Death to the dropbox: Rethinking Student Privacy and Public Performance

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Abstract

As online educators struggle to re-create the social experience of the class-room and remote students lament the missing camaraderie and interaction of a face-to-face education, common pedagogical approaches compound these issues by further segmenting and isolating students in the name of privacy. Chief among these approaches is the common habit of asking students to privately submit work to a course management system dropbox. The follow-ing paper addresses the problems with faculty's use and overuse of the drop-box and illustrates how faculty can implement a public performance model in their online classes to stimulate a social experience in an online class, in-crease student feedback and lower online faculty workloads

Introduction

Despite the continued growth of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2006, 2008; Jaschik, 2009; Lokken, 2009) and the explosion of new media choices and Web 2.0 applications (Downes, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Thompson, 2007), the majority of online courses remain heavily text-based (Parry, 2009; WCET, 2009). Early attempts at online teaching in higher education were simply adaptations of classroom-based courses (Janicki & Liegle, 2001; Lowenthal & White, 2009; Parker, 2008). This is not that surprising. The development and delivery of online education is an increasingly complicated process, requiring both a specialized pedagogy and a technological expertise possessed by few faculty (Lynch, 2005; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Wray et al., 2008). Therefore when confronted with the task of designing a course online (especially one that has been taught before in a face-to-face classroom environment), it is completely natural for faculty to replicate many, if not all, of the activities into the online environment. We believe that this natural tendency is one reason why, even today, we see the majority of

online courses consisting of little more than readings, online lectures in the form of bullet-point driven PowerPoint presentations, and some online asynchronous discussions sprinkled throughout the semester.

While people are often critical of text-heavy online courses (Bork, 2001; Dunlap, Sobel, & Sands, 2007; Lynch, 2002), very little has been said about the use of the digital dropbox. We contend that the digital dropbox—more specifically the habit of submitting work privately (which is primarily done either through a digital dropbox or even worse by emailing assignments to faculty)—is one of those vestiges of the past that has been carried over from traditional face-to-face courses into the online environment. While there might come a time when it pedagogically makes sense to have students turn in their work to a private digital dropbox (only viewable by the faculty and the student), we have found that the majority of the time it makes very little sense to do so. The following paper addresses the problems with see with faculty's use and overuse of having student's submit their work into a private digital dropbox and illustrates how faculty can implement a public performance model in their online classes.

The Problem: The Digital Dropbox & Misconstrued
Conceptions of Student Privacy

Different learning management systems might refer to it by a different name (e.g., Blackboard with version 9.0 calls it the assignment tool) but a digital dropbox is essentially a place in a learning management system where students upload assignments for only the faculty member to see. We contend that using the digital dropbox (for the most part) is a destructive pedagogical practice. Why you ask? Even as more and more studies and common sense experience point to the importance of social interaction in online courses as a key success factor (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003; Lowenthal, 2009; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003), we find more and more faculty eliminating conversation by asking students to turn in work privately. Once inside the dropbox, the instructor secretly pulls it out, surreptitiously grades it, then quietly slides it back into the dropbox for the student, and only the student to see. Meanwhile, back on Earth, we find effective teachers (some who might even have students turn in some assignments privately) asking students questions in class, having student present projects and papers, showing off work and performing in front of their fellow learners, experts, and the teacher.

Private feedback has its place in education, for sure (see Bonk, Cummings, Hara, Fischler, & Lee; Blair & Hoy, 2006; Rovai, 2004). But we contend that the vast majority of feedback can and should be public. Research has established the important role that feedback plays in formal education. Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified feedback-- and specifically prompt feedback--as one of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. But feedback is not important just for undergraduate education or face-to-face to learning. In fact, feedback is arguably even more important in online learning environments where faculty and students rarely, if ever, see each other face-to-face. And while practitioners (Aaragon, 2003; Lowenthal & Parscal, 2008; Palloff &

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Pratt, 2003) have highlighted the importance of feedback in online courses, researchers have only recently begun to formally study the role of feedback in online courses (Oomen-Early, Bold, Wiginton, Gallien, & Anderson, 2008). While formal research is needed to fully understand how and when faculty should provide public vs. private feedback (though the work of Dennen (2005) addresses this a little), we believe that even in the absence of formal research, there are some obvious reasons to require public performance and utilize public feedback in the classes we teach.

Objections to asking students to produce work for public consumption, even inside the safety of a Learning Management System (LMS), usually falls into one of several key categories of concern: (a) fear of shaming students, (b) lack of time to adequately judge performance of all students in class, and (c) concerns over legal privacy requirements. We will look at each of these objections in turn.

