Computer-Mediated Communication:

Issues and Approaches in Education

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Chapter 15
Going Viral in the Classroom:
Using Emerging CMC Technologies for Social Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates the potential for social change in computer-mediated communication (CMC) education. A foundational discussion of emerging online technologies in terms of potentials for students and responsibilities of educators is followed with a description of a "best practices" classroom project and incorporation of case-study observations in terms of CMC benefits and challenges. The goal of this chapter is to highlight potential societal outcomes inherent in CMC education for students and educators as agents of social change.

INTRODUCTION

Classrooms can be an arena in which to endeavor for transformation of self and society. Recognizing this possibility, many teachers strive for such an ideal. Education as a practice that maximizes freedom – for students, educators, and society at large (e.g., hooks, 1994) – is exciting, particularly in a world in which new technologies are constantly emerging. The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate the feasibility of maximizing that educational freedom (and responsibility) through knowledge acquisition and distribution, using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology in the classroom. To accomplish this goal, a foundation is derived from research on the potentials of CMC in education. Next, experiences with online teaching and a particular project case study are presented to emphasize accountability for students and teachers trying to effect social

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change. The chapter concludes with a call for inspiration and challenge.

THE POTENTIALS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

As noted by Willson (2010), the potential for social change via CMC is not without controversy. On the one hand, initial speculations of Internet networks' massive societal impacts were perhaps overstated, at least in their time- and influence-expectations. On the other hand, limiting one's focus to social communities and their online communication illustrates that CMC technologies have affected society (macro) at interpersonal (micro) levels. In this sense, speculating as to the possibilities for using the Internet or CMC for individual-level social change is not idealistic, but, as this chapter demonstrates, is evidenced in day-to-day work with CMC and students.

With each new technology that surfaces, teachers and researchers are able to harness and assess the potentials of these tools for educational purposes. As Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) discuss, CMC allows universities, philanthropic organizations, and individuals to further their respective social goals. Contrary to, and perhaps not mutually exclusive with, the perception that online education is solely a tool sought by universities seeking profit (Feenberg, 1999), this chapter takes the position that the use of CMC in education is instead a method with the radical potential to challenge and re-envision, if not to uproot, dominant systems and cultural misunderstandings or stereotypes. In essence, activists and advocates of social justice can utilize technology (and have done so[1]) to advance diverse politics and encourage participation in social movements (Castells, 2007; Denning, 2002).

Thus, the potential of educating students to use CMC effectively is significant, documented, and twofold, involving (a) students' ability to operate locally and globally for social change and (b) teachers' social responsibility to conscientiously educate their student-agents-of-change.

Potential for Students and Society: Social Outcomes

Courses that implement a variety of CMC instructional materials are believed to be more effective for student learning outcomes than those using only one form of CMC or none at all (Miller & Redman, 2010). Videos, in particular, can actively involve viewers by inviting them to personally interpret the meanings of the message content, and how it applies in their own lives (Friedman, 2006). Indeed, Internet videos are a method of course content delivery preferred by students (Dey, Burn, & Gerdes, 2009; Young, 2008). Miller and Redman (2010) found that students viewing course content via online videos performed worse than face-to-face students *only* on the exam content that was not covered by the web videos; when tested on content that was covered in Internet videos, the online-video-viewing students performed significantly better than their face-to-face-instruction peers. But the benefits of CMC instructional technology (and web-based videos, in particular) are not limited to students' mastering of course content.

Students also can participate as active, influential societal members. Ever on the cutting edge of emerging technologies, students are particularly well-suited to advance alternative practices and social perspectives, learned in the classroom, into mainstream society. Eighty-five percent of eight- to 18-year olds in U.S. households own and utilize personal computers (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005) and form and maintain social relationships online (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). Ninety to 97% of college students report using the Internet at least once a day (Fortson, Scotti, Chen, Malone, & Del Ben, 2007; Cotten & Jelenewicz, 2006), and these students use online media as much or more than face-to-face communication to maintain personal relationships (Heiberger &

Harper, 2008)Students, often adept at CMC, can make use of online tools in the classroom to connect educationally; use of CMC predicts increased social relationships and connectedness in school settings (Lee, 2009).

