Evaluation Summary:

U6800: Conceptual Foundations of International Politics
Discussion Board Use
Fall 2001 (last revised 09-17-04)

Randi Rosenblum and Arafaat A. Valiani, Doctoral Students
Department of Sociology, Columbia University
With Peter Sommer, Director of Education
Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning

Summary: http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/evaluations/u6800_summary.pdf (this document)

Project Description: Background & Purpose

Conceptual Foundations of International Politics (U6800) is a required course for all first-semester MPA and MIA students at the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). The course typically enrolls about 300 students and is divided into 20 sections. The lead faculty member, in this case, the Dean of the School, or one of five graduate teaching fellows, leads sections.

The course comprises four main learning components:
1.   Plenary sessions (lectures, panels, films)
2.   Discussion sections
3.   Reading assignments
4.   Exams and papers

Plenary sessions, discussion sections, and reading assignments are weekly requirements and form an integrated whole. Discussion sections follow Monday plenary sessions later in the week. Discussion sections are where students explore the ideas covered in readings and plenary sessions.

The course web site was created to support these intellectual activities by providing students with a number of resources, including:
•   The course syllabus
•   Readings
•   Exam questions
•   Video-taped lectures
•   Bulletin boards

The online syllabus replaced the paper syllabus normally given out on the first day of class. In addition to outlining the course's topics and assignments, the online syllabus functioned as a gateway to course readings and information about guest lecturers.

The web site contained a separate page for course assignments, which included descriptions of their objectives and access to relevant materials and resources, such as writing guides and samples of past work.

An archive of videotaped lectures allowed students to expand on and compare the perspectives and approaches they were learning to those examined in previous years.

Bulletin boards corresponded with discussion sections. The lead faculty member and other instructors intended the bulletin boards to provide students with an opportunity to clarify and/or elaborate upon issues raised in class – in effect, extending the discussion beyond the physical and temporal bounds of the classroom. The technology permitted students to incorporate excerpts of videotaped lectures into their bulletin board postings, thus transforming

the bulletin board into a multi-media platform for sharing and discussing ideas collectively.

Overview of the Evaluation Process

Our evaluation considered how students' use of these digital technologies was integrated into the course. Given the course's varied components, we employed multiple research methods to determine this. The following table identifies these methods and the data sources and objectives to which they were applied.

Method	Data Source	Objective
Participant observation	*15 discussion sections*	*Evaluate the link between lectures, sections and students' use of technologies with respect to discussions.* *Develop rapport with students and fellows.*
Content Analysis	*Online, 40 minutes per week for 8 weeks*	*Examine quality, and frequency of web site usage.*
Student survey	*125 respondents*	*Obtain substantial data on student practices, preferences, and technical problems.*
Interviews	*10 in-depth, with students*	*Obtain a more fine-grained and immediate understanding of student experiences and motivations in using digital technologies.*
Focus groups	*14 discussion sections*	*Assess the kind of learning the techniques made possible that would not have occurred otherwise.*

Findings

Spatial and Temporal Expansion

The bulletin boards permitted students to carry on discussions beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the course. Bulletin boards and affinity groups contained the run-off of ideas and opinions expressed in class. Many of those who were active in their sections were also active on the bulletin boards. These students saw bulletin boards as places to elaborate on interesting themes raised in class. Students frequently posted comments after section meetings and addressed individual classmates or the section as a whole. For example, students' postings often began, "Just one more point about today's discussion…."

Less outspoken students were also active bulletin board participants. Many of these students explained that they required more time to ponder the issues and compose their responses before joining the conversation. As one international student described,

> "Sometimes I had a lot of ideas during the class – I wanted to say a lot of things…sometimes they were complicated…[and] not that easy to discuss during the class. So what I did is go to the bulletin board and write [the ideas] down, and send them to my class so we could discuss those things. So for me, it was a spectacular tool…."

Some students also cited as a benefit the bulletin boards' accessibility from remote locations. Students' busy schedules often prohibited them from meeting outside their sections or classes. One student mentioned living far from campus and being unable to spend her days there. Bulletin boards expanded the spatial and temporal frontiers

of the learning environment by enabling such students to participate in ongoing discussions when and where their schedules permitted.

Other students said they used the bulletin boards to preview weekly discussion questions, which were generally posted in advance of section meetings.