Shame

In this day and age where education is seen more as a commodity that students purchase (White & Lowenthal, 2009) and more and more emphasis is placed on ensuring that faculty are excellent teachers and students are learning (Boyer, 1990; Lowenthal, 2008), faculty fear the repercussions of embarrassed and dissatisfied students. When talking to faculty about the importance of having students submit their work in public spaces and then evaluating the student's work publicly, we have found that faculty fear that requiring students to present their work publicly and having it evaluated publicly (which is different than grading it publicly), whether in the course shell or beyond, will somehow embarrass or shame the students.

Educational theory is clear on the point that students learn through a variety of modes (e.g., Gagne, 1985; Gardner, 1993; Kolb, 1984), including modeling (Bandura, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1990). In certain disciplines, the ability to model performance through public critique is essential. The arts and architecture both maintain a tradition of the studio critique, where a teacher and outside practitioners publicly comment on student work. The goal is to provide the student with timely, expert feedback on their work, and for other students in the class/studio to learn from the feedback as well.

In this way, students both perform in public, receive feedback in public, and are able to learn, or model, from other students, all thanks to the public nature of the learning event. Thus, public performance and public feedback as instructional strategies are not only accepted (with a long history of use) but also valued within the arts. But the pedagogy underlying the idea of a studio critique, public showing and public evaluation, should not be restricted to the arts.

Lack of time

Online faculty regularly claim that teaching online takes more time than teaching in a face-to-face classroom (Dunlap, 2005; Mills, Yanes, & Casebeer, 2009). While the jury is still out on the whether it actually takes more time in the long wrong, there is no

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question that teaching online requires a different skill set (Dennen, 2005; Lowenthal & White, 2009; Lowenthal, Wilson, & Parrish, in press) and that faculty often end up doing different things online than they did in the f2f classroom (Wiley, 2002; Wray et al., 2008). For instance, rather than showing up to class once a week and giving a lecture, faculty online have to setup their course (which can be very time consuming) in advance and then login (often daily) to monitor online discussion and provide feedback to students. Given this, online faculty often feel overwhelmed as it is and the very idea of adding one more thing (e.g., public feedback) seems like just too much.

In our experience, though, having students share their work publicly can actually save faculty time. Depending on the LMS one is using, the only time saving benefit (that we can identify) is the ability to possibly download (or in Blackboard language, "collect") all assignments in one zipped downloadable folder. But in the big picture, the amount of time saved doing this is negligible given the benefits of having students submit their work publicly. For instance, having students post work online in public places in the LMS (e.g., in discussion forum's) can save faculty time by enabling faculty to reference feedback they provided other students. Further, evaluating student work publicly can help improve their instructor feedback as well as student satisfaction because students end up seeing the faculty in the course shell responding to other students rather than silently waiting and wondering when the faculty member will grade their own work (see Dennen, 2007). Finally, faculty can even have students provide formative feedback to their peers (e.g., have students turn in a rough draft publicly in the LMS and have their peers provide formative feedback).
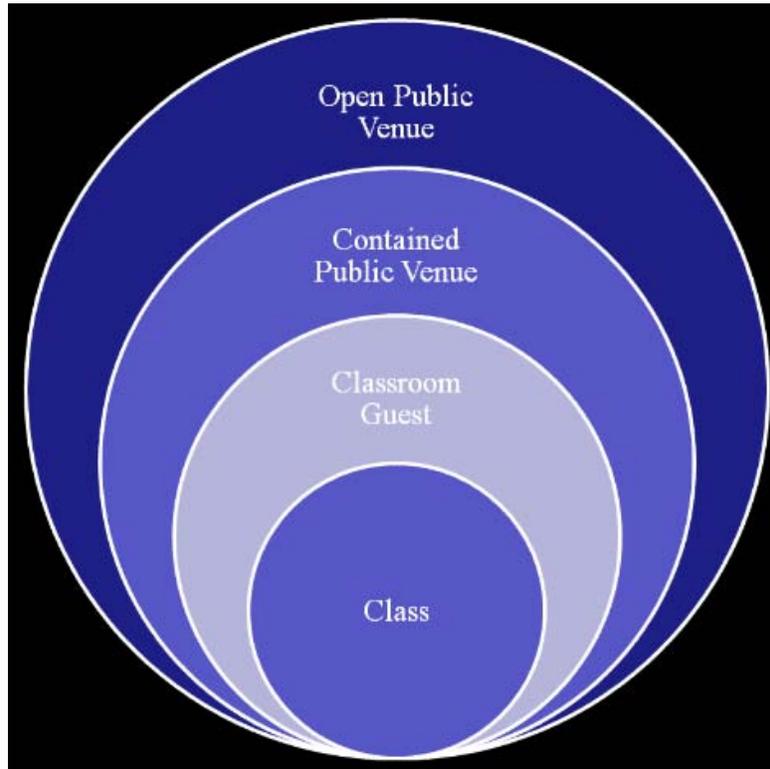

