

Student-Instructor Digital Relationships in the American Undergraduate Classroom

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Introduction

Digital communication channels—email, instant messaging and social media—are present in today's undergraduate classrooms in the form of mobile technology: the phones, laptops and tablets of today's students and their instructors.



This has changed how students learn. Has it changed the personal relationship between student and instructor? How does communicating electronically impact the relationship?

A review of the literature indicates that digital communication has made the relationship more egalitarian and friendly as the boundary between student and instructor blurs. I set out to test this hypothesis in a small pilot study at the University of Washington Information School.



Methodology

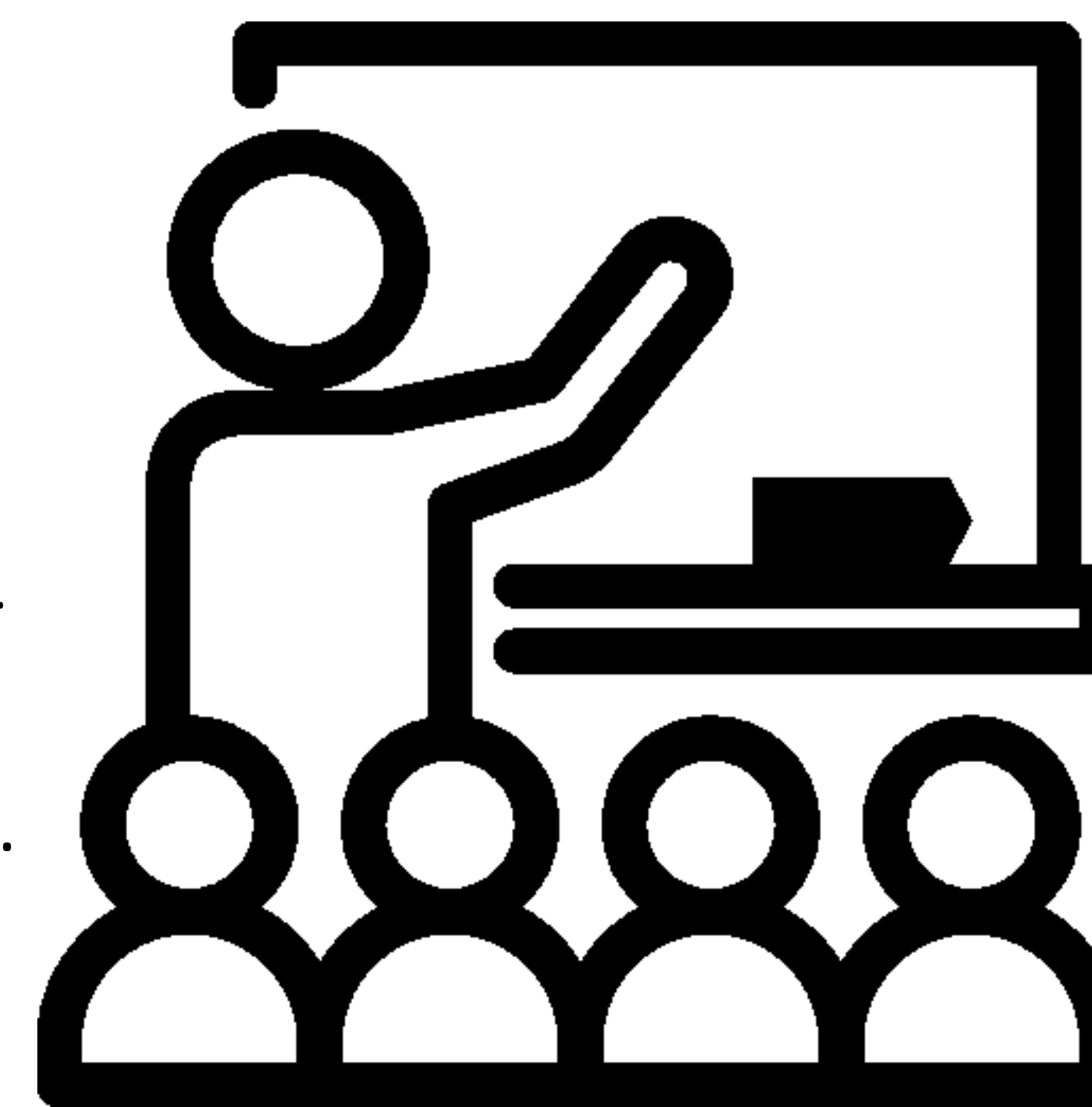
- Question: Has the extensive ownership and usage of communication channels and mobile technology had an impact on the personal relationship between undergraduates and their instructors at the University of Washington? If so, what form has it taken?
- Sample population: Undergraduates and instructors (professors, part-time lecturers and TAs) at the University of Washington Information School.
- Approach: Review of the existent literature, followed by electronic surveys emailed to individual instructors and posted on the undergraduate listserv. Interviews conducted in person.
- Results: 12 instructors and 31 students responded to the surveys. I conducted two interviews with each group.
- Analysis: Due to the low number of responses, all surveys were analyzed qualitatively, being reviewed for trends and patterns. I hand coded the anecdotes sections of the surveys and the interview notes to identify major themes.

Results & Discussion

Summary

Major results of analysis:

- Digital communication and mobile technology can help teach students professionalism.
- Mobile technology can enhance the classroom experience but also distract students.
- Digital communication facilitate speed and reachability.
- All respondents confirmed that it is more appropriate for students instructors to connect on LinkedIn rather than Facebook.
- Formality and compartmentalization remain key.

