

MSTU 4022

Telecommunications, Distance Learning and Collaborative Interchange

(Fall 2005)

Assignment 5 - Tipping Point Essay

This article offers a brief analysis of Malcolm Gladwell's Book - The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference, in an attempt to show how the issues raised therein can be applied in the implementation of Distance Learning Courses and Projects

Introduction

According to Gladwell (2002), social phenomena such as fashion trends, crime rates, teenage smoking, infectious diseases etc. often witness, at some particular point in time, a sudden and dramatic turn in activity, catapulting them into epidemic proportions. This tipping point of social epidemics is often attributed to one or more factors. For example when in the 1990s, crime rate in New York City suddenly dropped over 60% in 5 years, the New York City police attributed it to effective policing strategies. Criminologists on the other hand cited the decline in illicit drug trade as the main reason, whilst economists pointed to the improvement of the city's economy. Though each reason given was true to some extent, a critical analysis revealed that, none of them, either in isolation or together with the others, could wholly account for the dramatic drop in crime rate (Gladwell, 2002). So what happened?

In his book *"The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference,"* Malcolm Gladwell points out that there is always a potential for change, and that tipping points occur because "people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus." (p. 258). Basing his analysis on several worldwide natural and man-made occurrences, Gladwell identified three main factors that constitute this "right impetus." These "three rules of the tipping point" are the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

The Law of the Few implies that it is only a handful of extraordinary people who make things happen in society, and when they are involved in an issue, that issue is most likely going to tip into an epidemic. These people are connected, knowledgeable, persuasive, and very influential among their peers. Gladwell finds three types of such extraordinary people: Connectors (the outgoing, helpful, and nonjudgmental people who bring all others together), Mavens (those who take delight in informing and enlightening society about current and trendy issues), and Salespersons (the persuasive and emotionally contagious people who motivate others into action). To buttress his point, Gladwell cites the example of one such connector named Paul Revere, who, during the American independence movement, rode north of Boston one night warning that "the British are coming," and this was enough to get the people mobilized and ready to resist the British advance the next day. A similar errand to other towns by his countryman William Dawes that same night did not yield such a result.

The Stickiness Factor refers to a specific (sometimes small or trivial) quality of an issue or message that makes it memorable and resonates with the audience, grabbing and holding their attention.

Gladwell again indicates that the mixing of puppets and real people in the children's educational TV show *Sesame Street* was found to be the sole factor that made the show irresistible to children and could hold their attention to the screen for a considerable length of time. Prior to this, people and puppets were separated and the show was probably not going to last beyond a single season.

By *Power of Context*, Gladwell is saying that most human behavior is situational, contrary to the commonly held belief that behavior is attributable to one's innate character, disposition, personality or genes. Consider this: Seminarians on their way to make a presentation on the parable of the Good Samaritan to their instructors actually stopped and helped an injured man on the street when they knew that they had a few minutes to spare. In another scenario where the same Seminarians were told that they were already late and should hurry up, they ignored the injured man on the street! Gladwell thus concludes that, making small, seemingly trivial changes in the environment, such as fixing broken windows (or telling a Seminarian that he is late), is a very powerful method of starting or stopping a social epidemic. Gladwell also adds that social groupings play a critical role in social epidemics. For example he credited the success of Methodism to John Wesley who realized that a fundamental change in people's beliefs and behaviors could only be sustained if groups that would practice, express, and nurture those beliefs were created.

Gladwell's exposition puts us in a better position to understand the culture of social epidemics, and in fact, can serve as a useful guide when we wish to implement any idea or concept that we hope in the course of time, will tip and catch up with the rest of the population. Going by his ideas, you need to concentrate your resources on Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen, and also package your message in ways that are quite unique and appeal to people's emotions. In some cases, you need to test your intuitions empirically, and revise continuously until you find that sticky point.

