

Student Voice and Audience: Changing the Teaching-Learning Experience

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes how voice helps create student-centered learning environments where active, engaged, and authentic learning occurs. It examines how having graduate students post their assignments to the Internet broadens audience and provides for student voice that changes traditional teacher-learner relationships/structures. Traditional university assignments consist of one-to-one interactions between instructor and student; in essence, students are writing for an audience of one, their instructor. This paper describes a different pedagogical strategy in which graduate students post their assignments to the Internet. In this scenario, students are writing for real audiences including their own K-12 students, their students'

parents, and other teachers around the globe. Their audience is no longer limited to their university instructor.

The global objective for this research was to discover how requiring graduate students to post their assignments to the Internet affected their learning. A secondary objective was to evaluate the teaching strategies the university professor used to determine if she was creating a learning environment where active, engaged, and authentic learning occurred. Specifically, she wanted to discover how having a broad audience affected:

- the quality of student assignments
- the ownership students took in their assignments
- the value of audience, including its motivational and community-building possibilities; and
- the teaching-learning experience.

To indicate the importance of student voices, this paper is co-authored by a university professor and five current and former graduate students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is firmly grounded in constructivist thought that grows out of physical and social experiences, and is determined by the individual. The learner is viewed as actively constructing knowledge rather than passively absorbing a single version of "the truth." Constructivists see themselves as existing on the same plane as those they study and so honor multiple ways of knowing. Constructivists believe that the user constructs personal knowledge, so there is no one reality 'out there,' but there are many realities. Further, this study is firmly rooted in feminist pedagogy and features a collaborative, learner-center classroom that encourages risk-taking and intellectual excitement. Unique features of feminist pedagogy include: empowering all members of the community, engaging in reflection, and producing and then reflecting upon the social reality of these classrooms. In short, the university professor helped create the environment and interactions she wished to study in her classroom.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this longitudinal qualitative study, over 500 graduate students completed an online survey (Appendix A) over the course of twelve semesters about a teaching strategy their university professor

employed in their classroom, namely, requiring graduate students to post their assignments to the Internet rather than simply turning their assignments into her for evaluation. She employed interpretive methods to analyze student responses to open ended questions. She also conducted several focus groups with the five graduate students who are the co-authors of this paper.

She examined and analyzed the data in an effort to create a wide-angle picture of graduate students as they completed assignments that were viewed by wide audiences rather than a single reader/evaluator. Data were sorted and categorized using HyperQual2™.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The students involved in this study were all practicing teachers enrolled in a graduate program in a large public university in the Southwest. Assignments in their *Internet and Communications Technology* class were aligned with the NETS-T standards and included the creation of a Web site, a WebQuest, an AUP, links to resources for K-12 students, their parents, and other teachers, a digital camera project, and a paper on integrating technology in the K-12 classroom. Students incorporated all assignments into a Web site hosted on a university server. These graduate students' sites collectively receive between one and one-and-a-half million visitors per month.

All students completed an online survey (Appendix A) at the completion of this course. The survey asked open-ended questions about the instructor's practice of having students post all assignments for this course on the Internet.

In addition, the course instructor invited five graduate students to participate in several informal focus groups and to co-author this paper with her. Students shared individual perspectives on posting their assignments to the Web during two hour-long focus groups. All of the quotes listed in the Results section of this paper came from the focus groups.

FINDINGS

When students have a voice that reaches large audiences, extraordinary differences in teaching and learning occur within a graduate course. This study clearly shows that voice and audience are important considerations that should not be ignored when maximizing student learning is one's goal. In addition, the teaching strategies used

in this study provide proven examples of how university faculty can integrate technology into their instruction in meaningful ways, and university faculty can easily replicate the teaching strategies used. Further, by requiring that students post all assignments on the Web, the role of the university instructor more closely resembled a facilitator than an imparter of knowledge.

