

THE FIFTY PERCENT RULE: THE CHALLENGE OF ENGAGING STUDENTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of three separate community-sharing tools in the classroom over time to teach a marketing technology class at a large Midwestern University and a class blogging project over three semesters at a small Eastern College. These methods include a class wiki, a private Ning social network and the public Google+ social network. The paper describes the features of each and evaluates the pros and cons through their application for the learner-centered teaching approach. The research measures and reports the results of these efforts, discusses the challenges of engaging students in social media and online communities, explores underlying rationales and suggests opportunities for improvement. Rather than suggest widespread use of social media in the classroom, these results indicate that engagement might not be 100% and that social media should, of course, be supplemented with other forms of engagement.

To test the hypothesis that the more learner-centered the tool the higher the usage by students, we evaluated the various levels of engagement on the wiki, Ning and Google+ over each of the three semesters. The wiki was evaluated by wiki 'karma bars' which measured contribution. The more an individual contributed to a particular wiki, the higher the 'karma' rating. For the Ning social network, class participation grades were reported to measure engagement (ten postings of 10 points each for 100 points was the metric). For Google+ participation measurement, the number of postings were counted. For Ning and Google+ ten postings were required but not all students did ten postings, in spite of course requirements. Comments on postings, which are more difficult to evaluate, were eliminated from the analysis. The quality of postings was not an aspect of this analysis.

In spite of broad adoption by social media for personal use by what is known as the "Millennial" generation, student engagement across these community-sharing tools seemed to be 'stuck' at the fifty percent mark. Our general hypothesis that the more the tool facilitated the principles of learner-centered teaching, the more it would be adopted by students, was not supported. In fact, the results of a student survey indicate students did not think that the public social media network Google+ was a good way to share course information, although students did think the public network was a good way to share information on what was happening in interactive marketing. Qualitative feedback from students over three semesters from a blogging assignment at an Eastern College supported these results and indicated that blogging was considered a homework task to be put off until the last minute, if completed at all.

Therefore, across Universities, semesters, and social interaction tools, it appears that a rule of engagement of somewhere around fifty percent is the norm for social media use in the classroom, consistent with engagement in other areas such as the Forrester "Engagement Ladder." Therefore, we coin the term: "The Fifty Percent Rule" to suggest that educators need to understand that using social media in the classroom is not a guarantee of engagement. Other methods may need to be used to involve students than these tools. The paper discusses the reasons for this lack of engagement and ways to improve participation.

More research in this area needs to be conducted to determine the appropriate role of these collaborative and community-building technologies in the classroom. These results confirm the results of other researchers that social media is a tool like any other and must be used as appropriate to facilitate classroom communication. Like any other teaching tool, some students will be interested in using the tool and some students will not. Future studies should focus on the benefits to the students of the use of social media and expand beyond the limited setting of these educational institutions to see if other methods of student engagement will break the "Fifty Percent Rule."

References available upon request