SELF-PRESENTATION AND LIABILITY WITHIN E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT
This paper outlines some of the implications of delivery and participation within e-Learning courses and explores whether awareness of these implications may affect the behavior of participants in these courses.

KEYWORDS
Data, e-Learning, Surveillance, Online, Tracking

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a pronounced shift to e-Learning, but the use of web-based lecture technologies to supplement or replace face-to-face modalities had been steadily increasing in higher education well before the onset of the pandemic (O’Callaghan et al., 2017). Courses have become increasingly supplemented by web-based learning platforms such as Moodle and Blackboard, utilizing these tools to encourage student engagement and simplify administrative course management. It is now customary, in an effort to support students who may be uncomfortable with online modalities, to provide recorded lectures of both synchronous and asynchronous courses. Students can access and replay them at their leisure to prevent missing valuable content and to enhance comprehension (DeNeui & Dodge, 2006). Features such as these heighten the convenience of online courses and increase the likelihood of students enrolling and successfully completing an online course (von Konsky et al., 2009), but also present implications for the participants that would not typically arise in a traditional face-to-face setting.

Self-presentation is a term used in the behavioral sciences that refers to how individuals choose to present themselves to a wider audience, in light of how they want to be perceived by that audience. This is related to the concept of impression management, which entails controlling information about oneself to create a desired impression on others (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Self-presentation may be deliberate and potentially deceitful, but it may also be an entirely unconscious act. Self-interest of individuals and their awareness and understanding of their social environment determines the amount and type of effort they put forth toward creating their desired impression on others or, more broadly, the “public sphere”.

Rauchfleisch and Kovic (2016) and Mahlouly (2014) explored Habermas’ (1991) concept of the public sphere, a “network of communication”; in which individuals within that realm regulate their behaviors and interactions based on their perceived notions of acceptable behavior in that environment. Within that realm exists a hierarchy of “identity building” based on how the individuals wish to be viewed and how they adjust their behavior according to those objectives. The internet is identified as a public sphere that impacts identity building and “agenda setting” in the context of individuals’ self-presentation. The degree to which individuals police their behavior within an online environment, as with any other setting, depends on their cognizance of their roles within that setting and their awareness regarding how hierarchies of expectations within that setting operate. The behaviors and choices of participants in e-Learning environments likely function no differently. However, significant differences may exist in students’ level of awareness of themselves as members of an e-Learning environment and their subsequent roles within that realm as opposed to their roles and expectations within a face-to-face classroom environment. Furthermore, categorical issues may come into play. An e-Learning platform is, after all, the internet. Individuals who operate in other online environments such as social media platforms with degrees of comfort and familiarity may have similar assumptions about how to conduct themselves within an e-Learning environment. Different online environments may be perceived as similar by individuals operating within those environments despite fundamental differences existing among them.
2. E-LEARNING: BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS

The use of data tracking and surveillance in e-Learning environments is increasing, partly due to the use of tools highlighting such features as “learning guidance” and “assessment” in efforts to ensure an online course contributes adequately to a high-quality education (May & George, 2011). This access to data sets a precedent unique to the online classroom. In a traditional, face-to-face course, information about the student’s study habits or engagement within the course is restricted to what is observable in the classroom and information the student voluntarily provides. In contrast, e-Learning systems foster an environment of surveillance inconceivable through an in-person course format. All online activity pertaining to a course, as long as it is funneled through the e-Learning platform, is recorded automatically and can subsequently be audited. An instructor can see a student’s attempted logins, views of recorded lectures or other URLs posted in the platform, downloads of course materials, length of time the student spent in the platform, and even the IP address from which the student accessed the course.

Many e-Learning platforms provide canned reports of student activity supplemented by visualizations such as informative and accessible charts and graphs. A savvy instructor can use these data to assess student behaviors and even make predictions or assumptions about students based on their level of activity in the platform. An instructor may be less inclined toward lenient grading with students who are enrolled in online sections due to the increased accessibility of course content in conjunction with whatever observations the instructor might make based on the students’ online activity recorded in the platform. This places the instructor at a distinct advantage.

Conversely, the e-Learning environment may create potential liabilities instructors are unlikely to encounter within traditional classroom settings. While the Department of Education has established that recording students in online classroom settings is not a violation of FERPA (2020), recordings still produce some degree of vulnerability to participants. The number of participants in a traditional classroom is generally restricted, if not to enrolled students then at least by room capacity. Potentially, recordings can last indefinitely and access to those recordings may be allocated to other than sanctioned participants. Unless restrictions are set in place preemptively, “unfettered access” (DeNeui & Dodge, 2006) to recorded lectures could have a much wider and potentially unregulated audience than intended, which may have intellectual property, privacy and liability implications.

Accessibility to lectures via recordings, especially if not adequately restricted, may also create a precedent that inhibits discourse in the virtual classroom. Any classroom setting, whether it be face-to-face or virtual, is public. Participants in a classroom would be expected to be aware of this and censor their communication to some degree regardless of the mode of course delivery. However, a recorded lecture can be saved indefinitely and replayed, and therefore presents unique implications that are less likely to manifest in a traditional classroom setting. Thus, willingness of participants to contribute to meaningful discussion within the classroom may be affected, as might course content. For example, students in a face-to-face classroom might not be as likely to fixate on semantics or potentially take innocuous comments out of context as they could with access to a lecture they can save and re-visit and subsequently overanalyze. It is possible instructors sensitive to this phenomenon might adjust the content of their lectures accordingly to discourage misinterpretation or unwanted controversy.

