7 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT...
BACKCHANNEL COMMUNICATION

Scenario

Mary slips into the lecture hall for her economics class a few minutes before the guest speaker is scheduled to take the floor. The podium is set up with a screen on either side, one displaying a title slide with a URL for the slide deck and a second showing the address to a registered account on GroupTweet, a site that works with Twitter to allow users to privately post questions, respond to other posts, share insights, and otherwise engage in backchannel discussion.

Mary pulls out her cell phone, joining the session via her Twitter client; other students log in using laptops and netbooks. As soon as the talk starts, questions begin appearing on the Twitter feed displayed at the front of the class. When students find a remark or question interesting, they echo their interest by retweeting it. As Mary tweets a question about a reference that she didn't catch, she notices that not all of the students are using the backchannel—the guy in front of her closes his laptop so that he can focus on the speaker's points. He can check the commentary after the session ends to catch up on the class discussion.

Confused by a statement on one of the slides, Mary types in a question about a term she doesn't understand. One of her classmates responds with a few words of definition and a link to a site that gives a detailed explanation. Another of Mary's questions receives multiple retweets almost as soon as she finishes typing it.

Halfway through the class, the presenter reviews the conversation in the backchannel and chooses questions and comments that have the most enthusiastic retweets, including Mary's submission. This leads to a heated debate with fast-changing commentary in the backchannel, which lasts past the end of the class period. Revisiting the GroupTweet session that evening, Mary notices that the guest speaker has returned to offer links on two key points that most intrigued his audience.

1 What is it?

Backchannel communication is a secondary electronic conversation that takes place at the same time as a conference session, lecture, or instructor-led learning activity. On an informal basis, this might involve students using a chat tool or Twitter to discuss a lecture as it is happening. Increasingly these background conversations are being brought into the foreground as a formal part of lecture interaction as speakers actively encourage audience members to join in with questions or comments, sharing their feedback with one another without disrupting the speaker. When speakers integrate questions or comments from the backchannel into their lectures, or when students, emboldened by feedback from peers, broach questions they might otherwise leave unasked, the backchannel can help guide the presentation. Whether the backchannel exists as a spontaneous chat among a few audience members or as an audience-wide discourse displayed as text on a screen for common participation, the allure is its immediacy as a real-time conversation in parallel with the formal presentation. Still, not all members of an audience will agree on how enriching or distracting they find these second, third, or fourth conversations.

2 How does it work?

Although backchannel communication began—and often remains—in the purview of students or audience members, individual instructors across the college and university spectrum have adapted the tools of social networking or collaborative editing to set up accounts for class backchannel participation in the courses they teach. Educational conferences, too, sometimes provide chat rooms where participants can discuss presentations in real time. Participants might also hold private electronic conversations about conference activity with fellow attendees and colleagues who could not attend.

Some institutions have built their own backchannel tools. Hotseat, developed at Purdue University, showed enthusiastic acceptance among students in early pilot studies, where 73 percent used the tool, often to ask questions about material that they didn't feel comfortable asking about publicly in class. Live Question Tool, developed at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, is open to use by anyone and allows audience members to ask, respond to, or vote on questions while a real-time display shows the running commentary to all participants.

3 Who's doing it?

While covert student discussions have been around as long as students have been passing notes to one another, contemporary backchannels take advantage of digital infrastructure that includes wireless connectivity and a growing range of wireless devices. To participate, individuals must be aware that a backchannel

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conversation exists, something they may learn via a link in the presentation itself, through e-mail, or in casual discussion. Once participants have joined, they can take part under their own names, under pseudonyms, or anonymously, depending how the tool has been set up. Where the backchannel functions as a formal class activity, it might employ an application that invites questions and allows participants to vote on those of highest interest. Alternatively, backchannel activity can function as unsanctioned discussion, independent of instructor participation or awareness. Several web-based applications have been designed with backchannel conversation in mind, but often users repurpose other tools for backchannel use, including Google Moderator, Google Wave, instant messaging, Twitter, chat, and wikis.

4 Why is it significant?

The effective use of the backchannel may change the interactive dynamic of scholarly discussion. By acknowledging—or taking control of—the background conversation, the presenter can initiate a second channel where timid audience members can see questions posed by others and be drawn into the discourse. The lecturer who nears the end of a presentation ready to take audience questions could find the queries waiting in a queue, ranked by audience voting. An electronic backchannel could extend the boundaries of the physical room or auditorium by allowing participants who are joining virtually to submit questions on an equal footing with those physically present. Because most backchannel tools are device-neutral, the barrier to entry is low. When familiar social media applications are used informally for backchannel communication, discussion can be opened to the social networking community at large—beyond the physical classroom space. Background discussions have always been a component of classes, conferences, and presentations. Digital technologies allow that interaction to be brought out of the shadows and, perhaps, incorporated as a formal part of learning activities. Instructors and presenters alike should be aware of this dynamic and the opportunity it presents to add another dimension to learning.

5 What are the downsides?

The openness of backchannel communication—particularly the potential for outside community review or participation—raises a number of questions about control. Anonymous postings might open the door to disruptive, frivolous, or rude comments, and cautious participants might be driven from the discussion by grandstanders or bullies, particularly where backchannel conversations are controlled by audience members and limited to a few invited participants. At the very least, multiple conversations occurring simultaneously during the primary presentation are certain to dilute audience focus. This is of particular concern where topics under discussion require intense focus or reflective thought. Additionally, as with any communication tool, participants should understand that archived copies of comments could linger for a long time where they could be easily accessed. Typical good sense (and perhaps a code of conduct) should govern such shared items.

6 Where is it going?

Questions of control suggest there is a new literacy or set of academic values that must emerge to shape behavior on the backchannel. If speakers provide a venue for the audience's natural inclination to question, evaluate, and discuss a presentation as it occurs, making the backchannel a common part of presentations, it could, like clickers, emerge to model a new type of classroom interaction. Ironically, such a model—built of a background conversation brought into the foreground—might eventually be formalized to require careful reporting on the part of participants and an adequate list of references to support assertions. The resulting text record could provide a transcript of academic discussion that could enrich course archives. In the nearer term, using a tool like Google Wave for backchannel communication affords the opportunity for those engaging in the conversation to incorporate multimedia and other elements beyond those provided by text-based tools. Additionally, visualization tools applied to the backchannel could help make sense of a flurry of input by employing poll results, tag clouds, or other types of analyses. As mobile devices accelerate interest in the backchannel, this avenue of communication is likely to promote careful scholarship on the part of speakers who might be addressing a critical audience able to do real-time fact checking.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The essential challenge raised by the backchannel is how to use it most constructively to support instruction. It has the potential to take its place alongside clickers as a way to foster engagement and participation, especially in large classes. Because the classroom can be connected to the broader community via Twitter or some other publicly accessed service, students, faculty members, and others must learn how to use these services responsibly. While instructors must forgo some control for the backchannel to function as an effective learning tool, many questions remain regarding the best way to resolve attribution, privacy issues, and rules of order for productive or constructive discourse in an electronic environment. With the increasing use of smart phones, some have seen the rise of the backchannel as inevitable, emerging as a legitimate learning avenue, even where instructors are not engaged. Accordingly, many lecturers and presenters may find it useful to familiarize themselves with the applications and techniques of backchannel conversations as these tools become an increasingly common part of the standard presentation toolset.

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