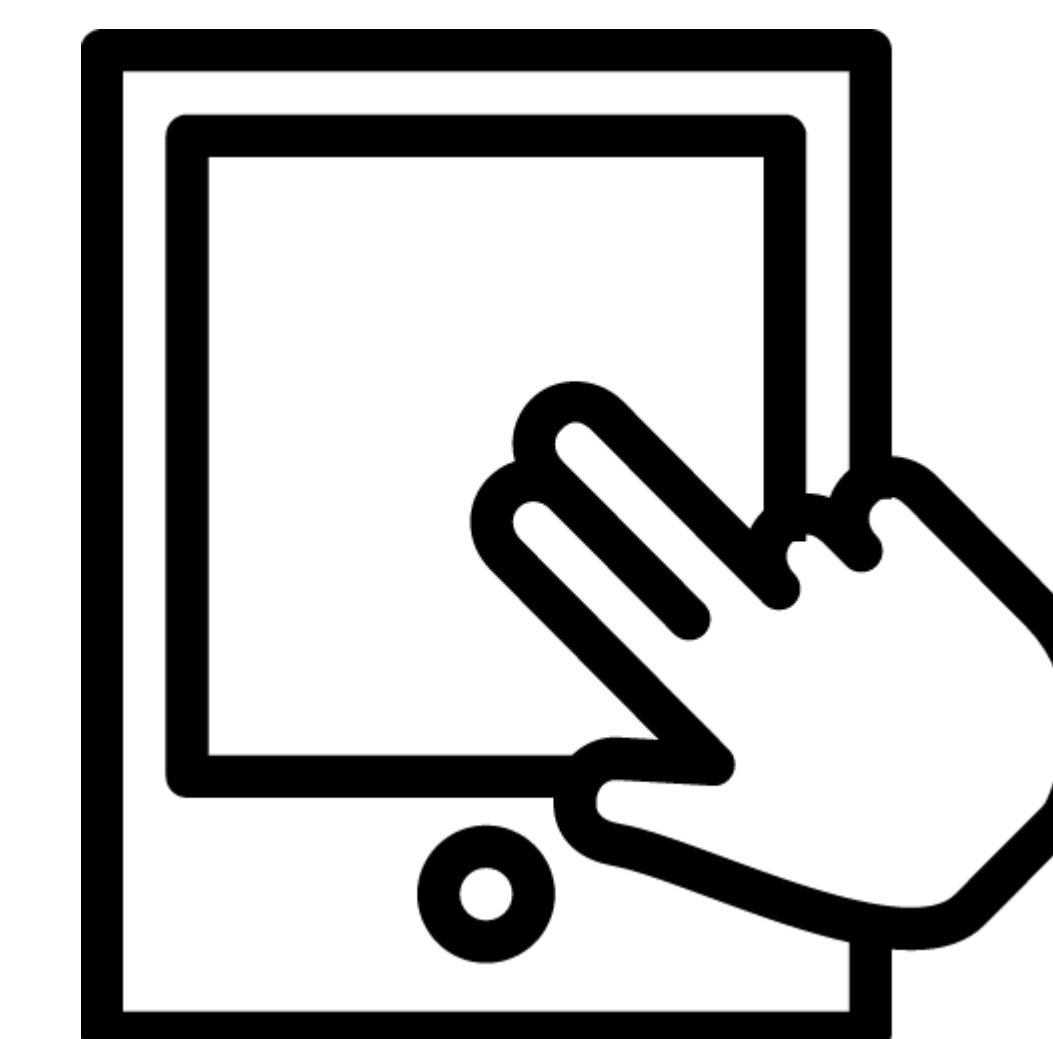


Instructor Survey Data

Position	Easy to contact	Connect with current students	Connect with former students	Easy to help students	Facilitate communication	Feel out of place	Students nearly familiar	Facilitate collaboration	Too many emails	Knows instructor is better	Outside office hours	Students don't reply
Strongly Agree	2	0	2	1	2	2	4	4	0	2	1	1
Agree	7	3	5	6	4	2	3	7	2	6	8	4
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	0	2	3	3	4	4	0	5	4	2	3
Disagree	1	0	1	1	3	3	1	1	4	0	1	3
Strongly Disagree	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0

Figure 1. Frequency table of the results of the instructor survey

Instructors frequently used digital communication to contact their students, including email and online forums such as Canvas. Respondents favored connecting with students on LinkedIn rather than Facebook and with former rather than current students. However, many respondents feel students are too brusque in their communications, and don't respond to emails quickly enough. There was a sense of general uneasiness around digital communication and mobile technology, and respondents were careful to maintain boundaries between their personal and professional lives.



Student Survey Data

Position	Easy to contact	Invite instructor on Facebook	Invite instructors on LinkedIn	Contact outside class or office hours	Current student on Facebook	Current student on LinkedIn	Former student on Facebook	Former student on LinkedIn	Use informal language	Appreciate difficult topics	Send media invitations	Feel out of place
Strongly Agree	16	0	13	11	1	6	2	18	2	3	11	2
Agree	11	6	18	16	1	21	15	13	7	11	10	12
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	7	0	2	7	3	9	0	8	6	7	7
Disagree	1	13	0	1	18	1	5	0	14	11	3	8
Strongly Disagree	0	5	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	2

Figure 2. Frequency table of the results of the student survey

Almost all respondents believed that digital communication and mobile devices made it easy to contact their instructors. Respondents valued the speed and convenience afforded by digital communication and mobile technology.. Like the instructors, students felt more comfortable connecting with their instructors on LinkedIn rather than Facebook, and felt connections with former instructors were more appropriate than current one.

Conclusions

- Digital communication channels are useful tools, but do not alter the essential authority-based relationship between instructors and students.
- Students may develop friendships with instructors in person, then—sometimes—friend them online.
- Digital communication and mobile technology have instead opened up a **new space** in which the relationship is conducted, possibly on the professional level.
- Next steps include conducting a wider study with a stronger focus on that space and its impact.