Anonymity and Classroom Participation

Kathleen Ray, Darnell Downs, Hayley Vey, Kamal Azmy, Alaina Squires

Problem description (overview):

For the purpose of this report, our group researched how the different levels of anonymity – complete anonymity (unidentified to everyone), semi-anonymity (anonymous to one's classmates but not the professor), and no anonymity (everyone can see your true identity) – experienced in classroom technologies such as the Top Hat platform, affect students' participation in terms of their willingness to participate, as well as their reasons for participating. To increase student participation in the classroom, which makes for a more enjoyable setting for both student and professor, we need to ensure students feel comfortable sharing their opinions with their classmates and their teachers. One way to achieve this is through the introduction of anonymous technologies, which allow students to share their opinion without being identified, and hence without the fear of being judged.
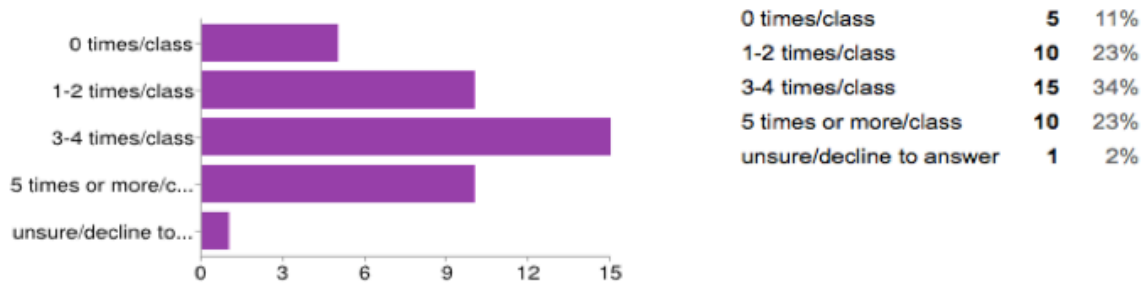
Recommendations:

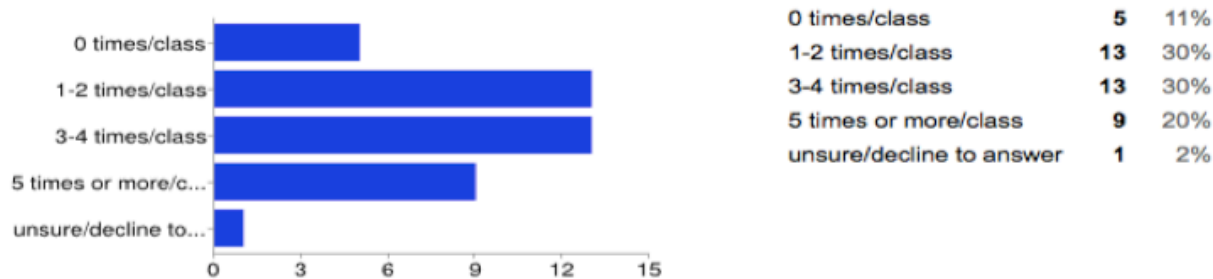*The following recommendations are directed towards Teachers and Administrators:*

- Incorporate classroom technologies like the Top Hat platform to boost student participation and make them feel more comfortable, but only if willing to accept complete anonymity, and the unaccountability issues that may arise from that.
- Lobby the developers of platforms like Top Hat to include a moderator tool, which would delay posts by 30 seconds - 1 minute, allowing professors the option to read and review posts before they are approved for everyone to view. To maintain the complete anonymity of the platforms, even if certain posts are disapproved by the professor, the authors' identity should still remain private, and unidentified. With this feature, even though professors would not be able to scorn someone for posting something inappropriate or obnoxious, at least they can disapprove these posts, and thus eliminate the distraction sought after/caused by them.
- Do not incorporate a participation grade into a course's final mark simply to try and increase participation in a class. This is a lazy solution, and instead look at how to make classes more interactive by increasing participation naturally, and not artificially by forcing people to speak if they want to receive their grades.
- Use a multitude of different teaching methods. Do not stick with just lectures or just powerpoints. Mix it up. On some days do small-group work, class discussions, technology-oriented classes, technology-free classes, and then also incorporate lectures and powerpoints along the way. We believe our professor's variety of teaching options was a big reason for the increased participation in our class compared to others.
- Do not use cold-calling as another artificial way of forcing participation in the class. This is an uncreative solution, and actually increases student anxiety. Instead, arrange the classroom in a way that encourages participation, and emphasize the importance of students' sharing their opinions from the very first day of class.