The process of thoughtful deliberation, essential for forming opinions about social practices, can be stimulated by students' CMC education projects, with the potential for reaching large audiences. The CMC education project highlighted in this chapter utilizes a "viral" approach to spur social change. This best-practices activity is especially inspiring in light of research showing online opinion-sharing can increase people's knowledge of, efficacy toward, and active involvement with socio-political issues (Min, 2007). Many educators have provided data demonstrating the success of CMC classroom methods for increasing students' social capital (Gully, 2010), collaboration with national and community non-profit groups (Calka & Black, 2010), and involvement in political campaigns (Roberson, 2010) and government social service agencies (Dimock, Kennedy, & Dimock, 2010), to name just a few published outcomes. Thus, the potential for classroom CMC to elicit social change is not overstated.

Internet sites to which anyone with a phone can contribute content allow successful communication tools to be widely disseminated and considered by users from diverse backgrounds. Essentially, filmmakers can now reach people who were inaccessible before the development of CMC, especially Web 2.0. Ultimately, making change on an individual level, with the force of CMC media, allows students to play a direct role in how potentially millions of people view and respond to issues. As Nakamura (1995) observed more than 15 years ago, the actual members of these sharing communities and social networking sites are "stubbornly optimistic" (p. 192) in their idealistic views of equalized power and potential for positive social changes, whereas scholars and theorists tend to be more pessimistic. More recently, and in keeping up-to-date with the youth culture (our students) using the Internet, one can observe the swift rise of musicians like Lady Gaga (Casserly, 2010; GaGa, 2011 with over 410 million views on her first video) or Justin Bieber (Bieber, 2011 to date the most-viewed video on YouTube with over 615 million views) and for-profit companies like Old Spice (e.g., Old Spice, 2011 with more than 35.3 million "hits" on the first video and more than 963 million hits on only the top 10 videos they have released to date) – each case suggesting that Internet social networking, as opposed to studio or traditional corporate organizations, plays a role in recognition success (Newman, 2010; Smillie, 2009).

YouTube has reported that 51% of its users view the site at least once a week and 52% of users aged 18 to 34 years report "often" sharing videos with colleagues and friends (YouTube, 2010). As a result, although even viral video producers can succeed – for example, Gaga's and Bieber's financial and [sometimes] critical success – or fail – note the number of "dislikes" on Bieber's video, it is clear that viral messages, and perhaps even those that do not number in the hundreds of millions of views, always succeed in the sense of getting heard, viewed, and discussed.

Potential for Educators: Social Responsibility

Educators who recognize the value of shaping young minds to help society can take advantage of using CMC to accomplish their goals (Sherblom, 2010). Whereas instructors may certainly have students who retain information from face to face lectures, discussions, and practical applications, this chapter contends that true educators encourage students to transmit knowledge to contexts outside the classroom; this is the nature of educational activism (Book, 1990). To undertake a social learning model of instruction, in which students are taught the skills to *do* and *act* on their own, is not merely to teach, but instead is to serve as an expert-advisor (Darling, 1990).

CMC is well-suited to a social or relational (e.g., Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006) model of learning, because the method allows students to assume ownership of their education in a manner conducive to equalizing power (e.g., hooks, 1994) in the classroom (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 2000). A situation conducive to learning is one where students are free to learn and to feel safe, encouraged, and potentially equal. Building this environment should be the first priority of an educator, and CMC can help facilitate this process of freedom (Gully, 2010).

To provide a quality learning experience for students using CMC instruction, educators must not only incorporate worldly, cutting-edge, and emerging media, but they also must be clear in their expectations for student learning and the potential outcomes for social change (Sherblom, 2010). Students may prefer and benefit from lectures presented via Internet videos (Dey et al., 2009), but the onus for immediacy and engagement then becomes instructors'. Clarity is a responsibility of teachers implementing CMC education. This is because, as hooks (1997) notes, there is no opportunity for challenging dialogue if students do not first understand the concepts being discussed.

