Chapter 5

Death to the digital dropbox: Rethinking Student Privacy and Public Performance[1]

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As online learning continues to grow each year, (Allen & Seaman, 2010) so do the number of new media and Web 2.0 technologies faculty have at their disposal (Antonelli, 2009; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011), yet the majority of online courses remain heavily text-based (Parry, 2009; WCET and Campus Project, 2009). Online learning often mirrors the traditional classroom (Janicki & Liegle, 2001; Parker, 2008; Rossett & Marshall, 2010; Lowenthal & White, 2009), with a focus on read and write (and at times discuss)—sometimes with good reason.[2] First, we all find ourselves relying on our previous experience when trying something new (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Lowenthal & Muth, 2008). Second, many methods used in traditional classroom environments can be effective in an online learning environment.[3]And third, over the past few years teaching online has become an increasingly complicated process, requiring both a specialized pedagogy and a technological aptitude possessed by few faculty (Lynch, 2005; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Wray, Lowenthal, Bates, & Stevens, 2008). Given this, when confronted with the task of designing an online course (especially one taught previously in a face-to-face classroom environment), it is completely natural for faculty to replicate many, if not all, of the classroom activities in the online environment. We believe this is why so many online courses consist of little more than readings, online lectures in the form of PowerPoint presentations, and some online asynchronous discussions sprinkled throughout the semester.[4]

Perhaps one of the most often used, but seldom talked about, vestiges of the past carried over from traditional face-to-face courses into the online environment is the digital dropbox — or more specifically, the practice of having students submit their work privately. The digital dropbox is essentially a tool incorporated into most learning management systems that enables faculty to designate a virtual inbox where students

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[2] It is important to note that we bring this up not to suggest that we think online learning should strive to emulate face-to-face learning but rather that we recognize why many (but not all) online courses mirror traditional face-to-face courses.

[3] For instance, Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of good practice are generally sound principles of good classroom instruction that apply equally to the online environment (see Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001).

[4] We recognize that the online learning landscape is diverse (Lowenthal, Wilson, & Parrish, 2009). We are not suggesting that most online courses fit this description across all contexts or that heavily text-based courses are necessarily always poor quality. Rather we have found, as we expect many others have, that there are far too many online courses that meet this description.

can privately submit their assignments and later retrieve them (presumably with a grade and some type of feedback). While there might be a specific time when it pedagogically makes sense to have students turn in their work to a digital dropbox viewable only by the instructor and the student, we have found that *most* of the time it makes little sense to do so. In this article we argue for use of a public performance model and explain why.

The Problem with the Digital Dropbox and Misconstrued Conceptions of Student Privacy

We contend that using a digital dropbox — or even worse, having students submit their work privately via e-mail — is more often than not a destructive pedagogical practice. Even as numerous studies and commonsense experience point to social interaction in online courses as a key success factor (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004), we find far too many faculty eliminating opportunities for conversation by asking students to turn in work privately (see Harvey, 2009). Once an assignment is inside the dropbox, the instructor pulls it out, grades it, then returns it to the dropbox for the student, and only the student to see. Meanwhile, we find effective teachers — who might have students turn in *some* assignments privately — asking students questions in class and having them present projects and papers, showing off work and performing in front of their fellow learners, experts, and the teacher. This "public" performance and feedback allow the teacher to increase accountability of the student performing, leverage feedback and teaching moments from one student to the entire class, and better calibrate student success models by publically offering criticism, praise, and formative feedback. The increase in educational impact without a corresponding increase in instructor workload clarifies why public feedback and assessment have remained powerful tools in classroom instruction.