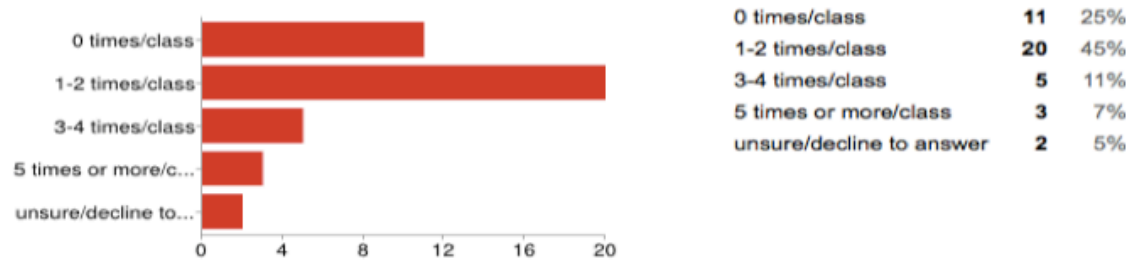Graph 1: Average participation in three different situations of anonymity

Via Top Hat (completely anonymous) [On a scale of 1-5, please rate your average participating in class in each of the following situations when they are offered:]

0 times/class	5 11%
1-2 times/class	10 23%
3-4 times/class	15 34%
5 times or more/class	10 23%
unsure/decline to answer	1 2%

Via Top Hat (anonymous to class and only the teacher can see) [On a scale of 1-5, please rate your average participating in class in each of the following situations when they are offered:]

0 times/class	5 11%
1-2 times/class	13 30%
3-4 times/class	13 30%
5 times or more/class	9 20%
unsure/decline to answer	1 2%

Via Top Hat (everyone can see your true identity) [On a scale of 1-5, please rate your average participating in class in each of the following situations when they are offered:]

0 times/class	11 25%
1-2 times/class	20 45%
3-4 times/class	5 11%
5 times or more/class	3 7%
unsure/decline to answer	2 5%

Detailed Description of Problem

As stated previously, the scope of our report focused on looking at the different levels of anonymity – complete anonymity, semi-anonymity, and no anonymity – present in classroom technologies such as the Top Hat platform (which we used in our Sociology 2120 course), and how they affect students' willingness to, as well as their reasons for participating.

Most professors wish to get the highest level of participation as possible from their students because it makes the class more enjoyable for everyone. With a higher level of participation the class dynamic is less awkward, more people are sharing their opinions, and good discussion arises from that, in a way that it doesn't when the entire class is spent by the professor lecturing

at his/her students[1]. However, in reality what occurs most of the time is that even though they would prefer a more lively classroom, students choose not to participate for a number of reasons: they're shy, and they have anxiety, amongst others[2]. The million dollar question is how professors and administrators can help students become more comfortable sharing their ideas with the class. This is where anonymous technologies can play a role.

With complete anonymity, students can share their answers without the feeling of being judged. Throughout the semester our class used Top Hat, and initially it was a completely anonymous platform where our classmates could not see our typed responses, nor could our professor. However, after some minor issues arose in the form of immature emoticons, and inappropriate language, the platform diverted from a completely anonymous platform, to one that offered only semi-anonymity. In this new form, while our classmates still could not identify the authors of posts on the platform, our professor could, and this is unfortunate because students still might feel that someone is judging their answer, which lowers their willingness to participate, and this is an issue that anonymous technologies should be resolving. This is where a dilemma arises: is the added value of full privacy in completely anonymous platforms versus the semi-anonymous platforms where someone is still possibly judging a student's answer, high enough that it is worth it even if some unaccountability issues arise as a result of the complete freedom?

