Lurking, Spying, and Policing: Practical Strategies to Enhancing Engagement and Collaboration in Virtual Group Work

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This paper explores and describes the practical strategies to enhance community and collaboration in the online classroom. While the practice of having students work in teams and groups in the on-site, face-to-face environment is well utilized, and the strategies to overcome the issues of social loafing and aimless communication among group and team members is well documented, the practical strategies for the online environment are not. The subtle revolution that is moving more and more classes to the online learning environment is creating an opportunity to re-categorize online classes out of the "distance learning category" and into the "university proper" category. However, for that to fully materialize, online classes must be a proper course with its own practical strategies in teaching and learning. The techniques of lurking, spying, and policing online collaboration within groups and teams is described and explored.

Most university teaching scholars will agree that in today's information society, an instructor must move beyond the delivery of a course as merely passing along content – particularly since so much knowledge is easily attainable via the internet even without an association to a college and/or university.[1] So much so, that a plethora of articles from teaching scholars in multiple disciplines seem to be in agreement that there are some identifiable and significant characteristics of an effective course in which students are what is called "involved learners"[2] and teachers practice a "student centered" pedagogy[3]. Weissman and Boning (2003), in their research, identified five features of an effective course: 1) creating community through collaborative learning, 2) fostering student ownership of learning, 3) connecting academic ideals with other disciplines and the "real world", 4) evaluating student learning through active experiences, and 5) sharing the experience of the discipline. Across the board, most

departments have/had its select faculty that strived to meet these ideals, earned teaching awards aplenty, and tested the effectiveness within their own classes using their gut-instincts along with some type of qualitative or quantitative data. The overall conclusions are community and collaboration in the classroom is a good thing in the college environment.

In an effort to create community and provide opportunities for collaboration, many faculty have employed "group work" or "collaboration" to move a content dense course where students sit and take notes into a course where students may create a sense of community and collaborate in a project to enhance the overall learning process. For the most part, when done well, group work enhances more than just student learning. Leadership skills, communication, problems solving, critical thinking, and higher order thinking can be greatly enhanced in students by utilizing group work. However, one only needs to ask any college/university student about "group work" to find that many prefer not to working in groups. Gillespie, Rosamond, and Thomas (2006) undertook a qualitative study of students that were required to work in multiple groups in multiple classes and found that while most students described at least one positive experience working in small groups, they also described a number of negative group experiences. Collaboration, for both the instructor and the student, is a skill that takes works to develop, is time consuming, and can be very frustrating due to the unpredictable nature of minute, micro interactions and the occasional emotional flare-ups. Ineffective group communication that is hostile in a subtle manner can lead to negative feelings towards working in groups along with worry and stress. Some students feel they have too much at stake to not be in complete control of their own grade due to the outcome of a group project. Many students that feel nothing but a grade of "A" is acceptable, do not want to take a chance with a group that may inhibit their ability to earn that "A" grade. These type of students tend to focus on task objectives and could care less about social or emotional issues within the group setting.

While some research suggests that such socio-cognitive conflict is the key ingredient in changes in cognitions and learning (Van Meters and Stevens 2000), there are many issues that can occur that can inhibit learning in the collaborative process. "Social Loafing," the phenomenon where people deliberately exert less effort when in a group was well documented by the work of Latané, B., Williams, K. and Harkins (1979). This inherent problem of social loafing is well documented in Gillespie et al (2006) where

subjects in their study make reference to the disengaged student. Subjects referred to the disengaged student in terms of negative labels such as "slacker," "back-row student," "flake," "deadweight," and "lazy person." Other negative labels include "the quiet ones," "the one's that never say anything," "deadbeat," "along-for-the ride student," or the "sit & watch student."

Teaching students how to effectively collaborate typically is not part of the manifest learning objectives of many courses that utilize group work but more likely is a latent learning objective of general education. Hall and Waver (2001) found that while interdisciplinary collaboration is important in education, ". . .questions of when to educate, who to educate and how to educate remain unanswered and open to future research." This also brings to mind the question of "where to educate? Online?" The major issues of social loafing and learning strategies of collaboration are prominent and well described in the literature for the traditional visible student onsite and an issue that students and faculty struggle to resolve (sometimes effectively, sometimes not). What happens now that so many classes are moving rapidly to the online, virtual environment where the student and instructor can, once again, retreat into a position of being somewhat "invisible" in a virtual world?

