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Papayas and pedagogy: geographically dispersed teams and Internet self-efficacy

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Abstract

PR students' Internet self-efficacy (e-mail, BBS, real-time chat, and Web research) was measured before, immediately after, and 7 weeks after they worked in either geographically dispersed (Kansas and Hawaii) or local (Kansas only) teams to develop a PR issue statement. Internet efficacy increased over time regardless of condition.

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1. Introduction

“What role can Internet technologies play in achieving class objectives?”¹ is clearly an important question that has been asked time and time again among PR educators.² However, based on the demands of the PR profession^{3,4} and the recommendations of academic standard setters,^{5,6} this study asks, ‘How can we teach students to use the Internet efficiently *as a tool of public relations?*’

2. Research program background

In the spring of 2001, syllabi for advanced PR courses at two culturally and geographically distant universities—University of Hawaii and Kansas State University—were synchronized to

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include a common subset of course objectives. Students were asked to use asynchronous learning networks (ALNs) to discuss controversial issues in public relations. Although the details of that study are published elsewhere,¹ one particular finding was instrumental in designing the current study. When students were asked to log on to an ALN to discuss an issue, with the requirement that they respond at least once to three online prompt questions, the resulting discussions were mostly linear. Most students logged on, wrote a quick response to each of the three prompts and logged off. Interaction was clearly limited.

Therefore, the current study is built upon a Fall 2001 class assignment that required a different set of advanced PR students from these two schools to work together to complete a relatively demanding project, rather than to simply discuss an issue. Communication resources included an online bulletin board system (BBS), real-time Internet chat and e-mail. Students also were required to make use of the Web for background research on the issue. This design serves to examine how students learn about Internet technology as a tool of PR as well as how they learn PR strategies by working on an assigned issue.

3. Internet self-efficacy as course content

The first major goal of this activity was for students to increase their abilities and confidence using Internet technologies to collaborate successfully with colleagues in completing a challenging PR assignment. Internet self-efficacy, then, becomes a central construct of the study.

The construct of self-efficacy is derived from Bandura's social learning theory. Bandura defines it as "... the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce ... outcomes."⁷ Bandura's social cognitive theory of learning suggests that self-efficacy not only includes an individual's judgment that he or she can "organize and execute courses of action," but that he or she can do so to "attain designated types of performances," namely, successful performances.⁸

As a dependent variable, self-efficacy is believed to be influenced by prior success with a given task.⁸ As an independent variable, self-efficacy has been found to be a useful pedagogical tool for affecting future performance.^{9,10} Regarding computing technology specifically, Compeau et al. found that computer self-efficacy positively affects performance expectations and future usage of the technology.¹¹ They also found that greater computer self-efficacy led to more positive affective outcomes (e.g., enjoyment) and decreased levels of anxiety with computer technology. Based on these findings, encouraging students to start using computers for specific tasks in the PR classroom seems a logical place to initiate the productive cycle of building efficacy.

In the current study, Kansas State students who were grouped with Hawaii students for the project were encouraged to use online technology to a much greater degree than Kansas State students who worked in groups with only students from their same class. That is, although students in the Kansas State-only group were encouraged to use the Internet to accomplish the assigned group work, by design they were less dependent on the Internet for such communication. On the other hand, Kansas State students grouped with Hawaii students were all but required to use the Internet for all correspondence with their colleagues in Hawaii (with the possible exception of direct phone calls).

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