Title: Social Media as a Vehicle for Connecting Theory and Practice
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Summary: A professor alters the course design for an upper-level undergraduate mass communications class to help students make connections between and critically assess theory and practice.

Background

The School of Journalism and Mass Communications has made efforts to update its curriculum to help students prepare for careers in a digital media environment. In line with these efforts I developed an elective course "Social Media in Strategic Communication" (JOUR 615), aimed at covering concepts and skills important for professional strategic communicators in the age of online social networking. I first taught the course in Spring 2012 and am now scheduled to teach it each spring. JOUR 615 is open to upper-division undergraduates and master's students focusing on advertising or public relations.

My learning objectives for students were:
• understand significant changes in strategic communication approaches brought about by the networked information society;
• create social media content to achieve a client organization's strategic goals and objectives;
• learn how to develop social media planning for a client organization;
• use social media analytics to measure and evaluate social media campaigns; and
• understand ethical issues related to social media-based strategic communication.

I designed class readings, assignments, and social media participation requirements to achieve these goals, and I expected students to acquire a theoretical understanding of class topics through readings, lectures, and class/group discussions. Students regularly contributed to the class blog site by identifying issues or problems with the week's readings, raising original thoughts, or posing discussion questions. Computer lab sessions and individual/group presentations were designed to help students gain hands-on experiences with social media tools and learn about case studies. Client projects allowed for the application of theoretical concepts covered in class to real-world situations.

However, while students easily saw the value of learning hands-on social media skills, some had difficulty understanding the importance of also learning theoretical aspects of social media. Most social media courses focus on either theory or hands-on skills, but I believe it is important for students to be aware of the connections between the two to become effective professional communicators. Therefore, while participating in the Best Practices Institute at CTE, I focused on how to improve ways of effectively combining theoretical and hands-on approaches in my social media course. In this portfolio, I explore how changes in my course design might enable students to better understand connections between theory and practice and become more motivated to critically assess concepts and theories related to social media in strategic communication.

Implementation

To make more explicit the connections between theoretical understandings and hands-on skills, I made three significant adjustments to the course in Spring 2013. First, I changed the class from two 90-minute meetings a week to one three-hour meeting a week. The purpose of this change was to give students time to use social media skills relevant to theories and concepts discussed in class on the same day by attending a computer lab session immediately after each lecture session. Second, I revisited two of the previous client projects that gave students the important opportunity to apply concepts they learn in class to real-world projects or situations. I changed the dual-client project format to a one-client project format to permit students to spend more time focused on one main client project. I also replaced a mini-client project with a social media analytics assignment. In this assignment students analyzed concepts and metrics of social media monitoring and evaluations to analyze social media buzz around March Madness 2013. Finally, students completed three blog posts during the first third of the semester, reflecting on how what they learned in class may apply to real-world situations. These changes were intended to help students better understand the connections between theory and practice.

Enhanced computer lab sessions
Holding a computer lab session immediately after each lecture every week required some significant adjustments to the course itself. First of all, the class met once a week for three hours with the first half devoted to a lecture and class discussions in a regular classroom and the second half to hands-on skills in a computer lab. In Spring 2012, the class met twice a week and lab sessions were not held as frequently. Second, the change also required reducing the maximum class enrollment from 28 to 20, since each lab in the School can accommodate only up to 20 people. In Spring 2012, hands-on skills were taught in a classroom with students using their own laptop, as no lab could accommodate the whole class of 28. Finally, in terms of course preparations, I needed to prepare hands-on exercises every week that were directly relevant to the week's topics. For example, when we discussed social media monitoring and analytics during the lecture portion of the class, students then learned and used different social media analytics tools during the lab session that immediately followed.

More focused approach to client project
In this class, students worked in small groups to develop social media strategies for a client organization. In the past, a final paper was the only client assignment required of students. In Spring 2013 I implemented several important changes to the client project. The first change was the addition of multiple small assignments building towards the final paper. These small assignments included examining the client organization's social media needs, monitoring its current social media use, and developing a detailed social media plan (theoretical and practical) for the organization. I provided written comments on each small assignment, and students were required to improve each section based on my feedback. These small assignments constituted the main components of their final paper. To make this shift from a single paper to a scaffolded approach more manageable both for me and for the students, I reduced the number of client projects from two to one.

By focusing on one main project throughout the semester, students were able to spend more time on research and strategic planning for the project and, thus, to produce a higher quality social media plan book.