Further, educators should be experts on the subject matter they convey through CMC. In the past, misinformed or uneducated, biased information was less likely to leave the classroom with the student to whom it was directly conveyed. Using CMC when teaching, however, means that course content is potentially widespread, making the educator's responsibility for accuracy greater than ever.

Academics – whether they conduct research, teach, or do both – have an added social responsibility: careful contemplation of how their CMC-distributed information is interpreted by and affects the general population. Using CMC, scholars spread ideas, opinions, and research findings that society embraces as true because they come from legitimate, academic sources (Young, 2008). Educational institutions, and the instructors who work for them, are socially imbued with a power to supply and validate knowledge and thus, in many ways, create social reality. In addition to lucidity and accuracy, a social conscience must be cultivated by the teacher/researcher who circulates education via CMC. As Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) note, "regardless of the educator's explicit intent, democratizing educational experiences is an act not without societal consequence" (p. 569). For example, something as innocuous as posting online lecture slides can result in a perpetuation of stereotypes, misconceptions, and ultimately social harm derived from misquoted, misinterpreted, or biased (without explanation of that bias) statistics, quotes, or findings. Unfortunately, Internet users often draw information from the sources most easily available (e.g., Wikipedia or Google searches), without double-checking their accuracy. Because educational institutions imbue faculty with expert-level credibility, educators are doubly culpable if their errors or prejudices, however subtle, affect others. Thus, educators employing CMC have a social responsibility: to ensure clarity, in their expectations for student-posted material and through in-class discussion/analysis; to maintain current, informed understandings of the knowledge that they impart; and to endeavor to anticipate possible repercussions of their own, and their students' CMC-distributed knowledge.

BEST PRACTICES CASE STUDY

For this project, the term *viral* connotes an online word-of-mouth event in which varied methods of CMC, including email, web-sharing, and social networking sites, may be used to distribute information that is "self-replicating, exponentially increasing diffusion…and impact of the message" (Welker, 2002, p. 4). When something is viral, it is distributed online among peers because of its stimulating content (Porter & Golan, 2006). As CMC has grown in use, viral distribution,

particularly of personal videos, has been channeled by everyday users to advance their own agendas. Because of their potential to go worldwide, viral films are used as an exemplar of CMC education in the activity described in this chapter.

The Viral Project

The viral film project was originally designed for use in my Communication in Abusive Relationships and Communication of Men and Masculinities courses. Illustrative examples are derived from these courses as case studies and from the author's in-the-field online teaching experiences in general. In its initial iteration, the viral project was implemented in traditional and hybrid courses. However, similar approaches to a CMC-education project design have been used in wholly online courses involving group work (i.e., students' instructor-led education and peer-collaboration both occurred via the Internet). Therefore, the viral project is intended to be adapted to a variety of disciplinary courses in an array of classroom formats, including traditional, hybrid, and online environments.

The goal of the student project is to emphasize how emerging CMC technology provides the potential for public service announcement (PSA)-style videos to go viral. Not just a class video project, this approach to CMC classroom incorporation instead allows students to apply persuasive, highly creative, and possibly provocative, edgy, and controversial approaches to mass distribution of educationally-informed content matter. Indeed, the point of this project is to showcase emerging digital and Internet technology, such as shareware, social networking sites, and digital communication tools. The specifics of professional video design and production are not within the realm of this project. Finally, students understand that true viral occurrences are naturally-spread. This project has the potential to involve truly viral education, but the initial method of accomplishing this phenomenon is artificially created in this project. Therefore, whereas it is unreasonable to expect student-posted projects to become actually viral, this feature does not detract from the activity's educational effectiveness. The ultimate goal is for students to realize their *potential* for distributing knowledge and to teach them to do so not only persuasively, but also in *educated* and *ethically responsible* ways (see Brewer, 2010; German, 2010).