This section summarizes the analysis of data from the online survey and the graduate student focus groups. Findings from this study cluster around several major themes: the quality of student assignments, student ownership in their assignments, the value of audience, broad audience as a motivator for meaningful learning, the value of a community of learners, and changing the teaching-learning experience. Each subsection below summarizes our major findings, and then provides quotes from graduate students that provide richness and depth to our summary.

The quality of student assignments

Graduate students completed assignments more thoroughly and more thoughtfully when they were writing for broad and authentic audiences including their own students, parents of these students, and other teachers. Just knowing that they would post their assignments to a Web site viewed by more than one million visitors per month was sufficient motivation to insure that all students completed quality work. They came to realize that posting their assignments to the Internet fostered professionalism and made grades irrelevant.

Students were also inspired to produce quality work because all assignments were tailored to individual student's needs. As practicing teachers working on graduate degrees, they appreciated assignments that were immediately relevant to their own classrooms. When asked to create a Web-based curricular unit or locate Web sites they could use in their instruction, they saw the personal relevance of such an assignment, and they put more effort and care into these assignments than less relevant assignments.

Finally, students were not working for grades, they were working to create excellent instructional materials to be used in their own classrooms. As further evidence of their commitment to quality, students updated and refined the work they posted to the Internet long after their graduate classes was completed.

I understood expectations better because I reviewed how former graduate students tackled assignments, and was more inspired to complete assignments to the best of my ability because they were posted on the Internet.

Posting my assignments to the Web raised the quality of my work because I wanted to know that I was doing a good job. I wanted to model excellence for my third and fourth grade students.

Other factors that kept my effort at the highest level throughout my graduate program were the collaborative classroom environment, personalized and purposeful assignments, and the discussions and debates that grew from each.

As other teachers on my campus began using my WebQuests and links posted on my website, I was encouraged to keep creating high quality content, to stretch my learning, and to stay current and cutting edge.

Student ownership

Graduate students took greater ownership in their work when it was posted on the Internet rather than submitted to a single reader/evaluator, their university instructor. Choosing their own topics and building curricula for their K-12 students that was appropriate for the digital natives they taught, helped graduate students' learning become more focused, more personalized, more meaningful, and therefore, more their own. They could focus on their own learning, rather than their professor's knowledge.

I was able to gear my assignments to my specific content and grade level by creating carefully designed, standards-based lessons. Everything that I created was purposeful for use in my classroom.

Students who were absent began using my web page to complete assignments so they could be caught up when they returned to school. They began taking that same ownership for their learning as I had just a few months earlier in Dr. Christie's class.

I could see that my students felt the same sense of freedom with topic choice, but at the same time, they felt the responsibility of meeting my high expectations – as well as their own, since they were posting their electronic portfolios to the Web.

The value of audience

By publishing their assignments on the Web, graduate students immediately gained an audience broader than just their professor. They were using the Web as a tool to facilitate and extend the learning of their K-12 students. Such practice extended learning beyond the school hours and school wall, and it helped to facilitate conversations between these students and their parents around the learning process. The Web sites created in graduate classes became communication tools between practicing teachers and the parents of their K-12 students, as well as a means of sharing technology integration ideas with fellow teachers.

My experience as a publishing graduate student has opened my eyes to limitless possibilities that exist for all students to share their work with a larger audience.

Since I was designing assignments for use in my own classroom and also posting them to the Internet, I gave a great deal of thought to creating projects that would engage my students and challenge them to think for themselves.

My students created a regularly aired video newsmagazine for our school, grade level Web pages for individual teachers, as well as public service announcements. Language Arts was the subject, technology was one of the tools, but the motivation came from the students themselves because they knew every student and teacher in the school was viewing their work.

My students could no longer say "nothing" when parents ask "What did you do in school today"?

We had email contact from teachers and classrooms around the country that came across our posted lessons and enjoyed using them! We even collaborated with a classroom in Ohio by posting a literature review that linked to their first grade website.

