Teaching with Social Networks: Establishing a Social Contract

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Overview

There cannot be greater rudeness than to interrupt another in the current of his discourse.

—John Locke

Social networks and wikis promise new environments for student interaction beyond the traditional classroom. Like other technologies, however, these platforms do not inherently produce vibrant collaborative communities. Just as trust and mutual respect are key qualities of successful classroom interaction, truly effective online student communities must negotiate rules for behavior, interaction, and engagement.

Establishing a social contract supports a vital online community of inquiry. In blended classes—which combine co-present and web-mediated interaction—contracts that address both settings are particularly effective. This research bulletin provides examples of successful student social contracts and describes students’ views on the impact of the social contract on their learning.

There are multiple barriers to collaborative communication in educational settings. Student concerns include specific doubts about how they will get credit for their own individual contributions, fears of “idea theft” and editing of their work by peers, and suspicion that contributions will be uneven among group members. Further reported concerns include potential negative judgment by peers or—perhaps worse—no response at all from peers. The social contract is one means to address these barriers: students who agree to a standard level of online civility avoid many issues of conflict and grieving (intentionally disrupting an online community) that can derail a positive collaborative endeavor.

Most large online communities establish behavioral guidelines, but these are often not developed by the community itself. Wikipedia is perhaps the best example of the kind of open guiding principles that a community of inquiry might aspire to; the site’s editors have published five principles intended to guide the work of all contributors. These describe format and intent (“Wikipedia is an encyclopedia”), point of view and research methods (“Wikipedia is neutral”), intellectual property and copyright policy (“Wikipedia is free content”), online behavior (“Wikipedians should interact in a respectful and civil manner”), and an ethic of experimental risk-taking (“Wikipedia does not have firm rules”). Many corporate-driven communities, on the other hand, establish the kinds of top-down rules that tend to show up in class syllabi. The massive online gaming community World of Warcraft, which currently has over 11 million monthly subscribers, has rules of interaction (“in-game policies”) spelled out in legalistic terms by the owner, Blizzard Entertainment. Participants in higher education classes rarely come to a collective agreement about classroom and online behaviors; they miss an important opportunity to build a strong community of inquiry and trust.

Highlights

Recent research indicates that effective online educational design should involve some form of establishing rules of engagement, or social norms. Sunstein describes social norms as “social attitudes of approval and disapproval” that emerge within a given
culture. Classroom and online space are both cultures that form and break apart quickly; they are bounded by the constraints of the single-term educational model. If established social norms are the glue that binds societies together, then it is important to be explicit about establishing the norms of a classroom society as soon as possible during the bounded term. Although students “volunteer” to be in a classroom, they have not chosen their classmates, nor have they self-organized to form an optimal learning community. The social contract can help them coalesce as a community efficiently and early. This is a particularly important initiation ritual in the developmental cycle of a course, and it can shift the enforcement of social norms, by mutual agreement, from the authority-bearing instructor to classroom peers.

What Is a Social Contract?

Each semester, I ask my students to write collectively two social contracts for a semester-long blended course. One refers specifically to in-class behaviors; the other refers to online behaviors in the class wiki or social network. These constitutions refer to social behaviors only. A constitutional change does not impact grade distribution or course requirements; those matters are taken up separately with the instructor. The writing process begins during the second week of classes, when students have an initial sense of the nature of the community they have joined. The class wiki is an excellent platform for the negotiation and collective decision-making that are required for this exercise. There are three stages to the process:

1. Students begin to post their ideas for their expectation of themselves and their peers to the social contract wiki space. The wiki is used because everyone must have equal read/write/edit privileges and because it is advisable to have contributors identified by name. Students who are reluctant to propose a class rule in their own name may e-mail their suggestions to me for neutral posting. This is the students’ space for collective reading, writing, discussion, and editing.

2. Once consensus is reached that there are no further proposals, students vote in class on each proposition set forth in the draft constitution, and then on a full working constitution for the semester. Some additional wordsmithing takes place at this stage, but each of the basic principles for conduct is either ratified or rejected.

3. Students agree to enforce the constitutions themselves, with the understanding that, at any point in the semester, the documents can be amended by a 2/3 vote. Quorum is 90% of class members; online votes are accepted in case of absence.