Privacy

Perhaps the single largest objection to lifting the veil of student privacy is the notion of privacy guarantees. Practitioners and researchers alike have talked about privacy and online learning nearly since its inception (see Tu 2002a, 2002b). But privacy is not a single construct but rather a complicated construct (see Figure 1). And while individual privacy is a critical aspect of a free life in a Democratic society, much is done within the frame of education in the name of privacy that really has little or nothing to do with the broader social value of individual privacy.

The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is routinely cited in the United States as the standard of student privacy. But a read of the somewhat ambiguous language in the act reveals a few key points. First, student grades and their enrollment status is protected information, faculty are not allowed, for instance, to post grades on their office doors or even post class lists. Student's grades in a course and the very fact that he or she is enrolled in the course are considered private. However, the act also allows for open, public feedback on student performance in the interest of reaching educational goals. In other words, the act provides space for public performance of student work in order to teach.

Clearly, privacy rights are important. And balancing meaningful needs for student privacy with the equally important need to share feedback to achieve pedagogical goals.

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Figure 1. Student Privacy

Finally, one last objection, though rarely brought up by faculty, is the idea that many students might choose to take online courses because of its perceived anonymity and privacy (Varvel, 2005). And therefore, these students might be dissatisfied when they come to find that their expectations or assumptions of anonymity and privacy are not met. While we recognize that this is likely to happen from time to time, we strongly believe that there is enough research to suggest that learning is a social process and students— whether they like it or not—benefit from socially interacting with their peers, even in (and at times especially in) mediated learning environments.

The Solution: Public Performance Models

A student steps onto the stage, hands poised on his electric guitar. The audience settles and he begins. Tapping out harmonics and effortlessly flowing through multi-octave scales. The guitar sings in a multitude of voices and fingers fly across the fretboard. This player shreds and you have to see it to completely appreciate the virtuosity of the sonic performance. The audience claps and cheers. A few seasoned musicians compliment the performance and provide a few notes on how to move his skills even further.

Public. Performance. Critique. It's a time honored model in the performing and fine

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arts. But we contend that it is time to consider public performance as a pedegogical tool in all disciplines. We briefly outline some core strategies faculty can use to accomplish this.

Stop Using the Dropbox

A simple first step is to have students turn in their work in public spaces in the course shell (e.g., online discussion forums). Online discussion forums are a great environment to have students post their work and receive faculty and student feedback.

By simply replacing the dropbox with public submission or work, any student assignment becomes a performance. Whether a paper, report, or page of problems solved, each student provides his or her work in full visibility of the class. The instructor provides feedback on the assignments, allowing students to learn from the direct assessment of not only their own work, but also by reflecting on the work of their peers. The grade, plus any feedback that the instructor feels should remain private, can be provided and recorded in an online gradebook.

Carrying the idea further, rather than simply having students post work such as a term paper, instructors might consider taking the notion of performance a step further. Using Web-based tools such as Jing or Adobe Connect, students can present their work, in a reasonable proxy for for a classroom presentation.

True Public Performances

Web-based tools like those previously mentioned can also be used to have students present their work to even a larger community outside of the LMS. This larger audience can even include experts in the field who can provide authentic and relevant feedback. Though keep in mind that once you leave the safety of the LMS you should ensure that you have prior consent from the students or give them the option to work under a pseudonym.

Conclusion / Implications

Modeling is a key pedagogy that, intentionally or not, instructors use in the classroom. Praising top students, questioning marginal performers and demonstration of personal enthusiasm for specific behaviors in the classroom are stock in trade of any classroom teacher. Moving online, instructors must remember to provide opportunities for students to model learning and performance behaviors. Moving student work from private dropboxes into public forums is a central strategy for providing online students with personal accountability of producing their work for the scrutiny of their peers as well as providing the instructor the opportunity to share feedback across the class--stimulating discussion, exciting inquiry and developing knowledge.

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