The entire project involves (a) instructor preparation of students through lecture; (b) student analysis of existing online videos pertaining to a chosen topic; (c) Internet background research using credible, scholarly sources; (d) digital film design, creation, and online posting; and (e) class evaluation and project debriefing. Benefits and challenges of CMC education, as exemplified by this project, are incorporated throughout the discussion of the activity which follows.

Step One: Preparing Students

One or two class periods should be initially devoted to the topic of public health media campaigns and/or Internet distribution systems. In these lecture periods, students are presented with and discuss strategies that succeed and fail in persuasion campaigns, according to communication research. This preliminary instruction includes interpersonal and social psychological persuasion basics, media influence, and public campaign or advertising strategy effectiveness. Teachers without a background in these topics can access a number of online (e.g., Bator, 2010; Mueller, 2011) and print (e.g., Maibach & Parrott, 1995; Rice & Atkin, 2000) sources summarizing effective, research-established persuasive campaign tools. Although topically diverse, the content of these sources can be applied to any scenario or academic discipline and will aid in teaching students the best audience-specific strategies. Even for faculty without a background in persuasive communication, these preparatory lecture periods can be edifying and are necessary for a successful

conclusion to the project. As noted by Rajaram (2007), whereas there may be no formula for viral files, "*video* content is king" (in Bogatin, 2007, emphasis added). Students are already cognizant of viral videos. As a result, by merely discussing viral examples in class, instructors and students can, at the very least, begin to deconstruct the trends that make videos viral and persuasively successful.

From the beginning of the semester, it is important to consistently reiterate the project's timeline and goals. Students can choose to elicit emotion, inform, educate, raise awareness, persuade, or some combination of these goals. Whatever goal(s) they choose, students should strive to make their films effectively significant. As Golan and Zaidner (2008) noted, viral messages target people "through the gut rather than the brain" (p. 970). The richness of a message, tied to visual and audio cues, ultimately determines the effectiveness of CMC in general (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 2000) and YouTube videos in particular (Bonk, 2008; Rajaram, 2007 in Bogatin, 2007). Previous films in this project have incorporated: music ranging from hip hop and rap to classical music to emotional ballads; factoids and statistics flashed across the screen in ways varying from gripping to humorous; rehearsed scenes with actors spanning from absurd and hilarious to serious and disturbing; social support resources including helpline phone-numbers and websites and how-to tips for personally assisting others; design schemes incorporating black-and-white, sepia tone, and total color spectrum views; video footage including traditional action-film shots, still images, and PowerPoint slides; content showcasing informal participant research ranging from man-on-the-street reporting to expert interviews; imagery arrayed via cartoons, photographs, and clip art; tones or moods created to be everything from contemplative to riotous; and presentation formats as diverse as background narration, first-person camera discussions, and taped live action footage. The only tactic forbidden is harming others; otherwise, everything else is fair game for projects meant to stir the public.

A common pitfall for first-time instructors and students taking courses containing CMC is the failure to fully incorporate online content with in-class material (Kaleta, Garnham, & Aycock, 2003). This project directly addresses this snare by reinforcing to students the applicability of their in-class learning to the CMC method of knowledge perpetuation. A breakdown of steps, suggestions for evaluation, and an approximate project timeline are located in Table 1.

Steps Two and Three: Building Student Expertise

The next steps in the project allow students, working in small groups, to build expertise regarding a course-related topic of their choice. Student groups research *existing online content* (Step Two) and *established, credible research* (Step Three) on their chosen topics. CMC is ideal for this activity in that both popular content and scholarly journal databases are available online. Educators concerned about a possible digital divide across socio-economic or age groups will find this challenge largely addressed in institutions of higher education, which provide technological accessibility to all students. However, the entire process should be observed closely, because some students may be unfamiliar with particular technologies or unaccustomed to using the Internet for educational purposes (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Pérez, 2009; Yildiz, 2009). During this learning process, clearly supportive communication by instructors can be followed by students' supportive communication in CMC education settings (Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009). With an instructor's guidance, a secondary accomplishment of this project may be the introduction to and training in new technologies for students previously unexposed to these resources; in itself, this is an important contribution, particularly in

