

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Messing around in class

Social media are making their way into universities and transforming the future of learning

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We tend to see communication mainly through the lens of business, where the sender's intention is to convince the audience to purchase a product or service or to participate in an event or cause, or to change a behavior. Given that more young people are adept at simultaneously being receivers and senders, content creators and knowledge curators, you might think that institutions of higher learning would do a better job of accommodating them.

In fact, many institutions are experimenting with ideas intended to address this shift in thinking. According to a 2010 survey from the Educause Center for Applied Research, 40 percent of undergraduates report updating wikis, and 25 percent use social bookmarking. As students sit in classes armed with laptops, netbooks, tablets, smartphones, digital recorders and clickers, a teacher faces no less a challenge than does a marketer attempting to reach consumers distracted by multiple media inputs and information overload. A closer look at how universities are

reconfiguring the way their constituencies—faculty, administrators, students and affiliated organizations—communicate with one another offers us valuable insights into our jobs, which also involve addressing different publics. After all, these young people will soon be working alongside us. Universities are crucibles of experimentation; some of the lessons learned there can help us as communicators to deal with these issues. Like businesses, universities face the challenges of transparency, feedback, collaboration and co-creation of content.

Likewise, their IT departments have defined policies. Yet in this experimental phase, they've sent mixed signals. It's not uncommon for university students to complete assignments using Wikipedia these days, but there are some schools that ban its use as a resource. The aforementioned Educause survey found that 62.7 percent of U.S. undergraduates own an Internet-enabled handheld device, yet many universities have signs posted outside lecture halls about turning off cell-phones and electronic devices. Some faculties worry that too

many screens in class could be distracting to the student and to others. Others worry about what to do when students who have grown up on video games and texting show up in class and struggle with reading the coursework. On the other hand, some educators are introducing game mechanics to coursework.

But in many universities, those responsible for curriculum development and IT have begun to take a different view. They are not just trying to solve a problem (class size) or fill a need (to be relevant to “digital natives”), but instead want to position their institutions in a way that anticipates the future of learning. One such challenge emerged when faculty members at Purdue University, in Indiana, became concerned about cell-phone and laptop use.

“As we talked, we came to the idea that we could try working with the technology instead of against it,” says Hans Aagard, senior educational technologist at Purdue. The result was a social networking-powered mobile web application designed for students called Hotseat that enables back-channel communication. You

could say it is the digital equivalent of notes being passed among students while the class is in session—except that the instructors have access to those notes. But it is more than that, as we will see in a moment.

Sage, off stage

While change can be scary, it's not new. Around the turn of the last century, librarians—who used to be our human search engines—warned us of two dangers. First, they worried that the introduction of fiction into the library system would distract people from the “real” knowledge out there. Second, they suggested that library patrons not be allowed to pick books off the shelves themselves, as they might completely mess up the catalog system. In other words, even a hundred years ago people feared that pure knowledge should not be tinkered with, and that knowledge consumers should not be trusted.

Sounds like the knock against Wikipedia and YouTube a few years back, doesn't it?

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Purdue, a professor reviewed Hotseat before his students arrived and wondered if the IT staff could hide the back-channel comments from everybody in class—except him. He was finally convinced that that's the whole point of Hotseat—to make the entire class's comments visible to anyone. “It's a power shift,” Aagard says. “We are basically saying, ‘All information does not reside with me.... It's OK for you to listen to each other, and we think learning can happen that way.’” Turns out that the lecturer (often referred to in education circles as the “sage on the stage”) has the most to gain from this, as he or she steps back and lets students interact with and listen to one another. The lecturer could also use Hotseat to take a real-time reading of how the information being presented is being understood, and adjust

the pace or depth of the content to address the issues being discussed.

Tinkering with the “sage on the stage” model means messing with a tradition that has been around for centuries. Changing



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knowledge systems does not faze Michael Netzley, assistant professor of corporate communication at the business school at Singapore Management University. In 2007, Netzley began experimenting with a wiki in a course called Digital Media Across Asia, which he teaches twice a year. He has found that social media let students step outside their classroom and student roles, permitting them to make mistakes—in public!—and get real-world feedback.

“Positive public feedback can also be a strong motivator, more so than only [the professor’s] feedback,” Netzley says.

The new slate

The introduction of interactive, digital “smart” boards in the classroom (such as Blackboard) over the past decade forced teachers to rethink how they designed and implemented their lesson plans. Mobile computing is doing that now, but there is still some fear and loathing. Laptops in the classroom are more acceptable than they once were, but mobile phones are still regarded with skepticism. Into this breach steps tablet computing. Lisa C. Young, head of instructional design and educational technology at Scottsdale Community College (SCC), in Arizona, is part of a team that has taken the leap in introducing iPads to faculty and administrators.

“One of the instructors has had to rethink how a class will be taught, because a tablet, unlike a laptop, can act as a better interactive device during a

class,” explains Young. The pilot program plans to find new ways of communicating with students, who tend to be quite comfortable adopting a new format. One class of journalism students has been using tablets to create high-value content.

“A tablet is certainly more than a ‘consumptive’ device, as some tend to view it,” says Young. “Our students have been conducting interviews using the built-in sound recorder, editing their audio files, uploading them, writing up their coursework and receiving feedback seamlessly.”

Launched in the spring of 2010, SCC’s tablet computing program sought to test how mobile computing could enhance teaching and learning, with access to textbooks online, non-Flash video, word processing, Blackboard, classes and the library.

One question that often arises is whether too much multitasking and feedback loops in the classroom could work against students. “It can be distracting—some students reported being more distracted, some reported being more engaged,” says Purdue’s Aagard. But, he adds, “What critics often miss is that students are already disengaged from large lectures and fellow students. What they need are ways to be more engaged than they already are, and this is one approach.” Hotseat integrates with a student’s Twitter and Facebook accounts, and can even be used via text messaging. A student can post a comment during class and remain anonymous.

What if someone says some-

thing obnoxious or detrimental to the lecturer? Such a loss of control and power terrifies managers in many institutions.

Interestingly, a small number of students at Purdue have crossed that line, and in such cases, the instructor has taken it up with the individual—there is transparency, and a user’s login is tied to his or her credentials at the university.

Other schools are looking to cloud computing for ways to allow students to interact with one another and with faculty. Mixable, another custom network for Purdue students, lets a user create and hold discussions in virtual classrooms and listen to podcasts of lectures, and integrates the sharing of files with lecturers via Dropbox, an online file storage application. The University of Canterbury, in New Zealand, and the University of Washington are testing how augmented reality, which can overlay, annotate and create virtual 3-D experiences, might make course material accessible to students via mobile devices.

Even the most digitally savvy universities admit that this is a big leap. But as universities strike up e-book agreements with textbook publishers, as their students begin to create their own course wikis, and as instructors turn to podcasts and video and encourage collaboration, the classroom as we know it will never be the same again. As these graduates move out of the classroom and into our workplaces, we had better be prepared for them. •

about the author

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