Social media analytics assignment
I tried to link other small assignments to real-world examples as well. In Spring 2013, I created a social media analytics assignment for which students monitored and analyzed Twitter buzz surrounding March Madness 2013. Since the event is popular among college students, it helped students understand how what they learn in class can be applied to something that they find interesting. In my class, students were able to use Salesforce Radian6 – one of the leading proprietary social analytics platforms – throughout the semester for free, as the class was selected for the Salesforce Marketing Cloud Higher Education Program. Students also used Topsy Pro Analytics and compared strengths and weaknesses of the two analytics platforms. Students analyzed trending topics, content sentiment, and influencers surrounding the sports event. In addition, students used what they learned through this assignment in completing their client project.

Reflective blog posts
Early in the semester (weeks 2-4), students submitted three short blog posts reflecting on how theories and concepts studied in class may apply to real-world situations. They posted their reflections to the class private blog site using WordPress, and other class members could read and comment on them. Reading these contributions helped me better understand where students were in terms of their learning, and I could then adjust my teaching as necessary.

Student work

Social media planning assignment
The purpose of this assignment was to allow students to understand and implement the steps required to develop solid social media planning and to create a complete social media planning report. All project groups completed the required components (analyzing the organization's current social media use and developing specific social media strategies). The groups that received a high grade, such as Group 1, stated clear objectives for social media campaigns, provided solid research on the organization's social media activities, and suggested practical, detailed, and well thought-out strategies and recommendations for the organization's future social media engagement. Groups like Group 2, which received an average grade, covered all the necessary elements for a social media planning report, but lacked either a strong connection between research and recommendations or detailed evaluation strategies. The groups that received a low grade failed to provide solid research, sufficient information as to why they recommended certain strategies, and how they expected those strategies to contribute to the organization's overall business goals.

Social media analytics assignment
The purpose of this assignment was to help students become more familiar with social media monitoring and analytics by applying concepts and tools discussed in class to a real-world topic. Most students fulfilled all requirements for this assignment by identifying trending topics, influencers, and sentiment of social media content related to March Madness 2013. Students who received a high grade (student 1) provided a good rationale for choosing particular keywords for their analysis, completed all the required analyses, clearly explained the results with both text and visuals, and effectively interpreted the findings. Students who received an average grade (student 2) completed all the analyses and included analysis graphs but lacked solid interpretations of the findings. Students who received a low grade (student 3) failed to complete all the main analyses required and provided only scant explanations of what the results meant.

Reflections

Social media is an interesting and important subject to teach, but it can be challenging since technologies change so rapidly. In addition, college students, who have grown up with new digital technologies, bring different levels of understanding and familiarity with the topic. In my class, I try to nurture their ability to understand the underlying context and thereby anticipate useful tools rather than simply focusing on different tools that come and go. Students are, however, often more excited about learning different tools than about theoretical aspects. While most students easily see the value of learning hands-on skills in social media, some have difficulty understanding the importance of learning theoretical aspects of social media. For example, when I discussed theories of social media use in Spring 2012, a student asked why he needed to know about them.

With this challenge in mind, I made significant changes to the course in Spring 2013. I improved the design of the course to make more explicit the significance of acquiring both theoretical understandings and hands-on skills, as well as connections between the two.

It is hard to tell whether these changes were successful in terms of enhancing student learning without thorough analyses and empirical research. However, student evaluations of the course indicated that their learning experiences were positive. On the question of where the course "set and met clear goals and objectives," the mean score was 4.74 on a scale of 1 to 5. The mean of all the items was 4.72, which was slightly improved from Spring 2012.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that students appreciated the lecture/computer lab structure of the course, as they believe it allowed them to better understand how different aspects of social media are connected. Students also mentioned that completing sections of their final project and getting my feedback throughout the semester helped them produce a quality work in a timely manner. The overall quality of students' final projects also improved from the previous year. On average, their social media research was stronger, and theoretical concepts were better incorporated into their analysis and planning. In particular, some groups employed interactive social media strategies during their final presentations.

Students also seemed to enjoy the March Madness 2013 assignment. Several students told me that social media had been an important part of their experiences with March Madness, but this was the first time that they participated in social media activities while thinking of the theoretical concepts and research aspects that we discussed in class. When students see connections between classroom learning and what is happening around the world, they are more likely to be engaged learners.

One thing that I want to improve in the future is to create more detailed hands-on exercises for lab sessions. In several lab sessions, I had specific assignments that students were required to complete during each session. These lab sessions with detailed assignments went better than the sessions where I showed them how to use some tools

and they simply followed my instructions. Preparing for lab assignments before the semester begins will be essential to developing quality exercises.

I also plan to hold more meetings with project groups in the future. Since the class met only once a week, there were some occasions where I found it challenging to provide timely feedback on in-progress materials. I used online tools such as email, Blackboard, and WordPress to provide feedback, but I have found that face-to-face meetings are often more effective in discussing ideas.