To achieve these results, an instructor needs to frame the exercise with an emphasis on the benefits and process of negotiating a living document. Sample instructions for students might look like this:

Below, I have created editing spaces for entries to the class social contracts. This is where we establish what kinds of interactions, behaviors, and culture we wish to participate in. It is particularly imperative that we work toward the comfort zone of every student, rather than just to the larger majority. Please help indicate the factors that you think would make our class a good learning environment and a good society. We can revisit and discuss these contracts at
any time this semester. If, for any reason, you wish to add an item to this contract but you do not wish to have your name attached to it, please e-mail it to me and I will add it for you. Past social contracts have included statements on attendance, interruptions or distractions, mannerisms, appropriateness or inappropriateness of language or examples, topics open for discussion, editing of others’ work online, etc. This is your democracy at work! We are, after all, a small nation for the duration of this semester. Define the conditions that will shape your course experience by taking this opportunity seriously as a member of a dedicated learning community. General statements of conduct are appropriate for these contracts; personal statements about the behavior of individuals are not appropriate. If you have a real problem with someone in the class, let me know about it offline.

Student contract behavioral rules differ for in-class and online environments because students face different communications challenges in each social setting. Garrison and Kanuka point to fundamental differences in interaction (and in social learning) in online and face-to-face contexts of the blended classroom.⁸ Further, course contracts vary from semester to semester as new cohorts assemble. Despite membership turnover, most contracts share a set of common features.⁹ The following samples are representative of common social contract entries:

Sample In-Class Social Contract (Fall 2008)

- We are comfortable exploring tangents, but we will not get upset when Dr. —— reins us back in to move on. Anyone in the class is allowed to remind us to get back on task.
- Everyone is responsible to the rest of us for having done the reading.
- If you don’t post your ideas before class, we don’t get to see your point of view before we walk into the room. It is helpful to understand beforehand where people stand and helpful to commit before class so I can see if I change my mind due to the discussion we have.
- Only attack ideas, not people in the class. No *ad hominem* aimed at class members. This also applies to the wiki.
- In this classroom, we agree that we’re okay with discussing:
  - Politics
  - Religion
  - Sexuality
  - Morality
  - Global warming
  - Other controversial topics
- We can all make a mistake with the language we use, but some words are just too surprising and you should avoid them. Four-letter words and anything racist will upset a lot of us. [amended: “damn” and “hell” are okay] [amended: “effing” is okay]

- Using your laptop is okay, but excluding computer games (yes, even solitaire!), social networking sites, stuff unrelated to class. If you’re on those, sit further back in the room so we aren’t seeing it from behind you.

- No cell phones or [BlackBerrys] should be on during class. Annoying rings and texting notices are too much.

- Only ask for a paper extension if you really are deathly ill. Otherwise the rest of us are likely to resent it.

**Discussion of the Most Common Features of the In-Class Social Contract**

Students universally addressed the interjection of tangents into classroom discussion. There tend to be certain students who repeatedly bring up irrelevant or off-topic ideas in class; faculty may perceive class hostility or hear direct student complaints about these students “hijacking the class.” When class members are willing to enforce this clause (by simply raising a hand and stating “tangent,” for example), these conflicts can be avoided. In this case, the student proposing the tangent in question should be allowed to defend why his/her comment is pertinent. Sometimes this reduces group hostility sufficiently for everyone to actually listen to a new and challenging idea, rather than dismissing it a priori as a distraction.

The readings issue can also become a source of classroom resentment. There are few experiences more demoralizing than having prepared thoroughly for class and then discovering than no one else has done so. If students determine that this is a value—particularly in a discussion class—there is a carrot (peer approval) as well as a stick (lower participation grade) at work in reinforcing a positive learning behavior.

In blended classes, where there is a significant online component, participating online in a timely manner is the crux of the relationship between the two halves of the blended learning environment. Material posted online that is not discussed/reinforced in class feels like a message in a bottle—unread, unanswered, pointless effort. Students who are less confident with their own viewpoints may seek reinforcement of their own ideas or may simply need to sample online class opinion before they will venture to speak publically and in real time. Online posting in advance allows community members to save face later.10

Collective agreement that personal attacks are unacceptable is critical to secure in-class interactions. Students can object by simply stating “personal” to stop destructive behavior early or quickly. This statement further allows the class to discuss what a personal attack looks like, so that everyone has the same definition of the social norm. Likewise, establishing the parameters for topics to be discussed is important. For example, students often will not broach the subject of religion lest they offend others, but reaching a class consensus on the topics that are “in limits” removes those barriers. If a conversation does get out of hand, students subsequently can propose contract amendments. The same process applies for language parameters. Students will swear in class, and it is
difficult for faculty to know when precisely to censure students for inappropriate speech; our personal threshold might not be the same as that of the community.

