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Social and Technological Innovations in Teaching Public Affairs: Introduction to the Symposium

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Technology can be defined as “the social, material, or cloud/cyberspace tools used to manipulate human behavior to achieve a specified objective.” In the classroom, teachers use a variety of technologies to elicit desired student response or output and ultimately to achieve a level of learning appropriate for particular students. For example, decisions to use a chalk/white board versus PowerPoint during a lecture are often made based on the nature of engagement desired with the students. Arranging seats or desks in a classroom in a lecture format, an open circle, or an open square generates different types of engagement among and with students. Social media and networking tools enable relationships to develop that may not have been possible in a strictly face-to-face environment, particularly within the time constraints of a typical class period.

These technologies can be applied with the purpose of empowering students in the learning process, or democratizing learning. Several examples of these are described in Wankel’s 2010 edited volume, *Cutting-Edge Social Media Approaches to Business Education: Teaching with LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, and Blogs*. Using social media and Web 2.0 technologies, students have the opportunity to co-create their learning environment as well as the content delivered and discussed in the course. In the face-to-face environment, Ira Schor (1996) has written on “democratic classrooms,” in which students are empowered to craft core components of course syllabi, including assignments, course structure, and content. These are but two examples that suggest the ability to empower students through the application of technologies to teaching. It remains uncertain however, what the impact of using these tools has on learning, how they can be applied practically, and what the implications are for the public affairs classroom.

The five articles in this symposium consider such issues in depth. In developing the symposium, we sought theoretical exploration and empirical studies, including case examples that critically assess the use of social, material, or cloud/cyberspace technologies for student empowerment. We provide a preview of the articles here, followed by a brief review of practical next steps and areas in need of further research.

SUMMARY OF SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTIONS

Overall, the articles in this symposium generally advocate and provide guidance and suggestions for using new technologies in the classroom to empower and engage students. Use of these new, more interactive technologies is necessary, as several of the authors argue, because there is growing pressure from above and below for public administrators to effectively use social networking tools to engage with citizens. There is also a greater desire for active, engaged learning experiences among our students, which can be facilitated by new technologies such as social networking.

Bryer and Seigler set the context by digging into theoretical and instrumental rationales for student empowerment through social and Web-based technologies. This article also provides a useful framework through which to interpret the remaining articles in the symposium. Specifically, the authors present six rationales for student empowerment: (1) develop the ethical reasoning and judgment of students in complex contexts, (2) develop the leadership and management skills of students in complex contexts, (3) develop student ownership in the learning process, (4) provide space to allow the teacher to show passion and engage that passion with students, (5) ensure student buy-in to course objectives, and (6) ensure student buy-in to course content delivery methods. Bryer and Seigler define student empowerment in five parts: (1) granting control of course content to students, (2) permitting students to co-create subject matter content with each other and with the teachers, (3) enabling the voice of students, (4) enabling choice for students, and (5) enabling creativity with students. The authors present a variety of approaches to student empowerment in face-to-face, online, and virtual environments, ranging from videoconferencing and using touchpad technology in the face-to-face classroom to Second Life or OpenSim in the virtual environment. These tools and empowerment philosophy assume a different kind of relationship between the instructor and students, addressed more directly in Eikenberry's symposium article.

Eikenberry provides an overview of research on the use of social networking tools, with a special focus on public affairs classrooms. The article maintains a focus on the link between social networking for learning, professor-student relationships, and ultimately, how students, through more networked relationships, might be better prepared to engage civically through social networking. Among the areas explored is the relationship between teacher and student. As she states, "Using social networking applications in more formal learning environments . . . may open up opportunities for professors to connect

with students in new and exciting, although perhaps tenuous, ways to enhance student learning and relationships.” If faculty members empower students in the manner Bryer and Seigler suggest, does such empowerment fundamentally transform the student-professor relationship? If so, what is gained, and what is lost? Both Eikenberry and Bryer and Seigler suggest much can be gained through such transformation, including more civically engaged students and more virtuous citizens; however, such an approach requires the professor to shift away from a traditional authoritarian role to a more collaborative one.

Two cases offer practical examples of student empowerment through the use of newer technologies. Mergel offers a detailed case assessment of a class on “Government 2.0,” which is offered face-to-face but is supplemented by a variety of online and virtual world interactions. Hu and Johnston offer an assessment of a class on “ePublic Affairs,” taught fully online and primarily using a wiki for course content delivery and student interaction. Each offers unique lessons.

Mergel’s course, described in her article, combines face-to-face, online, and virtual elements to ensure students “feel comfortable using social media and interacting with their peers online.” To integrate student academic and practitioner experiences, they are asked to immerse themselves in the social media to “improve their digital competencies and online conversation skills in order to understand the pitfalls of online engagement in the public sector.” With a focus on both online and offline experiences, Mergel describes design of the course to include social skill development as well as provide students a firm grounding in legal requirements, such as those necessitated by individuals with sensory disabilities. By combining these perspectives, Mergel offers a clear alignment between teaching students with and about social media and future needs in public administration professions.

Hu and Johnston also offer a deep description of a class grounded in student-centered learning with social media tools. Their ePublic Affairs course is entirely Web-based, using a wiki as the primary tool for content development and delivery. Their class demonstrates some of the components of the empowered learning environment defined by Bryer and Seigler. Specifically, students in ePublic Affairs were empowered to co-design and co-create substantial elements of the course through the use of collaborative communication tools. This is a study of an innovative class taught experientially with the tools students might be expected to use effectively once they enter the world of practice. Interestingly, Hu and Johnston’s findings suggest that intrinsic motivation to perform based on community and collaborative norms might not be sufficient to engage students in the work of the class; extrinsic factors, such as grades, are still likely necessary to ensure that students work as part of a collaborative team.