I posted a math movie that my students created to teach others about geometry and patterns. These students were empowered and amazed to be able to share their learning with such a large audience!

My student technology club has expanded from video editing to video production as students managed morning announcements on our closed circuit television. Students accepted this new opportunity and responsibility with pride as they plan and deliver daily focused video messages. Students naturally consider the large audience and engage

in continual self-reflection in an effort to meet their own high standards.

Today, five years after receiving my Masters Degree, my knowledge seeking has not stopped. My web page has evolved. Since I can update and refine my web page as often as I like, I not only post all student activities now, I also provide resource links and classroom news. In addition, I showcase student work. When my third grade students and their pen pals wrote to each other describing themselves, and they in turn drew what they thought each other would look like, it was a project I knew needed to be shared outside of our classroom walls. The Web was the perfect medium for sharing to wide audiences.

Broad Audience as a Motivator for Meaningful Learning

Teachers face a myriad of challenges today. None seems more daunting than motivating students to learn. Students are often motivated purely by grades, not by the learning process itself. They are writing for an audience of one – the professor. Once students' classes are completed, their assignments carry little, if any, real value beyond that classroom.

However, when students are placed in an environment where their assignments are meaningful, purposeful, and created for real audiences, their learning becomes more active and authentic, and they become more engaged. When practicing teachers are writing for real audiences including their students, their students' parents, and other teachers locally and globally, they become energized and find their assignments rewarding and motivating. They become active, engaged learners who focus on "their learning" rather than the "professor's knowledge."

I am continually looking for ideas to help me in my quest to turn each one of my students into an intrinsically motivated, life long learner. By the second day in Dr. Alice Christie's graduate class I knew I had found not just resources to help me reach my goal, but a valuable model of a student-centered learning environment that I could recreate in my own classroom.

I started a Master's Program and dropped out because it seemed so irrelevant and I felt so isolated as a learner. I wasn't motivated because I wasn't encouraged to share my learning - or extend my learning to my classroom. But in this program, I was encouraged to personalize assignments so they were personally meaningful and

relevant to my life as a teacher. I was also required to share all my work on the Internet – so my learning benefited my students, their parents, and teachers everywhere.

I was motivated by my own expectations because the classroom assignments were created for my own students, to use in my own classroom, not for Dr. Christie to view and assess.

Once I posted my WebQuest, I could differentiate my reading instruction and introduce technology to students as an additional tool for learning. Students were motivated, excited and they felt challenged to do their best.

I began to see the value in helping my own students post their projects on the Internet. This opportunity created excited, engaged learners who took great pride in their final products.

The Value of a Community of Learners

When teaching and learning are viewed as solitary activities, students have only themselves to rely on. However, when students work collaboratively and cooperatively with others, a community of learners develops that encourages, and even demands, that students work together for the betterment of the class as well as themselves. A community is born when people with common needs or goals come together to assist each other in meeting needs or achieving goals for the common good. As in communities, classrooms and work environments are comprised of many individuals with varying skills and knowledge. Likewise, the combined skills and knowledge of the larger group is always greater than those of the individuals. It is through discourse and collaboration that greater knowledge is formed and higher practice is achieved.

Students who share drafts of their assignments gain valuable insights from fellow students and as well as their university instructor. This practice helps to shape the understandings of all members of the community from a myriad of perspectives. From all of these activities a feeling of camaraderie forms as each class becomes a community of learners supporting each other and growing under the guidance of the university instructor.

Graduate students are strongly encouraged to help each other in completing their assignments. In doing so, students not only achieve their goals and learn from one another, they also form friendships and

professional relationships that last beyond their graduate programs and establish conduits of communication between districts and schools. These professional alliances and friendships, cultivated during graduate classes are just as strong today as they were when the graduate students were meeting and sharing every week.