Private feedback has its place in education (Bonk, Cummings, Hara, Fischler, & Lee, 2000; Rovai, 2004). We contend, however, that the vast majority of feedback can and should be public. Research has established the important role that feedback plays in formal education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), and it is arguably even more important in online learning environments where faculty and students rarely, if ever, see each other face-to-face (Graham et al., 2001; Ertmer et al., 2007). While practitioners have highlighted the importance of feedback in online courses (Aragon, 2003; Lowenthal & Parscal, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2003), researchers have only recently begun to formally study the issue (Dennen, 2005; Oomen-Early, Bold, Wiginton, Gallien, & Anderson, 2008). Formal research is needed to fully understand how and when faculty should provide public versus private feedback, but we believe that even in its absence, there are obvious reasons to require public performance and use public feedback in the classes we teach.[5]

Objections to asking students to produce work for public consumption, even inside the safety of a learning management system (LMS), usually fall into one of several key categories of concern:

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[5] While there is very little formal research on requiring or integrating public performance or public feedback into online courses, people have argued for using this approach in some form at times in the past (Notar, Wilson, & Ross, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2009; Tu, 2004). Further, there is nothing new about having students conduct group work or online presentations online, though in our experience this is not used enough; in part because faculty often make assumptions about what can or can't be done effectively online (see Wray, Lowenthal, Bates, & Stevens, 2008). Finally, the literature on the important role of feedback in general and specifically feedback online suggests that public performance and public feedback might serve an important role in online courses (see Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

- Legal privacy requirements
- Fear of shaming students
- Lack of time

We will look at each of these objections in turn.

Privacy

Perhaps the single largest objection to having students post their work publicly (whether within an LMS or beyond) is the notion of privacy guarantees. People have talked about privacy within online learning nearly since its inception (Tu, 2002a, 2002b), and with the rise of social media, they are returning to this question (Boyd, 2010; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Rooney, 2010). Privacy, though, is not nearly as simplistic as people often believe.[6] Danah Boyd, a social media researcher at Microsoft, recently gave a talk at South by Southwest (SXSW) (see Figure 1) in which she explains how complicated privacy is and how too often most people think of "public" versus "private" as simple binaries when in fact they are much more complicated than that.

Figure 1. Danah Boyd Talks About Privacy

Similarly, we posit that student privacy is a complex construct that cannot be reduced to a simple binary. We believe that student privacy should be thought of as existing in degrees or as a continuum from fully public to fully private, as shown in Figure 2. While oversimplified, the graphic illustrates that student privacy is not just a matter of being private or being public. Student privacy exists at the course level in that only the student and the instructor know that the student is taking the course (even though in practice dozens if not hundreds of faculty and staff often have some ability to view the student's work in the LMS). In the class other students can see the course roster, and through discussions and group assignments they interact with and can see the work of their peers. Faculty also occasionally invite guest speakers into a course. When this happens,

[6] For a theoretical discussion on the complicated nature of privacy, see Boyd (2010); for a more practical example, see Hayden (2010).

someone from outside the course becomes aware which students are enrolled in the course, and the students' degree of privacy decreases. At times — though less frequently — students find themselves taking part in an event in a contained public venue (for example, taking a proctored exam in a big auditorium) or even in an open public venue (presenting their work, for instance, or attending a required class event like an art exhibit), and just like that, the students' supposed privacy is all but gone.

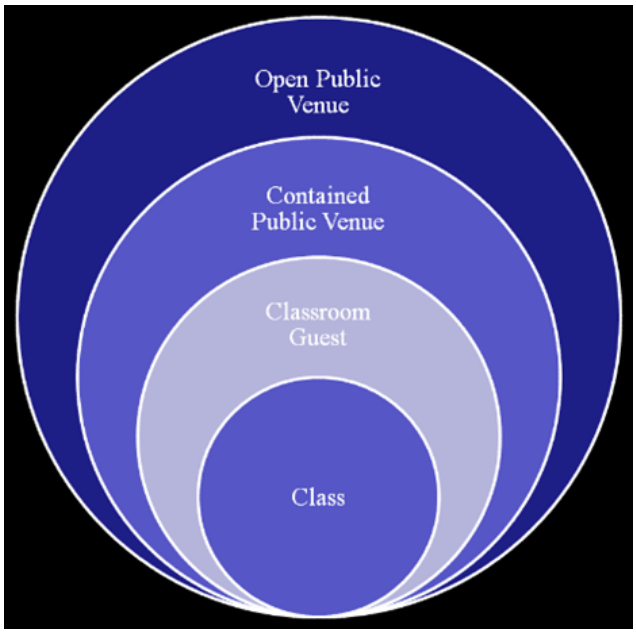

Figure 2. Student Privacy

Our point here is not to illustrate every possible point on the continuum of public versus private but rather to illustrate how complex student privacy can be. This continuum of privacy also makes clear how fluid our notions of privacy are, even in a traditional classroom.