This paper also begins to address an area that seems to be greatly lacking in the literature at present (and discussed by Eikenberry): how use of these new technologies might affect student learning and empowerment outcomes. Hu and Johnston comment that their

wiki course found that an open process of participation in co-creating wiki pages and the integration of multiple social media communication tools can strengthen students' feeling of responsibility, foster students' sense of community, and develop students' collaborative orientation toward group work.

The final paper—by Hu, Johnston, Hemphill, Krishnamurthy, and Vinze—also suggests, through a study on interactive computer simulations and decision-making in public affairs education, that computer technologies that enable collaborative role-playing activities with students can be powerful tools for student empowerment. However, the authors also observe potential ethical challenges in the delivery of such content. For example, even when creating a process that gives students freedom to develop their own dialogue and provides more relevant information to make informed choices, it is possible that student choice is equally constrained by knowledge areas chosen by course instructors and established by the parameters of the simulation. This situation may establish a superficial empowerment, however well intended.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The assembled pieces in the symposium suggest some important steps faculty can take in preparing to use social and Web-based technologies for student empowerment. Bryer and Seigler offer a set of guiding principles: For example, be open to learning about technologies and do not try to use a small set of technology solutions for all manner of pedagogical dilemmas or objectives. Among other things, Mergel offers the insight that in order for a class to be successful and relevant, it needs to tie into the emergent legal and institutional frameworks for the use of technologies in the public administration workplace. Eikenberry identifies, at least implicitly, the importance of carefully understanding and clarifying the desired student-teacher relationship in the use of social networking tools. Hu et al. similarly focus on ethics, but more on how teachers might unduly influence student decision-making based on potentially biased decision parameters developed for use with technologies. Finally, Hu and Johnston's work focuses attention on the level of systematic and interlocking detail required to successfully implement a technology-based course, as well as on the importance of acting on feedback received from students in a transparent process.

Many of these new technologies are available at little or no cost to faculty, but the articles in the symposium suggest that how we think about investing time in courses may need to shift to accommodate an empowerment-focused learning structure. While faculty may be able to spend less time on the front end of a course planning the curriculum, writing or recording lectures, and so on, they may need to spend more time coordinating student interactions, responding to and guiding dialogue, and providing direction to resources in reaction to the flow of a course. This is not meant to imply that a student-empowered course using new technologies is an anarchic free-for-all; structure is still necessary, but

it may need to be more porous and flexible. Faculty may also need to spend time learning about and understanding how to use new technologies; universities might provide support to faculty who are willing to try out and experiment with such technologies. Providing support to assess the effect of using new technology tools would also be invaluable to individual faculty members and the field.

WHAT WE STILL NEED TO FIND OUT

While the five articles in this symposium begin to assess the use of social, material, or cloud/cyberspace technologies for student empowerment, there is much room for more work in this area. There remain, for example, many questions about the implications of empowering students in the classroom, no matter what tools are used to do this. A student-empowerment model fundamentally challenges many public affairs professors' assumptions about students' learning and their view of human nature. For instance, can we assume that students know enough to know what they need to learn? Alternatively, can we safely assume that professors know what students need to know, especially given a rapidly changing public affairs work environment? There is also a question about how learning outcomes should be defined and measured in an empowered learning environment.

With a focus on newer technologies, the papers in this symposium begin to help us understand what their effect might be on empowerment and learning outcomes. Much more needs to be done in this area. Ultimately, do the knowledge and use of new technologies such as social networking lead to better and more learning as well as to more effective, self-aware, and ethical public service practitioners? As many schools of public administration and affairs act to address the new NASPAA accreditation standards, understanding the effect of these new tools on student learning outcomes will be increasingly important. Whether or not they do affect outcomes, can we afford *not* to incorporate their use into our classrooms given citizen demands? The papers in the symposium suggest that we need to do more to integrate new technologies and information about them into public affairs classrooms.

Yet, a question we posed in the call for papers still lingers: by empowering students in the classroom, are we preparing students to become transformational change agents, or are we preparing them for frustration and failure given the intransigence of institutional rules and norms? This begs the large, perpetual question about the role of public administrators in society. Are public administrators meant to be change agents? If so, empowerment in the classroom is likely essential to empowerment outside of the classroom. Or are public administrators meant to be neutral bureaucrats objectively implementing policy? If so, a traditional top-down model of education may be more appropriate.

In summary, what we know from research in this symposium and through other studies cited by symposium authors are that the use of social media and networking tools may be effective for enhancing student learning through social processes and for preparing students to be more effective public administrators.

Further, research suggests there are also challenges that can prevent social media and networking from being deployed successfully. Strategic integration of these tools is vital for a successful teaching and learning process, regardless of whether a class is taught fully online (as in the case described by Hu and Johnston) or fully face-to-face with supplemented technology (as in the case described by Mergel).

CONCLUSION

Literature on the use of new technologies for teaching and student empowerment is slowly beginning to emerge. The authors in this symposium have provided important citations and examples to the most engaging and thoughtful studies; we encourage the reader to review these closely. It is our hope that these assembled articles provide readers with ideas for experimenting with new technologies for teaching in a student-empowered classroom and to the development of emergent theoretical frameworks to understand the implementation and utility of these tools.

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