

# MANAGING TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION VIA WHATSAPP PLATFORM

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## Abstract

This paper showcases the real-time nature of class management using the WhatsApp platform. This platform is not evaluated as a distinct educational tool, but rather, to showcase its potential as enabler of perpetual engagement. The supporting data reflects the mobile interaction of three (3) different courses representing three (3) different levels of students (freshmen, sophomore and senior). A comparison to other digital (i.e. email, online boards) and analog (i.e. paper handouts) methods of communication helps give prospective on its advantages and possible shortcomings. The notion of persistent availability and connectivity is explored to help define the ever-rising student expectation of interactivity and feedback. The specific areas covered are regulating attendance, general course advisement, project discussions, on-going feedback and assessment and evaluation. At its conclusion, the paper outlines the potential for real-time communication outside of the allocated class-time. Lastly the novelty of this communication channel demonstrates a model for appropriating typical objects of nuisance into productive and effective tools of teacher-student engagement.

**Keywords:** “course management”, communication, real-time, WhatsApp, “mobile platform”, communication, “perpetual engagement”

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is to demonstrate possible ways of managing classroom interactions using current technologies. Students engage with peers and alike through mobile communications on minute-by-minute bases. They have become accustomed to response on demand relative to time, place and most importantly need. In a typical university, one expects a robust email system reaching all constituencies – from administrators to faculty to students. The use of email as a core mode of communication has established itself as a both valid and even expected affordance of an educational space. While this is an efficient method of mass communication, it lacks the immediacy of communication expected by today’s students. Teaching in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) exposes one to a daily reality of students engaging two, sometimes even three, mobile phones. They are talking, messaging, documenting, recording and even amusing themselves via their smartphones. As they dedicate substantial time of their lives to university and related activities, they remain perpetually connected with friends, family, peers and anyone relevant to their daily lives. Currently UAE has the largest penetration of smart phones in the world [1]. Using a popular mobile messenger service helps align students’ expectations with faculty actions. Over the course of a semester, three groups of students enrolled in three different classes – sixteen freshmen, seventeen sophomores and thirteen seniors were engaged exclusively through WhatsApp mobile messenger. The cases study outlined in this paper is based on a semester-long engagement with students in the American University of Sharjah in UAE. They are typically 18 - 22 years of age and of diverse ethnic background – dominated by Middle Eastern and Southeast Asians with small inclusions of Europeans and Africans. The typical gender distribution in the Architecture, Art and Design programs is 90% female and 10% male. While most supporting evidence included in this paper is anecdotal, it nevertheless provides a robust base for further consideration and focused research. Lastly, it must be clarified that all courses during which the WhatsApp conversation groups were studio based ones. They centre on acquiring a combination of hand/craft skills, in addition to critical and writing fluency for the successful completion of the studies. Most pedagogy, as in all art and design related programs, is served through assignments with specific requirements and final outcomes.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of mobile messengers has already been practiced for number of years. Its potential for educational setting has been clearly noted in number of papers and disseminated scholarly outputs. Some academic institutions in UAE have already explored possible productive uses of mobile devices for educational purposes [2]. Other studies focused on comparative research of the efficacy of using

computer based messaging and mobile texting (SMS), concluding its potential could be further exploited in various contexts [3]. More relevantly to this paper are studies which explored the specific use of WhatsApp messenger. A comparison between SMS and WhatsApp messenger identifies its more informal and conversational nature, which could be an asset while engaging students in difficult subject matters [4]. Other studies identified the possibility for collective generation of resources [5]. A possible use of Mobile Messenger is to support English learning courses. While clear benefits are identified, a key limitation is the technical management of the interaction between faculty and group of hundred plus students [6]. The application of WhatsApp messenger could help extend the learning possibilities in English learning through engagement of short narratives via text and images [7].

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

The core hypothesis of this study is that students do not only need issue based feedback, but a conversation space outside the class times to support their learning. To implement and study the idea initial preparatory steps are required. They include all students' agreement to participate, technical setup and implementing contingencies as needed.