This article, which is in two parts, examines how Gladwell's ideas can be purposefully applied in the design and implementation of effective distance learning programs and activities. The first part puts across some suggestions as to how some of the afore mentioned ideas can be incorporated into distance learning courses so as to increase student participation, whilst the second part uses some of the points as guidelines for the development of a distance learning project.

Part One

Incorporating Gladwell's ideas into an Online Distance Learning Course

Introduction

Creating an engaging, pedagogically sound and appealing web-based learning experience has always been a big challenge, especially as students are always looking for quality, convenience, flexibility and relevance to their educational and career goals. Several factors - including technology, administrative services, student support, faculty support, and even economics come into play in the development of an online course. In this paper however, I will only consider the issue of student support as I relate how some of Gladwell's ideas can be applied in that context, so as to increase student participation in a particular distance learning course.

Student support in a distance learning environment involves the provision of technical support to resolve learning platform and general computing issues, as well as the provision of quality tutoring and academic advising. Effective student support is crucial to attracting learners to a particular course and retaining them through to lifespan of the course. Two of Gladwell's tipping point ideas - "The Power of the Few" and the "Stickiness Factor" - are directly applicable when the issue of student support in an online distance learning course is being considered. I will therefore elaborate briefly on this.

A Distance Learning Course

<http://www.indiana.edu/~w505a/> "Using the Internet in the K-12 Classroom" is a fully online 3-credit-hour course offered by the Indiana University School of Education Distance Education Program, and targeted at K-12 educators. The instructor for this course is Christopher Essex (website: <http://php.indiana.edu/~cessex/>, and email: cessex@indiana.edu). In this course, students learn to create basic webpages in HTML, find educational resources on the Internet, and also design web-based learning activities.

Power or the Few

To start a word-of-mouth epidemic, Gladwell says you need to concentrate your resources on Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen. In the academic world, these are persons who are well known in their respective fields of study, are often invited to make presentations, consulted for advice and also exert a lot of power and influence. Not only can they offer substantive advice pertaining to a

distance learning course, they also have the ability to convince and persuade prospective students to enroll in the course. Students who will wish to enroll in any online course will first of all do some basic research to find one that is credible and worth pursuing, and having these influential persons endorse and promote a course is one sure way of persuading and attracting them.

On the main page of the above mentioned online learning website, the instructor has provided comments from other students who have previously participated in the course. I believe that this page will make a much greater impact if in addition to this, some comments endorsing the program were obtained from connectors and mavens in the educational technology field, together with their contact information. This will leave no doubt in student's minds as to the credibility of the course, and will also serve as a source of support in terms of advising and counseling as students pursue the course.

As mentioned earlier, support in the use of the technology is very crucial to getting students comfortable with the online learning environment pertaining to any particular course. A 24-hour, seven-day-a-week technical help desk together with online tutorials and orientations all provided by a technical maven will serve to familiarize students with the interface, tools and processes behind the online learning experience.

The Stickiness Factor

As Gladwell points out, though connectors, mavens and salespersons play a vital role in social epidemics (in this case, attracting and retaining students to an online distance learning program), their services alone are not enough. One also needs to package the content and deliver it in ways that will appeal to peoples' emotions so as to grab their attention and keep them motivated. With regard to support, students should find the learning platform user-friendly, the content relevant and timely, and the general learning environment challenging and motivating especially to adults. As these factors are present in most credible distance learning courses, to get one particular course to tip so that it will keep attracting and retaining large numbers of participants, then one needs to find that extra little thing that Gladwell calls the stickiness factor. This stickiness factor need not be a revolutionary idea but just a little variation of the norm, sometimes just a little tinkering at the margin.

Though this sounds like a straightforward idea, stickiness can be quite difficult to find and sometimes demands rigorous testing and retesting of ones ideas. With regard to the above mentioned online course, there is no simple correct prescription as to what should (or should not) be done. It simply calls for an extensive experimental study, like the ones conducted by the originators of the TV shows *Sesame Street* and *Blues Clues* but this time directed at adults, especially K-12 teachers.