Since laptops first began to appear in classrooms, students have proposed items related to technology use in the classroom. These statements vary widely from class to class. In a small seminar, for example, laptops are rarely used and therefore statements about their proper use are not required. Mobile devices, on the other hand, are a prominent issue. The most common IT-related contract item refers to turning cell phones off or placing them on mute so that they do not ring or beep in class. On multiple occasions, I have seen students ask for a neighbor’s ringing phone and turn it off. Most of my classes have chosen not to ban laptops from the classroom. They have, however, come up with constructive solutions to in-room technology distractions. For example, they have requested that students using laptops for any activities other than taking notes move back in the classroom where others are not within the cone of visibility behind them. This has proven to be a satisfactory compromise.

Sample Online Social Contract (Fall 2008, Same Class)

- First answer the question we’re looking at; then you can go off on tangents. Better, create a new space for your tangent interest and tag it so we can find it.
- If you don’t post your ideas before class, we don’t get to see your point of view before we walk into the room. Please post by 8pm the night before class, at the latest.
- Flaming is NOT OKAY. (Nor are capital letters when you are replying to someone—they are rude.)
- Same profanity rules as in-class. They look even worse in writing.
- No statements without some kind of evidence, unless you are clear that it is just your opinion. Provide a link to your evidence.
- The same topics we are willing to discuss in-class are okay on the wiki:
  - Politics
  - Religion
  - Sexuality
  - Morality
  - Global warming
  - Other controversial topics
- Do not edit my work online without telling me why. (Use the “discussion” section in MediaWiki.)
If you want to reformat my work so it looks better to everyone, that’s okay as long as it does not change the meaning.

If you post a video, image, or audio file that might be offensive to someone, please indicate that before the link so we are warned in advance and don’t click on it. Tell us in writing why it might be offensive.

The comments above about tangents online highlight an affordance of the online component of blended courses: students can create additional spaces for items of interest that are not pertinent to the immediate discussion. In MediaWiki sites, for example, they can “stub in” a topic for later exploration, or invite others to visit a new page on a divergent interest. This, too, is an important aspect of the social interaction of the class, even if it takes place along the margins of discourse.

Flaming and other violations of online etiquette are defined by students in their contract. This provides to all students a reference for real-world relationships (how many times I’ve wished that a colleague knew how irritating ALL CAPS is to a reader!). One of the most interesting categories addressed in online social contracts is specific to the social web, or Web 2.0: the etiquette involved in editing the work of others, either in content or form. Students have decided—through conscious self-exploration and public debate—what is offensive editing in a wiki environment. Although everyone has the same read/write and edit privileges in this space, only the instructor controls the “rollback” function that restores prior versions of wiki content. Contract guidelines let the instructor know when to exercise the rollback function, and when to not interfere. Students who formerly were passive readers in course web environments can contribute their own content to the site in the form of visuals, sound files, and video clips. They often post to the social contract statements about what might be offensive to others. These range from the general proscription of—and usually collective definitions of—“porn,” to quite specific details about recent viral videos or copyrighted music.

Reaching Consensus

Using social tools (in this case, the wiki) to build collectively an online community agreement introduces students to the many affordances of the technology. Students can define the parameters of their personal learning environment and, by taking ownership of the tools, they can likewise take ownership of their community and their learning. Vie and deWinter describe wikis as the ideal platform for this negotiation: “Wikis help enable the student-centered classroom by recording the messiness of negotiation within an electronic document that can be accessed in its newest form at all times.” The social web becomes the platform for a Lockean formation of commonwealth: a community of free, equal learners agrees to adhere to commonly established standards of behavior in order to further the common good of improved learning.

What It Means to Higher Education

Faculty often exhibit reluctance to form complementary online communities for co-present classes because they believe they might be uncontrollable and that there is an inordinate time commitment required to moderate and maintain civility online. On the
contrary, faculty can launch an online community—and defy the constraints of the bounded classroom—by guiding a discussion about the social norms that students wish to enforce in that community. Only through making explicit the unspoken rules of engagement can faculty and student participants create and sustain a safe and supportive online community and reinforce positive in-class interactions.

Modeling Collaborative Behaviors

Building a collaborative online space for students does not make students collaborate. Instructor modeling of collaborative behavior contributes somewhat to student understanding of collaboration. Engaging all students in the civic responsibility of collectively constructing an understanding that is of great importance to class members—the behavioral norms that will regulate their course world for the coming semester—is a highly effective exercise for students to practice the kind of collaboration that wikis best facilitate. The act of establishing the community simultaneously initiates wiki ethics of collaborative knowledge production, editing, and consensus-building.