#### **3.1 Prerequisites**

This approach relies on students' on-going access to WhatsApp mobile application. One of the key aspects of the platforms suitability is that is free and available for most mobile platforms, already widely used around the world. Following are the initial setup steps to assure that the interaction is possible between all. First – verify that all students have a smartphone with WhatsApp messenger and they are willing to participate in such group discussion. Second - request a student to volunteer to create a messenger group and add all course enrolled students to it. This helps create an atmosphere of mutual investment and ownership. Make sure the instructors phone number is added to the class group. The last step is to confirm that everyone is connected and able to receive messages. As a result a messenger group, a talk circle, is created and ready to use at the beginning of the academic cycle.

#### **3.2 Setup**

One must accept certain realities in use of Mobile Messenger for pedagogical reasons. It is an informal communication space, where abbreviations, emoticons and shortened phraseology are expected and practiced. It will not only be impossible to enforce formality in communication but also might challenge the authenticity of the engagement. It is not unreasonable to expect that students already participate in many one-on-one as well as group chats on WhatsApp.

#### **3.3 Contingencies**

One must also develop strategies to accommodate students, in the more rare case of not having access to WhatsApp messenger. It is not unreasonable to expect that even the most underprivileged students today, have mobile phone with Short Message Service (SMS) capabilities. This could be a simple solution for the rare cases of students lacking appropriate access. A less desirable and more cumbersome alternative is the use of email for key announcements and communications.

## **4 FINDINGS – APPLICATION AND EXPERIENCES**

Throughout the use of mobile messenger communication during the course of this study number of themes and specific uses emerged. To protect the identities of all participants in the conversation generic names replaced student names. The designations “A”, “B”, etc. are only relevant to each cited exchange and might not correspond to the same participant from conversation to conversation.

### **4.1 Regulating Attendance**

One of the most obvious uses of communicating via messenger is to regulate attendance and relevant issues. It creates an opportunity for real-time notification of delays in start time, absenteeism and reasons for delay. As many instructors know, it is a real struggle to notify students in possible delay in start time do to external factors. Here is an example note sent to students which class started at 2:00 PM.

1:16:09 PM: Instructor: I am coming from Dubai and might be a few minutes late. Please continue on with your assignment work  
1:52:23 PM: Instructor: I will not be late (Instructor 2013, pers. comm., 30/10)

When some students are late an instant message reminder serves as an encouragement to hurry to class.

2:06:30 PM: Instructor: Class has started. (Instructor 2013, pers. comm., 18/12)

## 4.2 Course Work Discussions

While many instructions are given during the beginning of a studio assignment, there seems to be a constant need of further clarifications and specific suggestions. This has proven to be specifically valid for freshmen and sophomore students. The following example is a brief exchange about idea development and assessment.

5:28:41 PM: Student A: I took pictures off my ideas

5:28:52 PM: Student A: is that alright?

5:31:25 PM: Instructor: Yes. Print them have them ready for review. (Freshmen Student, Instructor 2013, pers. comm., 6/10)

Sometimes a future discussion occurs so that students have a greater degree of certainty on not only what they have to do but how.

5:44:24 PM: Student A: Is the essay apa style or written in the back of our sketchbook ?

6:40:37 PM: Instructor: Just good English style

6:52:08 PM: Student A: But is it printed copy or online submission ?

7:34:25 PM: Student B: Professor how do i remove hyphenation on indesign ?

7:39:50 PM: Student C: Professor the essay must be on the sketchbook right?

9:09:18 PM: Instructor: Sketch book indeed (Sophomore Students, Instructor 2014, pers. comm., 6/1)

At times the conversation centres on very practical and even technical suggestions.

9:58:23 AM: Student A: What glue do you suggest

10:10:47 AM: Student A: Foam board, there is a thick one : 1 Cm. And there is a thin one : 0.5 cm which one should we use?

10:19:50 AM: Instructor: Spray mount (Sophomore Student, Instructor 2013, pers. comm., 3/10)

## 4.3 Assessment and Evaluation

After posting of the grades for a specific assignment the conversation space, particularly in the freshmen group lights up with responses, comments and not well disguised emotions.

