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Fostering Interaction and Building Community in the Technosocial Classroom (2014)

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Fostering Interaction and Building Community in the Technosocial Classroom
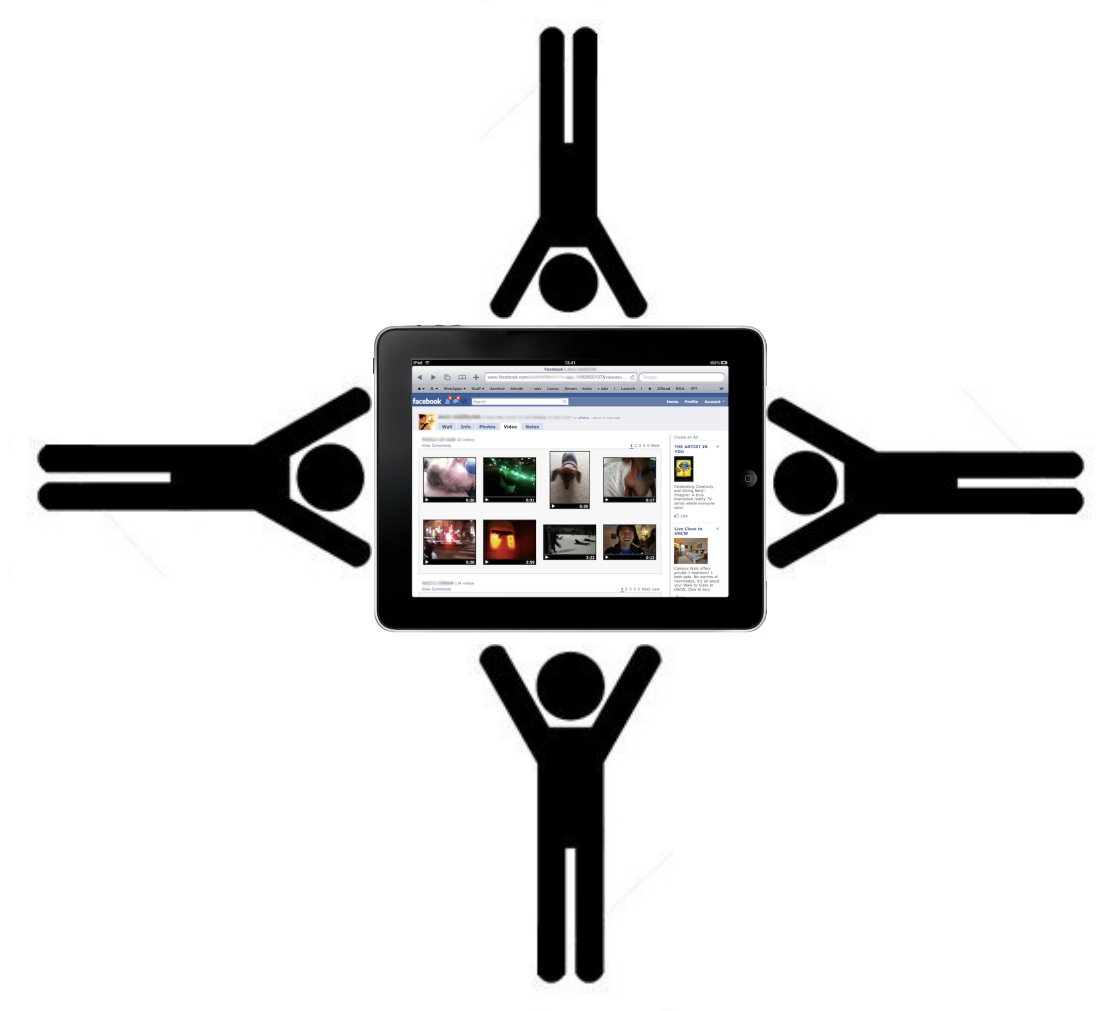
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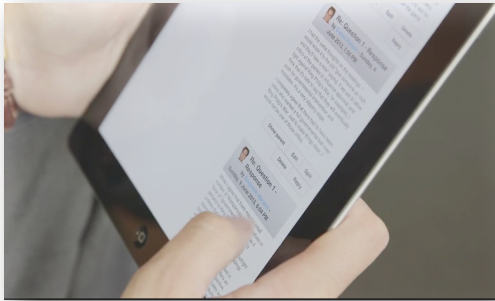The John Marshall Law School
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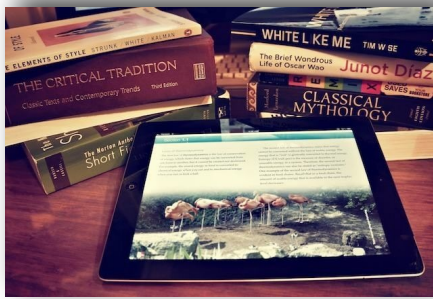
Introduction: The Importance of Community