Table 1. Proposed timeline and assignments to implement viral project in a semester-long[a] course

Steps and Instructor Tasks	Optional Tools to Grade or Evaluate	Suggested Semester Placement
One: Preparing Students week	*Incorporate lecture material	*Lecture around 5th
Lecture on persuastion, viral media	into course quizzes/exams	*3-4 weeks before midterm*
Two: Building Expertise week	*Group summary paper of	*Assign around 7th
Assign research: Videos currently online	existing online videos	*Can finish over midterm*
Three: Building Expertise	*Group "applied bibliography"	*Due around 9th week
Assign research: Scholarly resources		*Assign immediately after Step Two papers submitted*
Four: Making the Video	*Link to completed, posted video	*Due around 13th week, gives time to distribute & get hits
Assign video production		
Verify usability of video links		*Students may finish sooner*
Five: Assessing Viral Success	*Instructor graded evaluation of each video	*Grade before viewing day
Grade videos on content & production value		
Conduct class vote to select category winners	*Instructor- & class-choice "bests"	*Hold viewing day last week
Assess most "viral" videos	*Count of hits	*Tally on last day/end of term

Notes.[a]Based on a 16-week term.

today's society, toward equalizing opportunities for restricted groups (Yildiz, 2009).

Students begin their video projects by searching for existing online films relating to their topics. Due to their prevalence in the online world, Google and YouTube are ideal places to search for what has already been done on a particular subject area. Knowing what is already online regarding their topic will aid students in designing original videos. To maximize the breadth of their searches, it is important they start thinking of topics relatively broadly. For example, if a group picks 'sibling psychological abuse' as its topic, they should begin by finding every available video on 'sibling abuse' in general, in order to retrieve a broader set of initial results.

To demonstrate skills of content-analytic research, students are expected to assess their topically relevant online videos for: (a) *Prevalence* – how many videos on this topic exist in various outlets (e.g., YouTube) or are found via online search engines, (b) *Content* – which persuasive strategies are used in the videos related to the topic, (c) *"Viralness"* – how many hits or views these videos have, and (d) *Success* – feedback/commentary these topical videos have elicited from viewers. To conclude this stage (Step Two), each group submits a summary paper of overall online content findings (a-d, listed in this paragraph).

After the groups have conducted research on existing online content, they finalize their topics. In the course of the initial online research, students often find that a chosen topic is not truly original, or is already covered exhaustively online; in such cases, chosen topics can be adjusted. Extending the previous example, if 'sibling abuse' or 'sibling psychological abuse' are not unique or specific enough to justify new online videos, groups can consider specific types of psychological (e.g., financial, degradation, shaming, hurting pets, threats) abuse directed at siblings. In other words, specificity should be emphasized continually; it is more important to cover small, specialized areas very thoroughly and accurately than to cover a

broad area shallowly. Superficiality or incompleteness can lead to misinterpretation by online audiences (i.e., educators' social responsibility of clarity, discussed previously).

It is also important for students to choose a topic new to them, and one not already covered in the classroom. Students begin working from class concepts, but should not choose something that has already been explicated. For students, the point of this activity is not to parrot in a video their in-class learning. Rather, students are exercising an ability to create informed means of social change by first educating themselves. Obviously, in the role of topical course expert, instructors must verify that students do not incorporate inaccurate or biased information in their projects. Research steps (Two and Three) encourage students to conduct, or at least initiate, learning on their own, outside of a teacher's direction.

Once the groups finalize their topics, they begin the process of finding established, credible research (Step Three). Groups explore academic literature for research studies, review articles, and concept papers related to their topics. Ideal sources of scholarly information may include peer-reviewed journals, academic texts, and conference proceedings. In Step Three, students build their topical expertise. To demonstrate involvement at this stage, each group submits an academically-formatted reference list of scholarly sources that were useful in learning more about the chosen topics. Groups should include only the sources they plan on using to inform their video, not every source discovered. In this reference list, students should include each citation, properly documented, as well as their reasons for choosing each source. With this part of the assignment, reasons for choosing articles need not include content, as would a true annotated bibliography with abstracts. Instead, students should focus on listing their reasons for choosing the references – for example, why they found each one useful to inform their topic and how each applies to their project.