Enriched Content
Students said that online discussions sometimes resulted in the sharing of information and resources that enriched the content of the course. Students also mentioned that opposing points of view were often presented on bulletin boards and that this encouraged dialogue among students who might otherwise have disagreed but not confronted each other in a face-to-face setting. One student said that the bulletin boards had enabled those with specialized training to share their expertise with others. In some cases, the more subtle aspects of an issue were taken up online if they had not been voiced in class.

Students who were enthusiastic about the bulletin board talked about how the technology exposed them to other students' backgrounds and ways of thinking. Two students expressed disappointment that bulletin boards were not utilized more readily in other courses that did not have in-class discussion components. As one of these students explained, lecture-driven courses are precisely "where there is a real need to let students post questions and ideas." Other students felt that the online environment should be reserved for people outside the SIPA community, to whom they would not otherwise have access.

Community
The content of bulletin board postings suggests that they also supported the development of social and professional relationships among students. Indeed, students often used them to plan social events and gatherings. More generally, students addressed each other by name and cooperated in organizing tasks and exchanging information. Bulletin boards fostered group identity within discussion sections. The subject lines of individual postings often reflected section camaraderie; for example, one read "Good debates today friends."

Our data show that these online communities took on an important life of their own. One section requested permission to continue using their bulletin board indefinitely after the course ended.

Understanding Student Resistance to Bulletin Boards
To understand students' varied responses to *bulletin board* technologies, it is essential to consider the classroom context. U6800 requires students to participate in multiple learning components simultaneously. The emphasis, however, is on critical engagement with theoretical and empirical literature. Students therefore typically regard weekly reading assignments and discussion sections as their chief priorities. To the extent that digital technologies supported these facets of the course, students generally appreciated them; to the extent that they diverted attention from them, they did not.

Although it varied somewhat by section, participation on the bulletin boards was sporadic. Students' resistance to this tool was rooted in distrust for online versus face-to-face interaction. Many students said, and our ethnographic observations attested, that the debate-style discussion sections were the highlight of the course. Notably, this is also the course component that most effectively promoted meaningful relationships among students. Compared to discussion sections, students found bulletin boards impersonal and remote. As one student said,
[The bulletin board] would not be such a bad medium in the absence of [a] discussion section, but the latter is far more useful in spurring discussion, posting questions, etc. I do, however, think it should be available for students who do not feel comfortable, for one reason or another, speaking in class.

Another concern was that postings were not reliably read by all students and were prone to misinterpretation:

> "I don't want to say something on the bulletin board and then it just sits there all semester and people may misinterpret what you mean, and there is no way you can control that because the context is lost once the real discussion is over."

Some Fellows and students said they relied on email instead of the bulletin board for communicating announcements and questions because they could be assured that students would read them in a timely fashion.

Many also felt that because participation on the bulletin was part of their final grade, posting was less an exchange of rigorous ideas than insincere and arbitrary posturing. Some students suggested that having the instructor and teaching fellows as bulletin board monitors disinclined participants from speaking openly. Our observations indicate, however, that the sections with the greatest online activity were those in which teaching fellows reminded students of and assessed students according to the online requirement.

Technical and design problems also dampened students' enthusiasm for the bulletin boards. The inability to discern which messages were new was a recurring complaint. Students were also frustrated by the inability to include attachments with their postings; the length of time it took to open messages with no way to work offline; and the lack of a print function. Many students were disappointed when they posted messages and received no responses. Students also complained about the tool's inability to rank-order or otherwise organize postings – it could not sort postings either chronologically or by subject.

Many students did not know how to copy and paste video clips into bulletin board postings, and no clear tutorial was available to which they could refer. Another problem was that students' home computers sometimes lacked high-speed connections, making downloading and viewing videos difficult; campus computers either had no sound or no headphones.

Recommendations

The *Strategies for* Utilizing the Bulletin Board

- On-line discussions ought not to be viewed as an alternative to face-to-face discussion, but as an extension of in-class discussion.

- Require students to enter post comments at least twice per week – early in the week to enter a comment to a topic, later that week to respond to replies others have made to that topic.

- Structure activities so that all students enter comments within a confined time period.

Functional Considerations
- Create delete and print functions

- Invite guest lecturers to participate

- Create folders for organizing postings

- Allow attachments