Within the frame of education much is done in the name of privacy that really has little or nothing to do with the broader social value of individual privacy. Having public speaking students give speeches to their professor privately during office hours, for example, not only cuts against the authentic performance of the speech as a public act, it also eliminates meaningful learning opportunities from students observing their class peers. This logic applies equally well to an engineering student learning to communicate a bridge design and a writer mastering the craft of narrative.

The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is routinely cited in the United States as the standard of student privacy. Reading the somewhat ambiguous language in the act reveals a few key points related to student educational records. Most importantly, student grades and their enrollment status is protected information; faculty may not post grades on their office doors or even post class lists, for instance. However, the act also allows for open, public feedback on student performance in the interest of reaching educational goals. In other words, FERPA provides for public performance of student work in order to teach; in doing so, it allows a more nuanced notion of privacy than "private/public." While specific institutional policy might further restrain what a

teacher can and cannot do in the classroom, the point here is not to erase the broader notion of privacy but to attack the common misperception that everything the student produces in a classroom is private in all senses. Clearly, privacy rights are important; we have all heard of examples of students being stalked or cases of identity theft that have resulted from a breach of privacy. So is balancing meaningful needs for student privacy with the equally important need to share feedback to achieve pedagogical goals.

Finally, many students might choose to take online courses because of their perceived anonymity and privacy (Varvel, 2005). These students might be dissatisfied when their expectations are not met. While we recognize that this will happen sometimes, we strongly believe that research suggests learning is largely a social process[7] and that students benefit from socially interacting with their peers, even in (and at times especially in) mediated learning environments.[8]

Shame

Another objection faculty make to instituting a public performance model in their online courses essentially reflects the fear that requiring students to present their work publicly and having it evaluated publicly (different than grading it publicly), whether in the course shell or beyond, will somehow embarrass or shame the students. While we recognize the strong negative extrinsic motivations involved with public performance, it is more important to recognize the role that traditional public review of work has in the classroom. Requiring a public performance of what someone has learned is not new. Public performance and public feedback as instructional strategies are not only accepted (with a long history of use) but also valued within the arts (see Eisner, 1993; Ross, 1994). The arts and architectural education both maintain traditions of the studio critique, where a teacher and outside practitioners publicly comment on student work. The goal is to provide students with timely, expert feedback on their work, and for other students in the class/studio to learn from the feedback as well.

Further, portfolios have been used for years in teacher education (Barton & Collins, 1993). While portfolios are often developed for a variety of purposes (reflection, summative assessment, or as a showcase, among others), they also offer a way to publicly demonstrate what a student knows and can do.

The pedagogy underlying the idea of a studio critique or even the development of a portfolio — that is, a public showing and often public assessment/evaluation of one's work — should not be restricted to the arts or teacher education. And while public performance and public critique might at times embarrass some students, in our experience students tend to work harder when they know their work will be viewed and judged by their peers or potential employers.

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[7] Different theories of learning have argued, in varying degrees, that learning is a social process—for example, "social learning theory" (Bandura, 1977), "social constructivism" (Vygotsky, 1986, 1978), "situated cognition/learning" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Social learning theories, like these, all maintain that learning is "fundamentally social in nature; that it always involves interactions among people on some level" (Swan & Shea, 2005).

[8] Student-to-student interaction can help establish social presence in online courses. And researchers have shown that there is a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), social presence and the development of a community of learners (Rovai, 2002), and social presence and perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Lack of Time

Another common objection brought up by faculty for not using a public performance model in their courses involves their 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). Given this, the idea of adding one more thing (public feedback) and changing the way they have done things for semesters — if not years — just seems like too much.