Collaboration is an active learning strategy that is many times employed in the onsite, face-to-face classroom but avoided by many in the online environment –instructors and students alike. Even in the onsite environment, managing a course with groups can be somewhat time consuming and have its issues. For the online instructor it can be very time-consuming managing the collaboration of students in groups, especially in an online environment where sometimes communication is problematic.

Online communication is sometimes lost in cyberspace or ignored. Some students just miss "seeing" the communication. An instructor is not assured that students will read all announcements carefully or students might miss a posting by the instructor or fellow classmates. Emails might be ignored, sent to the wrong address, or merely secretly filed in "junk mail." There are many problems of time-delayed communications. Some problems are non-response, short, curt responses that can cognitively slow down or completely inhibit the accomplishment of collaborative goals and project completion. And of course, the traditional problems of social loafing by the "slacker" and hoarding of work by an "over-achiever" can also be present in the online classroom.

Such negative effects may result in a lowering of overall teaching evaluation scores, student dissatisfaction, and instructor stress and burnout. There is certainly a need to develop practical strategies that may enhance the overall experience for both students and instructors. The authors of this paper propose that the instructor in online environments can foster a positive teaching environment without direct interaction with students. Instructors can employ strategies that can serve as the "Guide by the Side" for students to manage the emotional and frustrating strain that can occur with collaboration.

The authors suggest that "lurking," "spying," and "policing" are means that can in fact be practical strategies to enhancing engagement and collaboration in virtual group work in a online class environment. No, we have not been transported to the time of the cold war. We are in a time in which new online practices in need of a descriptive label have fallen prey to our historical cultural practices.

Lurking

Lurking is a practice in which someone goes online into a virtual environment (such as a discussion forum, blog, social media site) maintaining a covert or stealthy presence by not participating, posting, or acknowledging their presence. The Lurker stays quiet observing the interactions of those in the virtual space. This seems to be standard practice even in the class websites. Typically, most people will begin by observing until they are comfortable enough to engage. Or they get involved when there is an approaching deadline. Lurking is a common online practice enhanced and made wide-spread by social media such as Facebook, online chat rooms, twitter, and massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG) where online users can be in a clandestine virtual space observe the communications and media in that environment, but not actually leave a trace that they have been in that environment.

In the online educational environments, lurking might refer to the practice of getting online either in chat rooms or discussion forums, scrutinizing /reading ongoing chats and conversations, but not participation or posting. There have been some studies that suggest such passivity might be indicative of an introverted learning style (Beaudoin 2002), that the Lurker is really just a Listener (Freedman and Anderson 2007), and that lurkers learn just as much as fully engaged students (Ziden and Fong 2010). Typically, in live chat rooms, participants are aware of the presence of the

"lurker" and many times might even try to entice the lurker to engage in the conversation. However, in asynchronous environments, the lurker might be considered "spying" on the interactions taking place, by not acknowledging having read the discussions with a posting to the discussion or discussion threads.

Spying

Spying is an online tactic in which one's observations is considered covert to gather some type of "intelligence" or knowledge. Typically, spying behavior has an agenda. In the case of online teaching, spying is used in multiple ways by different stakeholders. Administrators or peer reviewers may secretly observe to determine how one manages an online class, what assignments one creates, as well as the kinds of comments an instructor makes to students. Students may utilize spying on fellow students to gain better insight on how to create their own work or to mimic the work of others. An instructor can utilize spying or surveillance as a means to meet the need for assessing the practices of a student and determine if the student is meeting the course objectives or learning objectives as well as possibly providing insight to students in which to effectively and efficiently enhancing collaboration and community building.

Distance education and the "absent" student have made the notion of online collaboration something that many instructors might initially shy away from. This uneasiness and apprehension may be due to being faced with students expressing their expectations of working independently on their own, at their own pace, and without obligations to fellow students. It could also be that the inclusion of online collaborative work among students can result in greatly increases the workload and intensity of work for an already overly burden faculty member. Lurking and spying behavior by an instructor can be a practical tool in which to streamline workload, assess interactions and outcomes, and ensure accountabilities of student involvement.