6:52:08 PM: Student A: Thank u professor ♥

6:52:27 PM: Student B: WOHOOOOOO

6:52:31 PM: Student B: THANK YOUUUUU

6:52:40 PM: Student B: PROFESSOR YOU'RE THE BEST!

6:54:11 PM: Student A: The best at all \*

6:54:25 PM: Student C: ALLAH AKBAR

6:54:45 PM: Student C: THANKS A LOG

6:54:47 PM: Student C: A lot

6:54:49 PM: Student D: "emoticons"

6:55:53 PM: Student E: thank youuuuu "emoticons"

6:56:07 PM: Student B: MIRACLES HAPPEN!

6:56:10 PM: Student B: Hahahahaha

6:59:06 PM: Student F: Thank you professor, a star for youuu "emoticon"

7:02:41 PM: Instructor: It was all you. You did the work. Thank you for your enthusiasm, energy and commitment. (Freshmen Students, Instructor 2014, pers. comm., 10/1)

## 4.4 Motivation

One way the real-time nature of the medium can support on-going efforts is by offering encouraging comments from instructor to student and between students themselves.

11:57:22 PM: Student A: Guys.. Instead of complaining, go get some work done, or sleep so you can work tomorrow. (Freshmen Student A 2013, pers. comm., 17/12)

Other comments are more cryptic and undefined.

6:15:48 PM: Student A: What's due tomorrow?

6:16:21 PM: Student B: Keep working (Sophomore Students 2013, pers. comm., 26/10)

#### 4.5 Social Conversations and Emergencies

As one might anticipate, once a conversation space is established and continuously used, possibility for other conversations occur. The following example refers to an emergency situation where one of the students felt compelled to message the instructor as the situation was unfolding.

4:10:58 AM: Student A: Hi professor

4:12:29 AM: Student A: I am currently in the student center along with a couple of other girls

4:13:02 AM: Student A: The electricity went down

4:13:16 AM: Student A: All the lights and ACs in the girls dorms went off

4:13:27 AM: Student A: And have been off for about 3 hours now (Sophomore Student, Instructor 2013, pers. comm., 10/6)

For seniors however, the social conversations are leisurely in addition to seeking direct instructions.

10:28:59 PM: Student A: Best birthday with the best people

10:29:16 PM: Student B: Who's bday was it?

10:29:37 PM: Student C: Meeeeeeeeeeeeeee (Senior Students 2013, pers. comm., 17/10)

#### 4.6 Post Course Conversations

There is no need to close the WhatsApp group at the end of the educational circle, which provides for opportunity for post course exchanges. It is not unusual in studio-based programs for individual students to have the same instructor for various subjects. Sometimes the post-course conversations are more social.

8:25:13 PM: Student A: Hi :)

8:25:27 PM: Instructor: Hi

8:25:32 PM: Student B: Helloo "emoticon"

8:25:43 PM: Instructor: What a reunion (Freshmen Students, Instructor 2014, pers. comm., 6/4)

In other occasions the messaging communications could serve as a billboard for other useful presentations and activities helpful for students in their studies.

12:36:14 PM: Instructor: I will hold the talk/discussion "What is Education" on 5:15 pm Wednesday 19 march in AD2-218. It is open to anyone interested in the subject. See you there.

12:59:03 AM: Student A: Thank you for letting us know Proffesor i am really looking forward to this disussion although i have something so close to that time i will try my best to make it:( (Sophomore Student, Instructor 2014, pers. comm., 18/3)

### 5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the experience of using WhatsApp messenger to partially or even completely augment all course communication has proven to have obvious advantages and efficiencies. Based on the conversation analysis and class impressions some key advantages have emerged:

- Reduced need for face-to-face meetings
- Building a deeper trust between students and instructor
- Provide a larger scope of feedback
- Help motivate students better on an on-going bases
- Offers minute-by-minute level feedback (with little no lag time)
- Continue communications even after the course is completed

Many students expressed their satisfaction with using a medium they understand and use regular bases. It also offers an opportunity to extend the classroom experience outside of class time. Lastly, the trend going into the future points at the continued proliferation of smartphones around the world but more importantly to the continuous increase in use of messaging services in our daily lives [8 p.36]

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