

Do Students have a Double Standard of Transparency? The Use of Social Media in Education

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Summary: Notwithstanding the general tendency of university students to support transparency, especially in public affairs, experience indicates that they are hesitant to share their work with fellow classmates on closed class web sites. We discuss recent cases where students were asked to prepare a short video as part of their assignment and share the videos with fellow classmates on an intranet.

Keywords: Transparency, educational uses of social networking.

Abstract: Most people would support the idea that public affairs should be transparent. Especially, local or national governments are expected to conduct their affairs in a transparent manner, where citizens could easily access the information in the possession of the governments, and observe how public affairs and operations are being conducted. On the other hand, people are generally protective of their personal information, and wish much of such information to be limited in its distribution and in its availability to others. Educational uses of social media is at an interesting junction with respect to concerns of privacy and the push towards transparency. There seem to be pedagogical benefits of distributing student work to other classmates. After all, we are all taught in school, from kindergarten on, to share. However, how wide educational student material is to be disseminated poses an interesting dilemma, which we attempt to address here.

1. Introduction

The role of transparency in modern education with Web 2.0 and later technologies has been discussed in the literature [1]. Transparency in education enables open learning, promotes the creation and sharing of content, and facilitates cooperation.

However, transparency refers not only to the openness and accessibility of context but also includes implications toward the accountability of those who disseminate the information. In this sense, the transparency of institutional governance is almost used inextricably with accountability, especially in

open societies. However, here we must disjoin transparency in its raw sense of being observable to others from accountability. Although the two concepts are related in their use and social implications, we focus on making context public to a very specific group.

There is much discussion on transparency in the news as well as in recent literature. The cases of WikiLeaks [2] and alleged whistleblowers [3] have brought much attention and many discussions to the public forums. There are claims that the transparency brought on by such actions have allowed the general public to become more sensitive, and thus, played an important role in recent political

movements, such as the so-called Arab Spring [4] and Occupy Wall Street [5].

The youth, by and large, are seen as the instigators and avid supporters of transparency and change that is to be triggered by such political activities. However, transparency by itself, distinct from the concept of accountability, seems to be viewed differently. It is this distinction that puts issues of privacy under a different light. In this respect, we see Internet users becoming increasingly concerned about their personal data being used for commercial and even national security purposes.

This apparent dichotomy presents an interesting dilemma for educational uses of social networking. Specifically, one must balance the benefits of making student-generated content available to a specific group against concerns of privacy. Are there tangible benefits of incorporating student-generated content? Should students be required to generate and make available such content? Should the distribution of such content be optional? If optional, how should grading those students who make content widely available differ from those who choose to keep content private?

Perhaps, more fundamentally, one must start with the investigation of how students view the dissemination of their work within class. In this report, we present and discuss our experiences with this question.

2. Experience with Video Assignments

The authors have had experience over the past five years in assigning homework that required students to shoot videos and optionally place them on a semi-public site. Assignments were given at The Middle East Technical University (METU), The University of South Florida Polytechnic (USFP), and at Yasar University (YU).

Students were asked to prepare individual or group videos. It was explained that the videos would be graded on their content rather than their technical features. Thus, videos shot by digital cameras, phones, web-cams, or built-in laptop cameras would be acceptable. Some assignments were limited in their length to 60 seconds, while the length of others were not specified. A few of the videos are available for public view [6].

In many actual cases of homework, the students were asked if they mind putting their videos on line. Although our observations are rather preliminary at this point, we feel that most good students do not mind allowing their videos to be accessible by their classmates. Students with average or below average grades seem to be more reluctant to allow their videos to be made available to classmates. Many prefer their videos to be viewed only by an instructor or a grader.

Some students seem not to mind their work to be available to classmates, or even to the general university community, but have refrained from allowing their videos to be made more widely available to the general public. That is, there seems to be a significant difference in the fraction of students who would like to limit their work to the class and those who do not object to placing their work on a public forum, such as YouTube. The latter seem to be sensitive to the distinction between educational use limited to the university and the general public.