Today we have experienced a phenomenal change in the types of technological advances in the options of online communication and education. There are many computer based/smart phone, Bluetooth, wireless tablets, and communication tools that make collaboration viable in the manner of "university proper." However, there still may be hesitation to utilize online collaborative strategies because of the similar problematic issues that exist when collaborating in face to face meetings also exist in the

online environment. The issues regarding leadership, sharing of workload, social loafing, incompetence, non-participation, recording, documenting, and accountability are just as complex in the online classroom environment as in the face-to-face classroom environment. In addition, the online environment can easily create an atmosphere of alienation, isolation, and avoidance (Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk 2012). Wei et al (2012) found that such negative affects are reduced as students' online presence is enhanced. In other words, the potential for online group work as an opportunity to enhance student presence. Instructors can create an online learning community by identifying when and where to place a few nudges and guidance. Table One is a list of the Top Ten List for Online Lurking developed for this paper highlighting the strategies and practices that have contributed to the encouragement of student engagement.

Policing

Many students are overwhelmed today with obligations that traditionally students were not expected to have to consider (i.e., personal health issues, self-imposed goals, financial obligations, etc.). Additionally, most classroom instruction has moved to a "token economy" where points are awarded as a token to manipulate behavior (old school behavioral modification techniques). As a result, most students work to be effective and efficient in their workload to achieve the highest point value for graded work and may let sly activities that may increase their knowledge, skills, and education if no accountability is in place. The ethical codes of conduct many times have not been communicated well to students. Policing, as used in this paper, is a strategy to help students understand their social and ethical obligation to the course and to create accountability (with or without the "token" of points). If a student is knowledgeable of the tools that instructor uses to assess participation, engagement, and collaboration, many times the problems associated with social loafing, non-participation, and ignoring of online communications can be reduced if not eliminated by basic policing strategies. However, online instructors should be wary of creating a form of fear or apprehension in students. Just as Pavlov in his experiments in 1930s inadvertently created neurosis in some dogs that were pushed too hard to discriminate the indiscriminate-able, students know they are being watched and that sense of being watched can create an unpleasantness, as well as a fear or possibly apprehension. Policing in the form of "helping," "assisting," or "showing concern" can serve to remind student of their social obligation

to the course, their group, or the class in general. Additionally, such policing should include making students aware of an institutions Code of Conduct and of actions that would be a violation, should be subject to the formality of that code.

As faculty workloads increase and a transition to the online classroom takes place, what ethical considerations and "Codes of Conduct" should be at the forefront in lurking, spying and policing? How can student engagement be policed or monitored in an effective and efficient manner? Most computer assisted course delivery programs offer options to track engagement with the website. An instructor can run reports on "minutes accessed" to see if the student is putting the time into the course; determine how many times a student logs into the website, the last time the student logged in; Keep track of how many discussion posts as student creates, when students actually post, as well as the word count of each post. Such tracking can be used in the development of rubrics that assist in the policing/monitoring of both quantity and quality to enhance engagement of students. A down side of this type of monitoring is that some learn to play a token game of meeting the requirements of the rubric (or grading policy/formula/procedure) but not meeting the spirit of the assignments. For example, to enhance asynchronous discussions, one might create a rubric in which students are to post high quality postings three times a week. A student might meet that obligation, but never respond to any student or to the points that are made. Worst, a student may merely take the point that a student writes and rewrite that point adding no new information and rather than creating community, creates a frustrating environment for students who see such games as mockery of the class setting. In this case, policing may need to be done on a schedule where the student is guided in what would be a more proper way of participating.

An instructor can also create group activities and monitor the progress without engaging every member. A group leader can be the contact person reducing the workload and allowing the instructor to keep engaged --occasionally, throwing a "Psst..." or hint to team-leads and members to ensure student groups are on the right track.

Before students present their project, the faculty can take a quick look and add suggestions for the benefit of individual students and the entire class. This strategy takes to heart the old saying, don't cry over spilled milk" flipping the interaction of the instructor from a punitive authoritarian judging final work, to a mentor/consultant that enhances the final

product/performance of students. During synchronous online presentations, instructors can send notes to participants to ask certain questions without notifying the entire group. Once one or two students are engaged asking questions, it seems that the outcomes of peer questions gets the ball rolling and other students become more engaged. The authors have found that such strategies results in more students getting involved, asking questions, and becoming an engaged audience for student presenters.