Step Four: Making the Film

Completed films are based on (a) class lecture material, discussion, and reading materials; (b) information gleaned from research of existing online content; and (c) scholarly literature. The fourth, and for students, the most exciting, step is the designing, filming, editing, and online uploading of the film. Although students should be concerned about presentation quality, because it affects persuasiveness, more important is the *manner* in which the film (i.e., content) is distributed and marketed. As a *viral* education project, the focus should not be video production processes, per se.

Because students tend to underestimate the length of production processes, they should schedule small-group meetings for each stage of production. An ideal viewing time for YouTube users is approximately one to four minutes in length, particularly with educational content (Bonk, 2008). Typically, to replicate mini-documentary motion pictures, four to five minutes are the standard lengths of videos produced in this project. However, for educators who wish to emphasize viral persuasion over educational content, a better time limit is no more than one minute (two minutes maximum) each, to replicate true public service announcement or commercial lengths.

In Step Four, students (1) take responsibility for their own learning and (2) adapt to new forms of technology with which they may be unfamiliar. Thus, this step transforms two common challenges for students into the accomplishment of two pedagogical goals (Kaleta et al., 2003). Further, because videos are based on background research (both their own and others' published findings), groups need to include citations – either as the referenced content comes on screen or in final reference credits – for any material used from others. For example, in my previous students' films, some groups flashed research or statistics across the screen and immediately cited the reference at the bottom of that screen shot, whereas others showed information on its own and included a

final reference shot, at the end of the video, with all sources used. Some groups have creatively used fading and/or moving "movie credits" to document sources at the end.

Most colleges and universities have an audio/visual department that allows students to borrow recording equipment and provides facilities for editing productions. Students should be alerted to such campus resources when this project is introduced. However, students often have, and prefer to use, their own digital cameras, and in many cases, video capabilities on their smart phones to film projects. Further, many laptops today are equipped with user-friendly video editing software, which many students have used to complete this project in previous semesters. Each semester, almost every group has at least one member who owns or has access to video recording and editing software, either on a cell phone or laptop. For those without personal access to these media, basic computer labs on college campuses possess minimal editing tools and lab monitors sufficient to guide students through film production. Because the emphasis of this project is not on the *video* component of education, but rather is on the social, educational networking power of the Internet, seeking assistance from others for help with technicalities is within permissible realms for this project.

Although any film sharing website (e.g., Facebook's video posting function, Vimeo, Qik, or Justin.TV's SocialCam) can be used, YouTube has a number of advantages for use in this class project. Over three billion video views and hundreds of thousands of video uploads (amounting to 8 years of content per day) occur each day on YouTube (YouTube.com, 2011). Also linked to Google search and worldwide distribution (Helft, 2009), YouTube uses Adobe Flash Video software to broadcast its videos. Because of the free download access, this tool is especially advantageous for class projects. In light of research suggesting instructors' motivation for technology use is tied to perceived ease of use (Park, Lee, & Cheong, 2008), YouTube is ideal because of its accessibility (Bertolucci, 2009). YouTube is extremely user-friendly, with step-by-step instructions for uploading, responding to, and sharing (i.e., distributing outside the site) films. This is crucial, in light of research showing students' motivation to be affected by ease of use and perceived CMC usefulness (Liu, 2010). A primary criticism of the "ivory tower" of academia – and the distribution of knowledge (e.g., academic language in limited, refereed journals) – is its lack of accessibility for the masses. Online distribution of in-class research, in a societally-targeted (persuasive) style of delivery, incorporating humor, pop music, or vivid imagery, and using an easily acquired tool, addresses this concern by making sure there are few, if any, exclusions to knowledge (Young, 2008). In this way, the power that comes with information may become equalized over time (Nakamura, 1995; Sherblom, 2010).