We have found, though, that having students share their work publicly can actually save faculty time. Depending on the LMS, the only time-saving benefit (that we can identify) is the ability to download (or "collect") all assignments in one zipped folder.[9] The time saved doing this is negligible compared to the benefits of having students submit their work publicly in the LMS course shell. For instance, having students post work online in public places in the LMS (such as discussion forums) can save faculty time by enabling them to reference feedback they provided other students. Further, evaluating student work publicly can help improve the instructor feedback as well as student satisfaction because students see the instructor's participation in the course shell responding to other students rather than wondering when their own work will be graded (Dennen, 2007). Finally, faculty can involve students by having them turn in a rough draft publicly in the LMS and asking their peers to provide formative feedback.

Other Objections

Does public review of written material increase instances of plagiarism or raise other intellectual property issues? For instance, if students upload their term papers to a discussion forum for everyone to see, then any student can easily download and distribute another student's work. Does this public submission violate the students' intellectual property? These important questions should be considered in the context of public performance (Jocoy & DiBiase, 2006).

We believe faculty can adopt strategies to mitigate these issues. For instance, assignments customized to the student's personal background and interests can make it harder for students to "lend" their work to others in subsequent semesters. Further, if students must post their work publicly, they will probably think twice before plagiarizing or cheating in front of their peers in a semipublic venue like an online course discussion.

Finally, sharing work publically does not diminish a student's rights to that work. Cases of students openly sharing their work can help establish it as theirs and prevent others from claiming it while enriching it through peer feedback. Regardless of their work's merit, students need to learn the importance of copyright, plagiarism, and intellectual property. Encouraging or even requiring students to copyright or add a Creative Commons license to their work is always a good idea. Given the beginnings of a shift toward a more open and collaborative culture of sharing (open source software, open education, open social networks), students need to learn not only how to cite and credit others' work but also how to protect their own work.

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[9] We use two LMSs at our institution. Both offer faculty different options when grading/exporting/viewing student work. While some LMSs like recent versions of Blackboard enable faculty to download all of the work in a dropbox in one zipped folder, others require faculty to download each file individually. In fact, others have pointed out that depending on these options, the dropbox can make it difficult to "organize, track, and assess assignments" (Baron, 2003).

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 as his fingers fly across the fretboard. You have to see it, not just hear it, to completely appreciate the virtuosity of the sonic performance. The audience claps and cheers. A few seasoned musicians compliment the performance and offer suggestions on how to move the performer's skills even further.

Public. Performance. Critique. It's a time-honored model in the performing and fine arts. Other disciplines like teacher education and medicine also have elements of public performance in their curriculum. But we, like others (Palloff & Pratt, 2009), strongly believe it is time to consider public performance as a pedagogical tool in all disciplines. More importantly, we want to expand the notion of a public performance online to include the sharing of largely written material — essays, projects, papers, and even exams. We briefly outline some core strategies faculty can use to accomplish this and some benefits of abandoning the digital dropbox.

Stop Using the Dropbox

While private communication and feedback between a student and teacher may have a place in the classroom — online or face-to-face — in this article we focus on the expanding set of cases and circumstances where public dialogue about student work is effective, practical, and desirable. Even in cases where students might need some scaffolding and time to increase their self-confidence before performing publicly and being critiqued, a simple first step is to have them turn in their work in public spaces in the LMS course shell (see Figure 3). Online discussion forums are a great environment in which to post student work — from simple comments all the way up to essay exams and complete project proposals — making the work public to the class without exposing the student to comments outside the virtual walls of the online classroom.

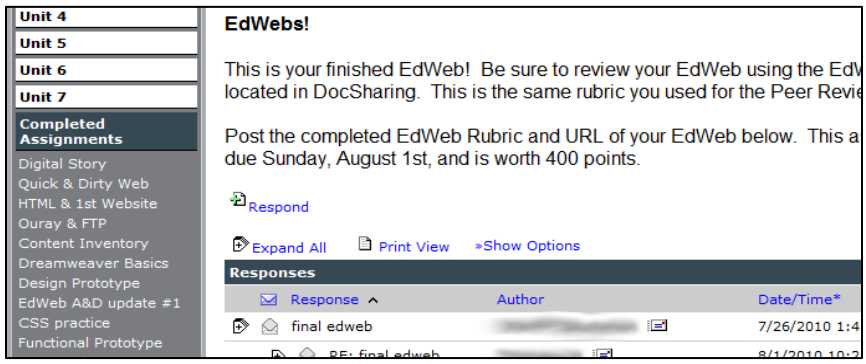

Figure 3. Students Turning in Work Publicly

By simply replacing the dropbox with public submission of work, any student assignment becomes a type of performance. Whether a paper, report, or page of problems solved, each student's work is fully visible to 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.