Much more work is necessary in studying the strategies of lurking, spying, and policing. The authors hope to expand their research looking at other variables related to his practice. It could be that the best approach for a teacher is to stand back and be a coach on the sidelines or mentor instead presenting an in-your-face type of teaching style when students are involved in online group work. However, what thought to be best for the student may not always be perceived as best by the student. In a course where students are free to choose, to think for themselves, to make decisions on their education, it is not uncommon for students to report a sense of "confusion." This phenomenon of student reported "confusion" should be examined further in future studies. Perhaps claiming "confusion" is a strategy by student to mitigate having to make a decision that might result in an unfavorable grade in a "token economy" setting. Perhaps students have been policed in such an oppressive manner that they are no longer free to choose (Instructors too may not always be able to show examples of inappropriate online behavior because the environment is changing so rapidly). Additionally, the authors are involved in examining student perceptions of privacy issues in an online class in relation to the strategies of lurking, spying, and policing. Do students and instructors knowing (or unknowingly) give up some privacy and acknowledge that someone may be looking over their shoulder in an online environment?

Online technology, instantaneous communications, widespread use of laptops, smart phones and now tablets have made possible a somewhat silent revolution in the delivery of traditional higher education coursework. The advancement of internet connectivity and the widespread access of wireless and mobile technology, and the development of a satisfyingly secure software in educational delivery systems have changed the face of distance education. Extension schools and distance education has always faced a form of stigma in terms of verifying the validity of such education.

Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) make reference to this with their statement,

> "The perceived "unnaturalness" of distance education has been consistent with the divide between "university proper" and "university extension," and with the location of distance programs at the periphery of university life."

It may be time to reconstruct this dichotomy for online education. One way to reconceptualize education in terms of "distance education" and "university proper" might be to think of distant education as an opportunity for individuals to study independently while "university proper" is an opportunity for individuals to study within a community of learners. The online environment is such an environment where many strategies of learning are possible. Today, in some institutions, when a student registers for an online class, the structure of the course is somewhat unknown. There is the possibility that the lessons are presented all at once and fully available whereby the student may work towards completing lessons and assignments at his or her own pace. The independent learning model allows for the possibility of completing large chunks of the course in one sitting (possibly with a case of red bull, the assistance of Google, and the pending dread of a final deadline for completion). There are also courses that strive to create an online community of learners that share and learn material at the same pace throughout the term or semester.

It is quite evident, while there is certainly some culture lag, technological lag, and policy lag in at many traditional university, there never-the-less is a revolution has taking place. Many students have quietly revolted by selecting online classes over the traditional face-to-face class. Many colleges and universities, nationwide and globally are no longer ignoring the mass exodus to the online environment by students. The actual departure of students from the traditional classroom seems to be fueled by a strong desire for perceived convenience and a perceived notion of using time and technology effectively and efficiently. Such conceptions can make enhancing engagement and collaboration in the online environment a challenge.

Many proprietary universities were quick to jump full force into the "online" course delivery business. It proved to be quite successful financially to many online universities and attractive to the masses of students that

wanted to earn a college degree but were challenged by being place bound, excluded from traditional educational environments, and/or had other major life commitments and goals that made going to a traditional university or even a regional/open university nearly impossible (i.e., full-time employment, young children, family commitments, precarious work obligations, injury, and/or illness). Overly committed students could still strive to earn a university degree. A universal top-down model was adopted by many proprietary schools to technically and ideologically manage the course with faculty as facilitator charged with the task of creating a community within the class and monitor the successful completion of preselected course work and assignments.

Some faculty were also keen and optimistic to move to the delivery of online courses. While physically it was challenging to teach more than five or six onsite classes (perhaps at different physical locations), one might find the online environment allows for the possibility to do more and have more flexibility with their time--especially if the priority was to merely provide content and monitor progress with or without developing community within the classroom or vice versa, merely managing communications in the class without the responsibility of creating learning objectives, assignments, and content. The profound amount of content provided online can seem like the development of content for courses is somewhat obsolete – the job of the instructor might be to merely manage and select the content. The traditional, professorial task of taking material intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with specialized knowledge or interest and making it accessible to only a select group of students is somewhat undermined by YouTube, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course), proprietary learning sites, non-profit learning organizations, and Google.

