

The Visible Classroom

As more and more classroom activities move, at least in part, to the digital medium, it is becoming easier and easier to share these activities—student papers, lectures, discussions, class projects, performances—with a worldwide Internet audience. In addition, because digitally facilitated activities produce a record as a near-automatic byproduct, they remain available. Thus materials and experiences that were traditionally private and ephemeral are now becoming both permanent and broadly available. This is the new, globally visible networked classroom.

Yet neither the global sharing nor the retention of digital records is an intrinsic property of the technologies. These are policy decisions—complex ones that involve student, faculty, and institutional interests. It is clearly possible to restrict access—but we must then decide who has access, and for how long, and under what constraints. It is also certainly possible to deliberately destroy records after a specified period of time. To draw one extreme scenario, a campus could choose to make the digital classroom a more private and protected place than most of today's physical classrooms, forbidding the recording or reuse of class-related activities or the presence of informal auditors. Clearly, at some level, education benefits from both ephemerality and the classroom as a protected place. The notion that everything one ever said in a class, every essay one ever wrote, should be part of a permanent public record seems to be a self-evidently bad idea, one counterproductive to learning and inquiry.

At the other extreme, a campus could

choose to conduct the majority of intellectual life, including its classes, in public and to maintain a permanent public record of these activities. Historically, mature scholarship has been public, through publication, and the passage of student to scholar was recognized by rites such as publication and public defense of a thesis. Already, today, some faculty are using the digital medium to routinely conduct and preserve advanced classes, including student projects, on a worldwide stage.

These are the two extremes; for the great majority of classes, it's likely that neither extreme is ideal. Sharing term papers among class members, making lecture notes and discussion notes available for student and faculty review, using network-based discussions, and making term projects public are all often welcome and useful. Today we have a collection of largely unexamined and sometimes inconsistent practices that have probably evolved based on what was historically possible and practical, not on what was ideal. Consider how physical practicalities shaped public thesis defenses or the accommodation of informal auditors in classes, and how this might change in a digital setting. It is time for a thoughtful reexamination of such policies and practices in light of the capabilities of the new digital medium and as a guide to how these technologies will be employed.

The first policy challenge is for academic institutions and disciplines to develop norms for how public and how permanent various parts of the educational experience—from mandatory core undergraduate courses to graduate seminars—should be. I do not believe that there is a

single right answer; norms will vary by discipline and by institution and hence by department within a given institution. This process is complex; a campus will need to set overall boundaries but will also need to leave open flexibility to individual faculty in establishing expectations for specific courses within the context of a departmental culture. Due to constraints imposed by state or federal laws involving student privacy, intellectual property, or other areas, it may well be that in order to take certain courses, or to enroll in certain degree programs, students will have to explicitly waive specific rights in order to fit within these established norms. And here is the second challenge: the need to clearly explain norms (and their rationale and implications) to students and prospective students at each institution, in various disciplines, and at the course level and to gain students' agreement to those norms and expectations in appropriate ways—which also means thinking through what happens when students refuse to waive rights.

The choices that institutions make about the visible classroom will be central to defining campus culture, student experience, and the way the campus is viewed by other organizations in an increasingly digital world. They deserve thoughtful and broad-based discussion by the campus community.

Note

For further discussion of this topic, see Clifford Lynch, "The Afterlives of Courses on the Network: Information Management Issues for Learning Management Systems," November 26, 2002, available at <<http://www.cni.org/>>.

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