Having identified student support as one factor that greatly influences student participation in a distance learning course, we need to take into consideration Gladwell's statement that "the line between hostility and acceptance, in other words, between an epidemic that tips and one that does not, is sometimes a lot narrower than what it seems." (p.132). Thus to get the distance learning course - *Using the Internet in the K-12 Classroom* to tip, we do not have to make any radical changes but work hard at getting it noticed by connectors, mavens and salespersons and also tweaking it here and there and if possible conduct some research work so as to find that hidden "little thing" that will cause the program to tip (i.e. if it has not done so already).

Part Two

Incorporating Gladwell's ideas into a Distance Learning Project

Introduction

On Saturday, October 8, 2005, a major earthquake hit Northern Pakistan killing at least 86,000 people and injuring more than 69,000. Entire villages were destroyed leaving an estimated 4 million people in the area homeless. Landslides and rockfalls damaged or destroyed several mountain roads and highways cutting off access to the region for several days (US Geological Survey, 2005). Aid agencies responded to this crisis by providing food, clothing, shelter, medical aid etc, but the question arises as to how educational aid can also be provided as schools and other educational infrastructure were equally destroyed and children displaced.

The Project

A group of graduate students enrolled in a distance learning course at Teachers College, Columbia University have come up with an idea of a project that will provide educational assistance to children displaced by the earthquake in Pakistan. Whilst the details of this project are still being worked out, it is important and timely to examine what issues have to be considered in this distance

learning intervention so as to make it succeed - particularly given the challenges involved - in serving children who are not only displaced, but also traumatized. Considering the fact that children will not be capable of self-directed learning as most e-learning products demand, the aim of the project is to first of all empower teachers in the use of digital technologies in classroom teaching and learning. It is hoped that with access, appropriate professional development and support, teachers will be better able to help their students comprehend difficult-to-understand concepts, engage in new forms of learning, access information and resources, and learn according to their individual needs. This can only be achieved by empowering the teachers in the first place.

World Links¹, an independent international nongovernmental organization started in 1997 within the World Bank, has determined that for e-learning to succeed in the developing world, it needs to build on three fundamental pillars:

1. Existence of an established community of learners,
2. Delivery through a blended face-to-face/electronic mechanism,
3. Offering of learner incentives.

The first pillar - existence of an established community of learners - is the other dimension of the "Power of Context" that Gladwell argues, plays a critical role in social epidemics. For example, the runaway success of Rebecca West's *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* was in large part a function of the book's study groups that sprang up around the work. Gladwell concludes that "in order to create one contagious movement, you often have to create many small movements first." (p. 192).

In line with this assertion, the project hopes to link with educators who will be using community-based access points (that are being set up) to access online training materials, and get them to start e-learning groups using the web-based resources and multimedia CD-ROMs that will be developed. Though this will initially require the services of connectors and mavens, the idea is that as more groups are formed, the teacher e-learning tipping point will be reached. To achieve this, the developers will ensure that the learning strategies to be implemented will motivate learners, facilitate deep processing, cater for individual differences, promote meaningful learning, encourage interaction, provide feedback, facilitate contextual learning, and also provide support.

¹ World Links has trained thousands of teachers and students from 25 African, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern nations in the use of technology (Kante and Savani, 2003).

Conclusion

The participation of single institutions as well as groups of institutions has resulted in increased opportunities for online learning all over the world. On the other hand, some institutions e.g. NYU Online, UMUC Online, Temple University's Virtual Temple etc. are pulling out of online distance education as a result of enrollments that were significantly lower than predicted (Anderson, T. & Elloumi, F., 2004). This phenomenon where some ventures succeed whilst others fail can be explained in part by the arguments put forth by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point*. Going by Gladwell's ideas, it will be possible to get a distance learning program to realize increased enrollment figures if we engage the services of the "powerful few," recognize the importance of context in human behavior and also strive to get our message stick by making little but crucial variations in the way normal distance learning programs are implemented.

References

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