3. Classical Homework versus Web-Disseminated Homework

An open question regards the precise benefits of making student-generated content. In one sense, students may learn from each other. After all, the exchange of knowledge within peer groups is a well-accepted phenomena and a well-established practice. Students routinely make class presentation, where others observe. In some cases, there are other

instructors or guests in such presentations. Doctoral defenses, for instance, are usually announced to the general public, where anybody may come and be admitted into the audience. It could be argued that students always learn from each other, albeit in an informal manner. Channeling student output through a website may bring some formalism to the process. It would also allow asynchronous information transfer, a phenomena well-accepted and widely practiced as web-based instruction is becoming more widespread.

If public student presentations are so commonly encountered in education, why then are students reluctant to place their videos on a public (Internet), or a semi-public (Intranet) site? We submit that the question warrants further study as social networking and transparency issues are encroaching course delivery and the learning objectives in higher education.

4. Preliminary Data on Web-Disseminated Homework

The authors have preliminary data that has been compiled as a first step to formulate a hypothesis and further rigorous statistical analyses.

First, students were asked to indicate their preferences if an assignment were to be given in which a video presentation was required. Five options concerning the scope of content distribution were offered to the students.

1. Only the instructor sees the content
2. Instructor and classmates see
3. Department students and faculty
4. University students and faculty
5. Public on the Internet

Additionally, students were asked to give the range in which their GPA falls. Data shows that approximately 20 percent of the students are in favor of placing their videos on line to be available for public viewing. The percent

of students who would like their work to be viewed only by the instructor is about 35 percent.

	Options				
	1	2	3	4	5
GPA					
>3	6	4	3	1	5
2-3	8	5	3	1	5
<2	3	2	3	0	1
Totals	17	11	9	2	11

The table shows the number of students and their choices. If we combine options 3 and 4 as there seems to be little difference between making content available to departmental students and faculty versus university students and faculty, then the distribution seems to be uniform among options 2, 3 and 4 combined, and 5, each at about one-fifth (22%).

The same information may be viewed in percentages, as shown below.

	Option				
	1	2	3	4	5
GPA					
>3	12.0%	8.0%	6.0%	2.0%	10.0%
2-3	16.0%	10.0%	6.0%	2.0%	10.0%
<2	6.0%	4.0%	6.0%	0.0%	2.0%
Totals	34.0%	22.0%	18.0%	4.0%	22.0%

The correlation between general student grades and their willingness to make their work available on line seems to be fairly weak.

Subsequently, in a class of 32 students, an actual assignment was given where students were asked to submit a 60-second video presentation. Students were asked if they

would like the content to be made public, or to be viewed only by the instructor. Only 3 students out of 32 agreed to make their presentations publicly available. The apparent discrepancy between hypothetical cases and actual cases is noteworthy. We submit that the preliminary findings justify further rigorous surveys and subsequent statistical analysis.

There are a few general thrusts of argument regarding the question of why students are hesitant to put their work on line.

First, students, especially those who do not fare well in class simply would like to avoid embarrassment as they are self-conscious of the shortcomings of their work. However, if this is the case, it clearly contradicts with the current fundamental tendencies towards transparency. Moreover, there does not seem to be any correlation between student grades and willingness to put their work on line.

Next, it may be argued that students are simply unfamiliar with the practice of placing their videos on a public forum. After all, technology is relatively new that allows all students to put megabytes of videos on line. This is the “traditionalist argument,” which simply says students are reluctant because it is new. This argument is also interesting, since it places the progressive youth under a conservative light. So, the argument would go, progressiveness is not a general attitude but a selectively applied one. Linked to this argument is the notion that the younger generation may not be as technologically savvy as they portray themselves to be. Most students are relatively uninformed when it comes to video formats and video editing.

Although there are other possible arguments, we offer only one more. The case may simply be a reflection of double standards. Such double standards are also common in society. For instance, people usually find it

amusing and entertaining when paparazzi take an inappropriate picture of a celebrity. The same people would not like their pictures to be published in a similar manner. The difference is that the paparazzi pictures are genuinely degrading, while class presentations are potentially degrading.

5. Conclusions and Further Work

Sharing student generated context is useful as it gives students to learn from the successes and mistakes of others. In a peer group, this is a well-practiced approach. New technologies offer education many opportunities to enhance the learning experience. The study of the exact nature of the impact of new technologies, as well as the cultural and traditional concerns in the adoption of such new technologies in education is warranted. Understanding student concerns is a prerequisite to improvement, meaning that a hasty implementation of new technologies in education should be viewed with a skeptical eye. In this respect, intensifying the dialog among the educators and the networking technology developers seems to be among the desiderata.

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