Methodology:

For research purposes, in our Sociology 2120 class we developed a comprehensive survey as a whole, of just under 100 questions. The survey was administered online via Google Docs, and 40 students in our class took the survey, out of a total possible 51 students registered in our course slot. Participants were from across many different programs of study, the gender breakdown was tilted in favor of males (24 compared to 16 females), and ages ranged from 17 to 32. Another source was our personal classroom technology journals, in which we wrote about the technology used in each class, how it helped us learn, and how our relationship with technology changed based on the usage of different technologies (anxiety, social distance, willingness to participate). These auto ethnographic journals allow us to recount our experiences[3], which might differ from those of other students and from the class as a whole. It is important to investigate the reasons for these differences whether it be down to personal biases, or different values and beliefs.

Findings:

One of the first questions our group determined that we wanted to ask was "In terms of teaching, how does Top Hat help you learn?". The overwhelming response from 26 of the 40 participants

---

[1] Bradshaw, James. *University students fare better with interactive learning, study finds*. The Globe and Mail. Accessed December 7, 2014.

[2] Williams, Jenny. (2014, November 2). *Students Shouldn't Have to Speak in Front of the Class*. Retrieved from http://geekdad.com/2014/11/students-speaking/

[3] Chang, Heewon. *Autoethnography as Method: Raising Cultural Consciousness of Self and Others*. Eastern University, n.d.

was that it enabled them to engage in discussion[4]. Of the other 9 teaching methods, only "small group discussions" had over 20 people respond that it helped them engage in discussion. Almost all of the other teaching methods had response rates of below 25% in terms of helping students engage in discussion. Next, we asked students how they would explain their overall level of participation. The two most frequent responses were "I'm shy" (17 people), and "I'm afraid of being wrong, or having the unpopular opinion" (16 people). Other common responses included "I participate only to receive the marks allocated for doing so" (10 people), and "No one wants to hear my opinion" (4 people). These findings confirmed our thoughts on low participation being attributed to anxiety, and fear of being judged.

The next question we added to the survey was "If you have a different level of participation in class when using Top Hat, why?", and the only response that over 6 people chose was "It's anonymous, and Top Hat lets me say what I truly think" (16 people). What this shows is that in class discussions where they are easily identified, students choose not to speak. However, when they can post on Top Hat privately, they feel comfortable sharing their opinions, safe from the judgment of their peers and if completely anonymous, their professor too. If a student does not feel that they obtain this right, or that they will be judged, then participation will remain low.

Another area of interest that we decided to explore was concerning ESL students, and how the anonymity of platforms like Top Hat helps them feel more comfortable expressing their views. The question asked was "Only if English is not your first language, how do you think classroom response systems (such as Top Hat) help overcome any language barriers for "speaking" in class?". There were only a few responses, but they really helped to display the power of anonymous platforms. "It's easier for me to write something, than to speak in class...I feel more comfortable when I can participate through Top Hat" was one student's response; another's was "I think it helps by taking away the stress of talking in front of everyone and making mistakes".

Another question we asked was "Do you participate in this class more than other classes you are taking?" 22 people said yes, 11 said no, and 8 responded that they were unsure. We believed that it was the use of Top Hat's anonymity, making people feel more comfortable sharing their ideas that led to this higher participation. Responses to the following two questions displayed the same result/outcome, "In lectures, or courses you have experienced where the professor teaches without electronic methods where you can anonymously participate, how likely were/are you to participate?" and "In lectures, or courses where the professor teaches with electronics (where you can anonymously participate through platforms like Top Hat) how likely were/are you to participate?" With electronic methods that allow anonymous participation, 28 people said they were more likely or much more likely to participate, compared to only 12 people who said the same for courses that did not use them. When not participating, students become the "losers" in the winners and losers debate[5], as seen in Rudi Volti's "Society and Technological Change". We

[4] Weimer, Maryellen. (2011, February 15). *10 Benefits of Getting Students to Participate in Classroom Discussions*. Retrieved from http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/10-benefits-of-getting-students-to-participate-in-classroom-discussions/

[5] Volti, Rudi. "Chapter 2: Winners and Losers: The Differential Effects of Technological Change" *Soceity and Technological Change*. Macmillan, 2014: 21-38.

know that we still need to keep the non-users[6] in mind, however, when designing the systems.

