CHAPTER 17.

USING X AS APPLIED LEARNING IN A FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSROOM

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"There's a bug in my class!" After all my planning and research, a bug that flew through an open window in my first-year composition class introduced my students to tweeting in the classroom. That inconspicuous message was also a precursor of a semester-long struggle to get students to expand their understanding of the online platform, which would hopefully prepare them to communicate with a larger world. My goal of using X in the classroom to prepare students for online service learning, useful in a post-pandemic world, would soon be abandoned due to pedagogical shifts and eventually online learning beginning in March 2020.

Rather than adopt this practice for use during the COVID-19 pandemic, I shifted to a more traditional service-learning model the following semesters. However, having reviewed the course, presented the results at a conference, and studied my methodology and results, I better understand how I could have made the project more viable. As the Northeast region of the United States shifts from the pandemic phase of COVID-19, there are now renewed opportunities to engage once again with service learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SERVICE LEARNING

Gray et al. (1998) document the many benefits of service learning, including helping students remember more course information, earn better grades, and enjoy their classes more. Waldstein and Reiher (2001) argue that service learning encourages students to actively learn because there is greater participation within the classroom and the surrounding community. These opportunities only increase as online learning becomes more normal, according to McGorry (2012), who writes: "As more students begin to explore online education alternatives and

institutions increase service-learning offerings, there will be greater opportunities to incorporate service learning into the online curriculum" (p. 48).

McGorry's research also addresses the intersection of service and online learning. They ask, "Can an online learning experience deliver the same benefits to students and organizations as it does in a traditional classroom setting" (McGorry, 2012, p. 45). Even though they found "no significant difference in outcomes between the online and face to face models" (McGorry, 2012, p. 45), Nellen & Purcell (2009) report a gap in research concerning service learning online.

X, Formerly Known as Twitter

The online message platform X is often used in the classroom to foster communication and learning. It is a low-stakes entry vehicle that provides as much or as little interaction as needed between instructor, student, and outside entities. X fosters student-to-student learning, which indicates to students which concepts are important (Blessing et al., 2012) and serves as a gateway to writing in a larger context while simultaneously allowing students protection due to their anonymity (Young, 2009). Blessing, Blessing, and Fleck (2012) note when used in class, tweets can provide an avenue for students to disengage due to distractions and that students who read class-content tweets retained the information more than students who did not read said tweets.

Course Goals

Rather than have students immediately begin online service learning, I decided to slowly immerse them in online communication via X. The four initial goals I created were: (1) create public discourse that would still be anonymous, (2) foster low-stakes online interaction with people not in the classroom, (3) allow them to write in the "real world" where the results were less predictable than in the classroom, and (4) help students understand which concepts were important (Blessing et al., 2012).

METHODOLOGY

Anonymous discourse would allow the students to become comfortable communicating with people both in and out of the course. While I knew which X names they used, the other students did not. Online discussions of coursework and readings would serve as low-stakes interaction, though there was always the chance that an unknown person would respond, which eventually happened.

Finally, through instruction and formative feedback, students would begin to understand which concepts were important. As it turned out, most students had only a basic knowledge of X and would need time to get acclimated to the platform. Those who had accounts rarely tweeted when not in class. As a group, they reported at the beginning of the semester that they were anxious about interacting with people outside of the course.

However, in addition to these short-term goals, my long-range plan had three components as it was designed to transition from online communication within the classroom to online service learning. They included (1) the first semester would be a test to navigate the challenges of acclimating students to online communication with strangers, (2) connection to a local organization to partner with, and finally (3) in coordination with a local partner, agree to an online format that would allow students to gain real-world experience.

Next, I sought to foster a sense of larger community by using the hashtag #cortlandwrites to connect students in my courses with students across campus and even community members in the town of Cortland, New York. Every tweet students sent would incorporate that hashtag. At the very least, it allowed students in multiple sections of the same course to find all course content tweeted by using that hashtag.

However, to do that, I would have to ensure the students were comfortable with using the platform. I had used X in the classroom before, however not for the purpose of introducing students to applied learning. My goal was to have them write on the open web to begin conversations and experience interaction with people outside the classroom. Armed with this research, it seemed possible to use online communication to prepare students to interact with local communities online. It also appeared reasonable to slowly prepare students for this communication using the composition classroom as a test bed.

RESULTS

The results reported by Blessing, Blessing, and Fleck (2012) represent my results in the classroom. X served as a platform to help students interact with course material. It also served as a tool for impromptu formative assessment, which is excellent for helping to evaluate student learning (Black & William, 1998) and can enhance student performance (Lunt & Curran, 2010). However, interactions with users outside the classroom provided either humor or anxiety for students. Additionally, it proved difficult to keep students focused on the material at hand. They would tweet about non-course subjects, such as bugs in the classroom.

Lessons Learned

X was not the correct platform to train students to interact online. The strength of the platform in the classroom, being disconnected from others, is also the weakness since it did not provide interaction with anyone in the local community. Communication through an organization's website would have helped to foster understanding of the organization.

In later semesters, I would partner with the campus cupboard so that students could learn firsthand about providing services to fellow students who were food insecure. That experience was primarily face-to-face, and students wrote about and reported positive results.

Transition to Applied Learning

There are several takeaways from the semester. First, the focus must be on connecting to and engaging with the organization. Online communications will become more comfortable for students when they know the people on the other end of the platform. Second, online communications, irrespective of platform, should be between students and the organization and only include secondary audiences when appropriate.

CONCLUSION

My project proved to be unviable in part because I chose to slowly introduce my students to online communication in the hopes that once they had that skill set, we could expand to incorporate community partners. This was the opposite of what I should have done. Any instructors pursuing a combination of in-person and online service learning should consider the order of operations. While the research shows that online service learning is not only viable but effective, instructors should consider combining in-person with online communication. Although X is still an effective platform to communicate online, the rise of alternate social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and others presents new avenues of engagement with local communities and organizations that seek to interact with students and instructors to provide real-world experiences.

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