Six Points for Six Posts:
Evidence for Using Facebook to Facilitate Learning in the Mass Lecture

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The author suggests using out-of-class communication opportunities activities to enhance learning in a large lecture course. Specifically, students are encouraged to use Facebook as a "persistent space" for classroom instruction, and evidence is provided to demonstrate cognitive and affective learning benefits of this activity.

BACKGROUND

Hollywood portrayals of the college classroom often invoke images of the stately professor standing behind a lectern "engaging" students in a crowded, chalky classroom theatre. In mass lectures, communication between instructor and student is largely top-down, with the instructor serving as a "sage on the stage" and delivering lectures and commentary to students in a one-directional and closed format. On the one hand, the mass lecture is a remarkably efficient way to deliver basic course materials as it allows for very large groups of introductory students in one area of study a chance to have standardized contact with expert faculty. On the other hand, many educators feel that such a format minimizes–and potentially marginalizes–student participation in their own learning and, as result, their own learning (cf. Murphy, 1998). So, what do we do with the format?

OUT-OF-CLASS COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES

One way in which instructors have tried to encourage student participation in mass lectures is by creating out-of-class communication opportunities (OCCs). Typical out-of-class communication opportunities activities include scheduled office hour discussion, writing conferences, review and tutoring sessions, among other meetings. In general, such activities have been moderately successful in helping students feel closer with their instructors and encouraging student motivation (Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Myers; 2004), but they are still restricted to space and time constraints for both the student and the learning. In terms of technology-based out-of-class communication opportunities, e-mail was one of the first widely-used applications that provided students with a direct link to their instructors that is not so restricted. Yet, e-mail communications are private and singular, which does not make them conducive to teaching larger numbers of students simultaneously. As well, they tend to be used more as an administrative tool (students asking about specific grades, for example) than an instructional one. More recently, online learning management systems (LMSs) have gained popularity in college classrooms as such programs provide students with persistent access to course documents, grade books, and other course materials. However, online learning management systems tend to play more of an administrative than instructional role – they act as virtual vaults for information rather than virtual spaces for conversation.

Traditional out-of-class communication opportunities help provide for more student-instructor interaction but are restricted to space and time constraints, and current technology-based out-of-class communication opportunities s such as e-mail and LMSs provide persistent access to information but do not facilitate communication and conversation. In addressing these dual concerns, educators have turned to social media platforms as potential spaces for education. After all, an overwhelming majority of college students to have a Facebook account that they actively check on a daily basis (cf. Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007), and these platforms provide an easy-to-access space for communication among large groups in a persistent virtual space. In short, social media platforms such as Facebook might be able to provide an efficient and effective learning environment for which to engage students in their own media environment

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