Publishers have also got their part of the online education business. Not only can students buy an overpriced (and likely to soon to be obsolete) textbook, but for an additional cost may access an online site developed and managed by a publisher (supposedly in concert with authors of textbooks). Online textbook sites tend to be fully populated with both content and automated learning management systems (like blackboard and e-college) so, at the extreme level, the instructor can easily be the social loafer merely send their student to a delivery system where students engage independently in self-study, takes a series of automated quizzes/tests – repeating those quizzes/tests several times to get the best possible score,

and moves along "quietly in the night"4 with their college credit. (The traditional night school, and correspondence schools sort of worked this way.)

Examining teaching and learning in the online environment and interrogating the models of "distant education" and "university proper" are central in providing space in which faculty may determine when prioritizing (or continue to prioritize) engagement and collaboration among students in an online classroom. There are many issues in restructuring perceptions of the online teaching environment. These may best be addressed by faculty senates and faculty councils. In the meantime, what is an online professor at a "university proper" to do when teaching is a priority, and student engagement is sought? There are many online instructors that seem to struggle with going beyond merely providing content for an online teaching environment in an "old-school" manner that is mundane. So much so that there seems to be a variety of strategies in which instructors attempt to transform passive online learning strategies into active learning strategies where students are fully engaged. That engagement many times has a strong focus on encouraging communication in which students concretely demonstrate the achievement of learning objectives through online interactions and the production of written or creative work that exhibits the ability to analyze, synthesize, evaluate material that was taught in the curse. However, if we are still committed to creating a community of learners that utilizes the practice of collaboration to enhance learning in terms of utilizing analysis, evaluation, application of knowledge in a settings that has that element of unpredictability and uniqueness, what strategies do we have at our disposal in the online environment to make this work? The strategies of lurking, spying, and policing were proposed as a few strategies that can help utilized to enhance collaboration without stressing and burning out the professor.

Most university teaching scholars will agree that in today's information society, an instructor must move beyond the delivery of a course as merely passing along content and that developing practical strategies enhance engagement and collaboration, especially in the online environment is essential for the "university proper." This paper explored and described the practical strategies to enhance such community and collaboration in the online classroom. The strategies of lurking, spying and policing are practical and can enhance engagement and collaboration as the subtle revolution in moving more and more classes to the online

environment takes place and increases the workload of faculty. Should guidelines and academic policies be provided at the university level for lurking and spying? It is difficult to imagine a straight up policy using these terms. Such policies may in fact limit the practicality of utilizing the university setting as a research site in developing cutting edge, teaching and learning strategies as scholarship. Most proprietary colleges and universities have policies in place utilizing lurking, spying and policing presently -- not just on students, but faculty of all rank as well as lower and middle level administrators. Of course, one might see the terms "monitoring," "assessing," and "implementing repercussions" rather than the "lurking," "spying" and "policing" that is utilized in swanky virtual worlds.

Table 1. Top Ten List for Online Lurking
1.   Omnipresent in online environment.
2.   No blatant, in-your-face teaching interaction which may alienate shy students.
3.   Private interaction to avoid any embarrassment to the student.
4.   Personal interaction (one-on-one time) between student and instructor without the rest of the class observing.
5.   Students can focus on assignments knowing they are on the right track because of the knowledge that the instructor is keeping track of their progress.
6.   A gentle, subtle "nudge" can be given to a student to encourage participation.
7.   A helpful hint or suggestion can be given to one or more students to help them on completing projects.
8.   Instructor has an overall "feel" of the class. If instructions are not being perceived correctly by a student or group the professor can quickly engage to avoid an incorrect final project submission.
9.   Monitoring individual student performance in different areas and at different times of the instructional process.
10.   Monitoring class performance in different areas and at different times of the course.

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1. "Back in the day" the privilege to access information and knowledge was by association with a university or college that "owned" library collections and/or had connections with other social institutions that stored and shared information.
2. A Google Scholar search using "involved learners" and "college students" yielded about 140 results (0.06 sec). Searching with just "involved learners" yielded about 1,150 results (0.07 sec).
3. In even less time, a Google Scholar search of "student centered" resulted in about 54,900 results (0.05 sec).
4. Of 265 student emails sent to one of the authors in the first three weeks of class in the Fall 2013 semester, 138 (~52%) were sent between the hours of 6pm and 5am.

Personal Biographies

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