issue and arguing it) and responsively (i.e., commenting on other students' posts). It also points them to some resources from which they might draw ideas (e.g., the Controversies Bank on the course web site at <http://faculty-web.at.nwu.edu/commstud/freespeech>).

I try to keep the boundary between the newsgroup and class time permeable. To get students started, I suggest in class they try posting online their initial and rough philosophy of free speech. After some momentum builds, I raise questions about managing the newsgroup such as strategies for how to sort through the hundred or so postings made each week. I bring relevant newsgroup threads into class discussion. Within a few weeks, students begin to break the class/newsgroup boundary the other way, posting online commentary on issues raised in class.

Like any public forum, the newsgroup is self-regulating. I impose no rules beyond a requirement that everyone must sign their posts. When someone sees something problematic occurring, we talk about it. With almost clockwork predictability, for example, the first serious "flame war" or online shouting match occurs about four weeks into the quarter—just about the same time as we're discussing "fighting words" in class! The students themselves intervene, and then we deliberate on whether we should impose rules on the forum. Other typical recurrent issues include whether non-class members should be allowed to participate and whether requiring online participation "chills" it.

At the beginning, one can already find expressed an attitude that students rarely allow into their official work: what I think of as the "they're stupid" stance of garden-variety closed-mindedness. It is, oddly enough, a sort of victory when students say things they ordinarily never would to the teacher's face:

My biggest pet peeve is stupidity—and unfortunately there seems to be epidemic proportions of it in this world. A lot of the subject material in our newsgroup centers on stupidity.

Within a few weeks, some early starters are engaging in a sort of active open-mindedness, finding issues with two defensible sides and debating them soberly, all the while setting an outstanding example for the rest of the class. I try to continue to loosen things up by declaring "inversion week" once a month or so, encouraging everyone to argue the opposite of their actual opinions.

## RESULTS

A snapshot of the newsgroup in the seventh week of the quarter shows almost 200 messages on 68 different topics; about 20 of these were continued from previous weeks, a dozen were news clippings posted by me, and another half dozen were announcements. Popular new threads—all student-initiated—included beer advertising on the scoreboard at the football stadium, speech codes at BYU, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and local news coverage of gruesome auto wrecks—each generating six to ten messages that week. Some students posted multiple short messages; most posted one longish one (two--to three-page equivalents).

The online public forum, however, is not a means but an end; its primary product should be the enjoyable and frustrating experience of arguing with this group of gathered strangers. Whether such public debate is worthwhile is, of course, a legitimate subject for public debate, one always opened by the students themselves at some point in the quarter.

In the final course evaluations, more than half of the students agreed that "I enjoyed developing an online 'personality,'" and "I feel I got to know several people on the newsgroup, although I never met them face-to--face." About the same proportion spontaneously discussed themselves and/or their fellow students in the unstructured part of the evaluation. For example: "You'll learn about your own views and the views of others." "We didn't just learn from the instructor; we learned from each other." "I learned about how annoying NU dorks are."

Interestingly, slightly more than half the students strongly agreed that "there was more B.S. on the newsgroup than in a regular discussion section." Personally, I don't think there was more breath (or electrons) wasted in the

newsgroup than in other teaching situations; instead, it would seem to be a matter of salience. B.S. in discussion fades and is forgotten. B.S. in the online public forum gets its due reward: It sits there and stinks.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

- o The problem of propaganda. While online discussion sounds like regular discussion, only less fun, online papers sound like regular papers, only less work.
- o The problem of access. At Northwestern, students have good network access-almost three quarters, for example, strongly agree that "I have easy access to the Internet where I sleep at night." Obviously, if routine participation were a greater burden, an online forum might be unworkable.
- o The problem of usability. The technology itself created more problems for the instructor than the students. While 90% of students found the newsgroup easy to use by the end of the quarter, probably half encountered problems and contacted the instructor to help resolve them. One solution might be to dedicate a TA to technical problems. Another is to shift to a web format, which allows the same sort of asynchronous communication in a more familiar interface.
- o The problem of grading. As often, less turns out to be more. In the first few tries, I attempted to impose quality control through grading, penalizing students for not using the course readings or not re-ponding to their fellow students. As well as being a pain for the TAs, this created a climate of censor-ship for the students: They felt that someone was watching them while they wrote. I've found that a more or less pass/fail system (three points every week the student posts at least once, up to 24 points in the ten-week quarter) elicits the same quality work without the intrusion.

The key remaining difficulty. The curve for the class is bimodal, with peaks at relatively high and relatively low grades. In the cacophony of the online public forum, nonparticipation or just going through the motions is hard to catch; I fear I'm losing a chunk of students here to complete passivity or anti-newsgroup bitterness. In the final course evaluations, about 15% advised, "lose the newsgroup." To capture these students, I offer an alternative to online participation: a real-world discussion group organized by the students themselves. This is not an opportunity the unattached have been willing to seize. I'm going to try next year placing students in small, permanent work groups, in the hope that fewer will be able to opt out of the course this way. Whether the intimacy of the work groups can be combined with the publicity of the public forum, however, remains to be seen.

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