Around this point is when we found the data to be somewhat confusing, and contradictory. We asked, "Do you think it is important for the professor to know who is participating in their class?" and 26 of 40 participants said yes. Then we asked, "Do you think that teachers give better grades to those who participate (speak) most in class?" and 22 of the participants said yes. This is confusing because it is an acknowledgment from students that they realize the importance of participating in class, and in fact they believe they will do better in the course if they choose to participate, yet from all the past data we know that a lot of students still choose not to participate. This means that their anxiety, and fear of being judged are overpowering their ability to do better in a course, and that is a major problem because it indicates that students could be doing better, but for reasons that are not their fault. Another confusing part of this is that in majority, people seem to think that it actually is important for the professor to know who is participating in class, but this is not realistic with a completely anonymous platform, so maybe they are advocating for semi-anonymous platforms, and the data for our final three questions seems to reflect that.

We asked people to compare their participation across the three levels of anonymity available on Top Hat by asking them to choose how many times in an average class they participate: 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5+, or unsure. Between the completely anonymous and semi-anonymous there was not a huge difference, people participated only slightly more in the former. However, when it was not anonymous at all, participation dropped off a lot. 31 people participated 1-2 times a class or less. In terms of people who participated 5 times or more per class, with complete anonymity that number was 10, with semi-anonymity the total was 9, and with no anonymity it was just 3 people. So the relationship between willingness to participate and anonymity is clearly that as the platform becomes less anonymous, students are less willing to participate, though there might not be as big a difference as one would expect between complete and semi-anonymity. Keeping that in mind, from our tech journals, as a group we decided that complete anonymity was truly superior to semi-anonymous platforms, because we still felt like we were being judged if the platform was not completely anonymous, which is why in our recommendations we proposed a completely anonymous use of platforms like Top Hat. Even though professors might have to deal with some obnoxious people along the way, we concluded that it was a worthwhile trade off.

Appendix A (Conclusion – looking into the future):

Note: We were past the page limit but we still wanted to include this section in the paper, so because it was optional we thought it would be fine to put it in an appendix.

Looking down the road we believe that university classrooms all over can become more lively and interesting for students with the introduction of anonymous technologies that allow students to comfortably share their opinions without the fear of judgment from their peers or their professors. With complete anonymity rather than a semi-anonymous platform there will be no conditions attached, no loopholes, and never a worry about being identified. It might be an odd

---

[6] Wyatt, Sally. "Non-Users Also Matter: The Construction of Users and Non-Users of the Internet". In *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technologies,* edited by Nelly Oudshoorn and T. J. Pinch, 67-80. Inside Technology. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.

transition at first for both students and professors because classes might seem a little less personal, and there might be a higher level of social distance, but if it dramatically increases participation as we think it will, it will be worth it.

Bibliography

Bradshaw, James. *University students fare better with interactive learning, study finds.* The Globe and Mail. Accessed December 7, 2014.

Chang, Heewon. *Autoethnography as Method: Raising Cultural Consciousness of Self and Others.* Eastern University, n.d.

Volti, Rudi. "Chapter 2: Winners and Losers: The Differential Effects of Technological Change" *Soceity and Technological Change.* Macmillan, 2014: 21-38.

Weimer, Maryellen. (2011, February 15). *10 Benefits of Getting Students to Participate in Classroom Discussions*. Retrieved from http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/10-benefits-of-getting-students-to-participate-in-classroom-discussions/

Williams, Jenny. (2014, November 2). *Students Shouldn't Have to Speak in Front of the Class.* Retrieved from http://geekdad.com/2014/11/students-speaking/

Wyatt, Sally. "Non-Users Also Matter: The Construction of Users and Non-Users of the Internet". In *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technologies,* edited by Nelly Oudshoorn and T. J. Pinch, 67-80. Inside Technology. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.