Few academic issues in recent years have been the subject of more analysis than distance education and the redefinition of the classroom. While critics are quick to point out that the technological basis of distance education can leave a student feeling isolated, it could be argued that mobile learning and online social interaction may actually prevent distance and isolation for many students who are unable to attend traditional courses due to financial or geographic constraints. In fact, such an environment can provide them with an otherwise unattainable academic community and a chance to thrive as they would in a traditional classroom. Interaction between students and instructors is the linchpin of this new model; all the flashy technology in the world won't keep a student from disengaging if he/she perceives disconnection between him/herself and the instructor.

With this in mind, how does even the most tech-savvy instructor keep up with the rapid advancement of technology tools available for open use?

Discussions of interactivity in education must be framed with a look at how students use technology, including social media and other types of interactive content. Determining how to best leverage a student's "technosocial" behavior—that is, how students function socially when physical and technology-based socializing go hand-in-hand—will lead to stronger interaction in the online classroom and can help build a community among students and instructors who are thousands of miles apart.

So, how do we do this?

The mechanics and psychology of building online course content are inextricably linked. Being aware of the best ways in which to provide such content so that the course learning objectives are achieved *and* a sense of emotional connection and community is created will be vital to the success of distance education as technology continues to expand. These two goals can be achieved by focusing on clarity of design, balanced collaboration, and integration of social media and networks.

Clarity of Design

Separating the types of interaction into categories in order to determine how best to structure a course is a good way to evaluate the ebb and flow of interaction in your course. Dynamic, collaborative exercises can be divided into categories of complexity to achieve a strong balance. For example, a 'light' assessment could be a weekly discussion forum, with different students being assigned, on a weekly basis, to lead the discussion, might be considered a more simple form of interaction, while multi-week group projects in the form of blogs or wikis might require more time and energy. In both cases, the instructor fosters an environment in which the students learn not only from the course materials and instructor, but also from one another. This type of dynamism in content development prepares students to work collaboratively in professional environments.

> **'Scaffolding' of course materials helps to visualize and achieve a solid balance of collaborative exercises.**

Balanced Collaboration

Heeyoung Han and Scott Johnson (2012) note that the emotional dimension of student interaction is an important component of how and why substantive course interaction takes place, so consider ways to make static content more engaging or collaborative. The more opportunities students have to interact with each other to mirror a face-to-face classroom experience, the better. Instructors should work to achieve a balance between coursework that requires a singular focus and exercises that foster a high level of collaboration between students.

Karen Swan, professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Illinois-Springfield, encourages a "culture of reflection" in an online course as asynchronous discussions allow students time to consider their classmates' responses before responding themselves (2002). When balanced with real-time discussion via videoconferencing or social networks, the student experience becomes unique.