According to Lange (2008), online sites such as YouTube, by their very nature, perpetuate social networking, a form of CMC, and an environment comprising unofficial self-governance. Films that are unacceptable or viewed negatively may not always be removed from the site (although "official" governance now dictates automatic removal of illegal or copyrighted material), but users will negatively respond to these presentations by posting public commentary. Therefore, YouTube and other distribution sites characterized by memberships exemplify (in Willson's, 2010 breakdown) a "community" gone "network" – having taken inward communication outward, having changed the norms and rules to protocols and codes, and having become more heterogeneous and dispersed. For some, the frequency of use and the immediacy and apparent diversity (e.g., cultural or demographic variety, but convergence of beliefs) of social Internet sites is felt as a true sense of idealized community, in the theoretical possibilities initially imagined by Anderson (1991). In either designation, it is clear that a tendency exists for

members to identify with/apart from others and influence/be influenced accordingly.

Ultimately, each group shares a link to its posted film with the instructor, so that both students and educator can monitor technological errors or other issues that arise in posting. As a safety consideration, it is important for students to embrace being "privately public," or being prepared to share films on a massive scale while maintaining limitedly-revealed (i.e., almost anonymous) identities (Lange, 2008). Further, students completing Step Four and posting films earlier than due, have longer time online to garner *hits* (discussed in Step Five). For films to be public before in-class viewing, a final deadline should be set of at least one week before the course concludes. Links to example films from previous courses are provided in the Appendix.

Step Five: Assessing Viral Success

In addition to providing in-depth education on particular course topics, each step of the project highlights specific skills and approaches needed when communicating online. Step One clarifies success versus failure in reaching audiences, and can be measured through testing, but also will be observable through the persuasive strategies exhibited in the final videos. Steps Two and Three develop students' skills in using CMC technologies, and can be gauged by the research reports on their findings. In Step Four (video), students produce web-based PSA-style films and publicize informed knowledge innovatively through the use of sharing websites. Observed throughout, and particularly at this penultimate step, students benefit from group collaboration and task/personality/culture management (Yildiz, 2009). The final step involves complete assessment of the success of the viral project.

A day near the end of the semester should be reserved for in-class viewing of each video. After watching all films, it is important to encourage discussions about the persuasive communication (both form and content) tactics used by each group. The class can vote for its favorites, but the instructor should evaluate the best ones according to strategies conveyed in the preparatory (Step One) lecture. As incentive, extra credit can be given for "wins" in various categories, such as Most Emotional/Moving, Most Entertaining, Most Educational, or Best Overall. As additional enticement, the "viralness" of each video is rewarded. Success is assessed by the YouTube hit-count and feedback comments on the day of final viewing. Students, knowing at the beginning of the semester that the most *viral* group gets extra credit on the overall project, push themselves to complete and post projects earlier than the due date.

Of course, all students raise the hit-count on their own film by continually re-accessing it themselves. This factor can be discussed throughout the semester, to emphasize the importance of personally distributing knowledge among one's social network. Indeed, this is one of the primary ways to enact social change. Therefore, students can post films on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter), email links to everyone they know, and encourage third party dissemination. By creating competition to be truly viral and by encouraging use of all CMC technologies available to them, the self-promotion playing field becomes leveled. A truly viral video is a hit for its creativity and connection with popular culture at macro/global and micro/interpersonal levels.

To succeed with the ultimate goal of social change, it is crucial that educators be personally excited about course material and this project. Students consistently report more effective learning with CMC education if instructors are concerned and passionate not only about the topic, but also about the CMC method (An & Frick, 2006). This project is ideal for any course in which educators wish (a) to have students disseminate theoretical information in an applied public-distribution manner, and/or (b) to have students clarify/debunk population-specific statistical data (replacing it with valid research findings): theories of

education, critical or literature analyses, sociological or psychological research findings, historical myths or developments to demystify, applications of mathematical, economic, or scientific ideas to daily life – the possibilities are endless.

SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Cutting edge, accessible technology and competent, challenging instruction are not reciprocal. Both must be constantly re-evaluated for quality in every specific situation so that CMC success in one venue (e.g., using video sites for class research projects) is not viewed as ideal for every situation (e.g., using video sites to distribute opinion essays).

Success [breeds] homogeneity at the expense of difference and variation…If successful implementations in computer-mediated learning and online instruction are used not as artifacts to support learning but rather as templates that the subject matter must fit…these tools lose their instrumental function and become yard-sticks for what is teachable and learnable. ... Against this homogenization, we under-score the value of diversity in subject matters, technological means, learning styles, and implementation scenarios (e.g., stand-alone, blended instruction, synchronous online teaching). (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 595)

As educators, we are (and should be) increasingly called upon not only to impart knowledge, but also to demonstrate and encourage enactment of discipline-specific skills. Social change is a big goal. By merely providing the tools and educated guidance to students in our classrooms, societal change can be effected – if not at the global level, then certainly interpersonally in nearby social networks. Through this project and other similar activities targeting knowledge distribution on a grand scale, I and my application-focused colleagues in the communication field have encountered definitive changes in our immediate universities (e.g., Brule, 2008; Eckstein & Pinto, 2010), local communities (e.g., Calka & Black, 2010; Eckstein, 2009; German, 2010), and at state (e.g., Dimock et al., 2010; Eckstein, 2010; Roberson, 2010) and national (e.g., Eckstein et al., 2005) levels (Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b; Harter, Dutta, & Cole, 2009). Social change, through knowledge gained in the classroom and university research, may be difficult, but it is not impossible.

This chapter sought to demonstrate, through incorporation of established CMC research and a personal best-practices project, the feasibility of social change through knowledge acquisition and distribution using technological resources in the classroom. A discussion of the potentials of CMC education for students and educators was followed by a presentation of a successfully implemented project case study to emphasize student and teacher roles in learning and in effecting social change. Strengths and challenges of classroom technologies were discussed throughout this chapter to illustrate the social outcomes inherent in CMC education.

In many cases, a desire to enact social change through one's students may require challenging (or supporting!) extremist, radical, or subversive ideologies. At other times, it may be ignorance that we combat. Both alternatives involve serious consideration of our social responsibilities as educators in a technologically advancing society. Incorporating CMC methods and approaches into education, as demonstrated in this chapter, allows students to feel empowered, to make their voices heard. Once educators and students overcome a sense of apathy and helplessness regarding CMC in the classroom, they are on the road to changing the world, one viral-video-potentially-reaching-millions at a time.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Educational Activism: Using formal or informal means of instruction to influence the world and effect social change through edification of one's students.

Hits: The number of times an Internet user views a site or clicks on a hyperlink; may be used to assess the popularity of a link/site.

Information Accuracy: The social responsibility of (a) educators to certify that the knowledge they present is clear, unbiased, and free of potential societal harm or of (b) students to ensure the projects they pass on to others are accurate and credibly researched; of essential importance in viral CMC education projects.

Social Networking: In the context of CMC, building social relationships via technological means with other people, known and unknown to the online user.

Societal Change: The revolution or transformation of people's attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors; can be enacted by individuals or institutions globally, locally, or personally.

Viral: An online occurrence in which distribution of a file snowballs in an accelerating fashion among CMC users because of its stimulating or unique content, ultimately reaching millions of people and garnering myriad hits. True viral dissemination spreads naturally.

ENDNOTE

[1] In addition to documented, published examples of this occurrence, my first-hand experiences with courses directly connecting (via various CMC tools) to (and thus, influencing) social changes include projects at the community, state, national, and international levels (e.g., Brule, 2008; A. Eckstein, 2009; J. Eckstein, 2010; Eckstein et al., 2005; Eckstein & Pinto, 2010).

APPENDIX

Example Viral Projects from My Previous Courses

Links Current as of September 2, 2011
Email jessica.eckstein@gmail.com for additional information

http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=SCjxMvIKw-c
http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=siAVf9_DPHo
http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=UTCp3DIbUww
http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=C4kxi9DnF-Q