Addressing In-Class Behavioral Concerns in Higher Education

Newspaper and academic articles address with increasing frequency the challenges to faculty of student use of digital devices in the classroom. Many universities have selectively or partially banned laptops from classrooms, have turned off wireless access in classrooms, and are now grappling with the question of how to regulate mobile devices that do not require wireless for a connection (smartphones and the latest generation of tablets). The social contract, agreed upon by community members, can resolve the issue without recourse to sweeping IT policy decisions. As a faculty member, I am not in favor of turning off wireless or computers (or even banishing computers to the back rows) because I believe that it is our responsibility to teach students how to live productively in the world they inhabit—and a significant aspect of that world is digital distraction. The classroom construct is artificial enough without banning the digital technologies that have become ubiquitous in students’ lives. I am open about these matters with students, but I also let them collectively determine the rules of engagement for our specific community. Students perceive distraction in class by fellow students as a priority issue; they have universally chosen to establish social norms for information technology use in my classrooms. The corollary that benefits me is that they enforce these commonly established behavioral norms themselves.

Student Monitoring of In-Class and Online Social Behaviors

It is not sufficient to collectively construct and ratify rules of contact for in-class interactions. Students must also have time to develop common strategies for enforcing agreed-upon social norms. I have witnessed the invention by students of flagging phrases (akin to folksonomic tagging in Web 2.0 applications) that indicate unacceptable behavior in a sort of face-saving shorthand. These usually track to key words in the finalized social contract, such as “tangent,” “ad hominem,” or “too personal” for perceived personal attacks, and “language” for excessive profanity. An instructor must work at enabling students to monitor discussion in this way; then the instructor must
transfer leadership to the students themselves. I have seen students ask for and turn off a peer's ringing phone (although only in cases where the social contract specifically allows such action), or quietly ask a student who is websurfing to move further back in the room where no one is likely to be distracted by screen content. Unsurprisingly, students report less frustration with their peers and more sense of control over their own learning in the classroom setting. This appears to correlate with self-reported improvement in ability to concentrate in the classroom.

Likewise, students need to take ownership of their online community. There are myriad ways to encourage this leadership. An instructor can assign discussion moderation to students on a rotating basis and evaluate their efforts with a grade. A benefit of this practice is that students experience directly the challenges of coordinating discussion and enforcing community norms. A considerable risk in this practice is that students not assigned to moderate generally take less responsibility for the health of the online community. Just as in the case of in-class student enforcement, all students can call out inappropriate behavior through tagging; this might consist of literal tagging for later edits or of civil comments posted to student blogs, wiki entries, and media postings. These track, once again, to the terminology designated in the social contract. Further, students have requested time in class to remind peers that postings to the social network must be there by a certain day or time to be useful to everyone, or to call attention to a general slippage in standards. On multiple occasions, such calls have resulted in amended online social contracts (for example, to broaden the scope of permissible language or topics, or to change posting times and dates, or to tighten restrictions on peer editing). Students report increased comfort with online participation and reduced stress related to online assignments. As Bossewitch, Frankfurt, and Sherman have observed, “Good user interfaces minimize cognitive stress; good social interfaces minimize social stress.”

The ultimate goal of the social contract is to empower students to manage their own social interfaces, both in the classroom and in their course-related online communities. And minimizing stress correlates to improved learning.

**A Lesson in Civic Debate and Values Formation**

The process of collectively writing, editing, ratifying, and enforcing social contracts—both for co-present and online learning communities—is an exercise in direct democracy. Students have behaved responsibly and respectfully in these contexts and have honored the trust placed in them by their instructor. I have found no better way to cause students to engage fruitfully in civic debate or to reflect upon their most deeply-held community values. Allowing students to construct the terms of engagement for their online community encourages them to monitor, contribute to, and collaborate with peers in a vibrant Web 2.0 collective learning environment.

**Key Questions to Ask**

- What are the key concerns of students who are required to participate in interactive online environments?
- How do—or should—faculty police online contributions to class social networks?
How can faculty engage students in moderating online discussion?

To what extent does the online social contract allow faculty to improve the social environment—and the learning—in the physically co-present classroom?

**Where to Learn More**


**Endnotes**


2. Student surveys at the inception of several blended courses at the University of Colorado at Boulder indicate that impression management and fear of conflict further influence students’ openness to online collaboration. Instructors likewise express concerns that collaborative work is more difficult to assess accurately than is individual work.


9. The most radical differences occur when a class is predominantly upper division (juniors and seniors) versus lower division (first years and sophomores).


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