Rather than simply having students post their work in a discussion forum, instructors might take 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 a classroom presentation, then later distribute it as they see fit.

We have successfully implemented a no-dropbox policy across a number of online courses we teach that span the education and art history disciplines. Not only has the policy decreased our workload by minimizing repetitious evaluations, there have been no student complaints regarding the public process of presenting work and receiving feedback.

True Public Performance

Web-based tools allow students to present their work to a community outside of the LMS. This larger audience might include experts in the field who can provide authentic and relevant feedback. Keep in mind, though, that if you choose to 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. We have asked students to create blogs, but we talk through the implications of making the blogs public to the world (which we encourage and sometimes even require) (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011) or simply public to members of their course or graduate program. When we require students to take part in a fully public event, we make every effort to give them the ability to work under a pseudonym.

Faculty need to recognize the privacy concerns of students who do not want their enrollment in the class made public knowledge (in line with FERPA's privacy concerns). Depending on the tool and the nature of the assignment, faculty can provide means by which students can protect their identity on the Internet while allowing the faculty, and the broader Internet community, to provide feedback and guidance on any work posted publicly.

Benefits from Abandoning the Digital Dropbox

Online approaches to student privacy seem to be both well-intentioned and driven by the uncritical application of classroom management techniques — such as grading papers privately outside of class. Nonetheless, privacy regulations appear to allow greater latitude in asking students to provide work publically and to perform publically inside the virtual classroom. Further, public submission and feedback cycles for most types of work have proven to be a superior strategy in the online classroom.

Summing up the benefits of abandoning the digital dropbox:

- Public posting enables students to see the work of their peers. Among other things, students can see differences in quality of work. This helps calibrate superior performance in the class, allowing all students to observe and model top performance.
- Students seem reluctant to turn in low-quality work in front of their peers.
- Visibility could discourage plagiarism because students would have to cheat in front of their peers.
- Public postings increase the instructor's social presence in the course by allowing all students to see feedback on all assignments. Because students largely gauge instructor participation in a course on the amount of feedback provided to the class, public postings allow students to better estimate the total time commitment the teacher makes to the online course. Private feedback

skews the appearance of faculty contribution because students can't view the actual amount of instructor feedback given to the class in total.

- Public feedback by the instructor helps minimize workload by reducing the number of redundant comments across assignments.
- Perhaps most importantly, public performance and accountability better model real-world conditions, where work ultimately is consumed inside a social system, by groups, publicly. In this sense, the public performance and feedback model provides students the most authentic practice available in a classroom—online or not.

Conclusion

Why make student work private? In this article we suggest that the presumption in that question should shift away from privacy. Teachers should mandate public performance and feedback unless they see a clear argument, whether legal or pedagogical, in favor of privacy. Students should in some cases use the dropbox, especially when the work they turn in should be a privileged communication. But educational theory and common sense suggest that in most cases faculty resort to protecting perceived privacy without considering the educational impacts.

Learning is a socially situated practice. The outcomes of learning will almost surely be applied inside socially structured work environments that do not have any sense of private output. Reports, project plans, memos, and analysis are produced and presented in a very public manner. Reflecting an authentic practice of working with others to achieve an outcome, public performance of student work not only models this practice, it also provides remarkable learning opportunities for students receiving feedback from their peers, outside experts, and the instructor.

Equally critical, as faculty move to an online delivery modality, they also must consider their work practices — not only in terms of pedagogical effectiveness, but in terms of workload efficiency. To that end, public submission of work and public feedback can increase faculty social presence without increasing the amount of work involved. Likewise, public feedback helps minimize the workload involved with grading by allowing the teacher to reduce the number of redundant remarks inevitable when scoring across private assignments. Just as important, the public feedback provides a class-wide formative activity where everyone learns from everyone else's assignment.

The Internet provides a new venue for education. Reconsidering student privacy in the online world is, we believe, a doorway to improving education.

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Bios

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