Integration of Social Networks

According to Fiona Wright (2013), understanding student motivation to use social media is a key element if one is to successfully incorporate social media into a course. This involves getting to know students online via discussion board or video introductions, and learning how they use the technology at their disposal - i.e. whether they are "**visitors**" (those who only go online for a specific purpose) or "**residents**" (those who maintain a constant social presence online). Engaging students on a personal level in this way opens the door to understanding both their academic and technological habits, and, in turn, can lead to stronger interaction between the instructor and students. Anthony Atkins (2010), President of the Carolinas Writing Program Administrators at UNC Wilmington notes that "the fact that a professor has a Facebook account brings what colloquially is referred to as 'street-cred,' or what professors might call ethos. Having credibility and establishing ethos fosters an honest, working relationship between professors and students that can be empowering for both."

> Students expect faculty who are fluent and familiar with social media and up-to-date technology tools, especially in an online classroom.

Building Community

One might ask: if all of these social and interactive networks exist, why should an instructor have to focus so deeply on engaging students? Shouldn't that framework be in place already?

It is a mistake to assume that online community-building simply takes care of itself. Consider the office building analogy: simply because everyone "lives" in the same professional environment, a true community doesn't really exist between everyone in the building simply because they happen to occupy the space - a community must be built around professional and personal relationships, shared interests and goals, and other factors.

So it goes with online interaction. Students may use Twitter or Google services, some might network with employers on LinkedIn, and most are likely on Facebook, but it cannot be assumed that they all use these services in the same way. The goal, then, should be to create a real community among instructors and students that most efficiently utilizes existing social network infrastructures.

Service-based Social Networks

Service-based social networks, like the ones mentioned above (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, et al.), and other platforms are a plus as students are likely to be familiar with their structure and functionality. Additionally, service-based sites often feature built-in collaborative tools, like the ability to post and edit comments, send files, and create multimedia. The ability to modify such

networks to your specifications is often limited, so you'll want to become familiar with how the features of a service-based network align with your goals as an instructor or course developer.

Some options include:

• A Facebook page for your course where information or multimedia can be posted on an as-needed basis;

• Course-specific hashtags on Twitter for both instructor feed (assignments, additional links) and group projects (i.e. #group2writingproject);

• Viewing online multimedia and conducting a real-time discussion utilizing Facebook or Twitter.

Course-organic Social Networks
Course-organic social networks can be viewed as the 'a la carte' of social networking: a combination of blogs, audiovisual elements or videoconferencing, service-based social networks, or other interactive online elements tailored to the specific needs of your course. Combining individual services this way allows you to more easily adapt existing course material for an online environment, and is infinitely more customizable.

Some options include:

• Utilizing Google Hangout ([plus.google.com/hangouts)](plus.google.com/hangouts) to stream group presentations;

• Creation of online portfolios using Google Sites (sites.google.com) so that students have their own piece of "real estate" for assignments, projects, or other course materials;

• Shared cloud accounts via Box, Google Drive, Dropbox, or other cloud-based storage services for peer editing or review;

• A course blog in which students are assigned the role of content curator on a daily or weekly basis.

A key factor to consider in either case is how your integration of social media fits the model of your course. Recognizing the potential benefits as well as the limitations of service-based or course-organic models of social media integration will be of great importance as you build your course. There are nearly limitless possibilities for interaction when service-based and course-organic social networks are combined.

Conclusion

Continued expansion of distance education will require patience, expertise in a variety of new areas (or, at the very least, a high degree of competence), and the ability to recognize that both instructors and students are still discovering what is possible. This navigation will require mindful exploration of technology resources, interactive content, and social networking, as well as how these components work together to form a cohesive, robust learning environment.

About the Author

Having developed and taught online courses since 2007, Christopher Bevard is currently the Assistant Director for Educational Technology at The John Marshall Law School in Chicago, Illinois, where he oversees development and delivery of JMLS' extensive eCourses program. To download a PDF version of this White Paper, visit sites.google.com/site/bevardedtech.

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