May and George (2011) advocate a three-fold “system of transparency” to ensure students and other users of e-Learning platforms are adequately protected within a surveilled e-Learning environment: 1. Informing users of any tracking process in place whenever accessing any online learning platform; 2. Acquiring approval from users that such tracking may occur; and 3. Allowing users “full control” of their tracking data and the power to make their data accessible or inaccessible to others. Whether this is feasible in all e-Learning platforms or within existing university data governance policies should at least be examined.

3. CASE STUDIES & ASSESSMENT

Despite the potential issues associated with e-Learning described above, self-awareness and subsequent self-presentation of some students as they engage within learning management platforms appears to be limited. Several anecdotal cases support this suggestion. Multiple seasoned instructors of both synchronous and asynchronous courses described encounters with students over many semesters. Many students were seemingly unaware their online activity within the platform was recorded and auditable, or, in some cases, observed at all.
In one case study, an online asynchronous undergraduate student who performed poorly in a business course attempted to negotiate with the professor to elevate the student’s grade. The instructor requested an audit of the student’s activity and the teaching assistant and IT support staff compared it to the activity of other students in the course who scored higher on the exam. The data gleaned from user activity reports within the eLearning platform illustrated that not only had the student failed to view nearly all of the recorded lectures, the student also displayed significantly less online activity than other students in the course who had performed better. These tools allowed the instructor to parry further negotiations or excuses preemptively. The activity data gleaned from the platform reports were also used constructively to suggest the student increase activity in the course.

Electronic delivery of materials in conjunction with software designed to check plagiarism also renders cheating relatively easy to catch, although some students persist in engaging in such activities. Another case study involves a business instructor who described several students who turned in identical assignments, only to be shocked when they were caught. In another particularly provocative case, an online sociology instructor received a submission of a paper only to recognize some of the content presented in the submitted assignment as the instructor’s own writing.

The final case illustrating students’ compromised self-presentation is a professor of business who described students in a synchronous online business course who made an appearance at the initial start of class only to disappear mid-lecture, turning off their cameras and failing to respond to the instructor’s attendance checks in the online chat feature embedded in the course. Upon conclusion of the lecture, the students (or their Zoom screens, rather) lingered idly in class, their representatives clearly still away from their computers.

These behaviors and the dichotomy of this phenomenon are perplexing. The current generation of traditional undergraduate students represented in e-Learning courses is considered to be the best-educated and most technologically-savvy generation (Bradshaw, 2019; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Many students, however, demonstrate a troubling lack of awareness (or apathy) that their behavior is observed by others as well as every aspect of their online activity is recorded and saved and can be retrieved. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, Millennials are more apt than previous generations to be comfortable with organizations (institutions of higher education were not listed in this survey) accessing their personal data and 80% reported they trusted businesses to keep their information secure (Alton, 2017). Fleming and Adkins (2016) theorize this trust may be the result of growing up while under constant surveillance by technology that blurs the boundaries between public and private.

Some students have expressed concerns about their privacy and voiced reluctance to being surveilled by their institutions but these objections seem to occur more frequently when they are actively made aware of being surveilled and some physical action on their part is required, such as being compelled to use tracking devices or a camera or face recognition software to discourage cheating during exams (Mangan, 2021). It appears that if the surveillance is “out of sight” it is also “out of mind”. Surveillance and data collection within an e-Learning platform likely does not enter a student’s consciousness unless the data are actively retrieved under circumstances described in the case studies.

4. CONCLUSION

The student behavior described in these case studies could be explained by a limited awareness of their roles within an e-Learning environment as well as difficulties identifying it as another social environment possessing a set of expectations and rules. Factors that contribute to this phenomenon may include generational characteristics of enrolled students and their relationship with technology. It is also possible the e-Learning environment, being relatively new and dynamic, with rules that are not always clearly defined, sends mixed messages to the participants, resulting in behaviors that appear contradictory or careless. Many students likely have never participated in e-Learning until entering college, and their ability to identify expectations within that environment and implications of their behavior within it may be limited. These challenges might not be restricted to student participants and may also apply somewhat to the instructors of online courses as well, who, as participants in a new and evolving arena, are still learning what the rules are and developing their own self-presentation.

Universities must carefully construct technological and business process measures that adequately restrict access to recorded lectures. Enforcement of security measures in e-Learning is vital to encourage participation as well as confidence in the online method of delivery. Such measures may include, but are not limited to, restricting the amount of time recorded lectures are available online and ensuring they are delivered in formats that are not downloadable; utilizing a single sign on (SSO) to limit access to course content; or simply requiring
students to view online lectures synchronously and not providing recordings of lectures at all. While all universities have general policies in place to ensure student data are protected and restrict access to student data, these protections do not explicitly examine how these data are being used internally. Universities should take steps to encourage a culture of data awareness for all participants in e-Learning platforms that addresses the unique issues associated with engaging within those environments.

5. LIMITATIONS

The onset of institution-wide mandatory remote learning in response to COVID-19 resulted in a large number of new (and sometimes reluctant) participants. Explanations for the behaviors observed in the case studies described in this paper are primarily speculative. If such behavior adjustments are indeed occurring, it is not known how directly or consciously they are being made. It is hypothesized, but not known, that those recently introduced to e-Learning environments may behave differently from their counterparts who are accustomed to operating within such realms. Further research is needed to ascertain whether a relationship exists between individuals’ familiarity with e-Learning environments and their behavior and whether those individuals consciously adjust their behavior in response to their perceived roles within the e-Learning environment.

REFERENCES