In short, students are encouraged to become a community of learners whose growth is facilitated by their interactions with each other. In this collaborative learning process, students worked together to solve problems and create valuable products. This practice motivated graduate students to not only share their expertise with others, but to strive to do their best work. Problem solving is exciting and demanding when shared with others who both challenge and work together to uncover the answers to problems that arise in everyday practice. Such a community of learners fosters excellence because each learner shares responsibility for the learning process with peers. This model is equally appropriate for K-12 learners as for graduate students, and these teachers went back to their own classrooms intent on creating similarly motivated communities of learners.

I began strong friendships with like-minded professionals learning in a motivational atmosphere. We became a part of a community of teachers as learners.

Dr. Christie invites others to engage in the problem solving process to share what they know with their classmates. Because of this invitation, one will see her students leaning over computer screens, pointing, discussing options, suggesting solutions, sharing the language of educational technology; in short, learning from, with and about each other.

My learning was so much richer because it occurred within a learning community of practicing teachers who were encourage to share perspectives, challenge each other, problem solve, and share our work with all the other members of the community.

I didn't finish class with just the WebQuest I created or the online resources I found. I left class with 30 WebQuests and 30 lists of online resources appropriate for K-12 kids, their parents, and other teachers.

Changing the teaching-learning experience

Sharing ideas and strategies to solve problems with broad audiences helped graduate students see themselves in new roles as teachers.

They began to view themselves as facilitators who designed learning activities that fostered authentic, active, participatory learning tailored to meet the needs of individuals. They became more organized and focused as learners, and they became empowered as learners by having greater control over learning, and were more likely to take risks as learners. With these emerging strengths, they began reorganizing their classrooms, changing their expectations of students, and viewing their roles as facilitators rather than dispensers of knowledge.

Graduate students began incorporating the learner-centered, collaborative strategies they saw modeled in their graduate classes. They opened the doors of their classrooms to allow others to peek in to see how learning is constructed. They hid less behind the once closed doors and stepped out in their own classrooms to form new communities of learners. They learned to trust in their own skills and in the skills of those around them. They learned a very valuable lesson: teaching and learning are about sharing what one knows, discovering what someone else knows, and together seeking answers to that which they have yet to know.

While Alice has been my mentor for many years, I am now able to mentor and share my knowledge with her. We are continually learning from each other.

Clearly, the modeling I experienced in my program influenced the way I taught in my own classroom.

Dr. Christie's students take the observed and practiced actions of this powerful model and apply them to their own classrooms and their own grade level or department teams.

The constructivist approach that I was experiencing in my graduate work was also reflected in the way I taught my own class. I believe my young students reap the same benefits as I did in my graduate classes.

I began to view technology as an important classroom tool and also an agent of change in my teaching/learning experience.

As my lessons were posted, my colleagues began to notice students using them. They began to see the value of online content facilitating a more collaborative and engaged learning environment.

Posting my assignments to the Web has had a transforming effect on the way I teach and learn.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Digital Natives is the term commonly used to describe today's K-12 students. They have no knowledge of a world without satellites, cell phones, computers, fax machines, television, DVD, or video games. There is a fast-paced, instant culture. They are at ease with advanced electronic tools in the classroom.

University faculty currently serve the first wave of this millennial generation who have grown up digital. Asking students to post their assignments to the Internet, therefore, is not the awesome task it was just a few years ago. The advantages to doing so are enormous. Those teachers willing to foster student-centered learning can maximize student learning by widening the audience for assignments. This simple teaching strategy challenges learners to:

- go beyond their expectations and those of their university instructor;
- be actively and personally engaged in their own learning;
- see their assignments as authentic and meaningful;
- complete assignments for real and broad audiences not just one professor who will assign a grade;
- deepen and broaden their learning through participation in a community of learners; and
- understand the value of audience as a key to student success.

Appendix A: Relevant Questions from Online Survey

Dr. Christie generally asks students to place their work (WebQuests, daily assignments, projects, etc.) on the Web on the server she maintains for students:

- Explain how this practice has affected the way you do assignments.
- Explain how this practice has affected how you learn.
- Explain how this practice has affected how you teach.