Backchannel chatter or spatter? A comparison of online synchronous chatroom use during STEM and Social Sciences lectures.

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ABSTRACT:

Student engagement in large lectures is challenging, and one of our strategies has been to introduce online chatting and polling during lectures. Although our initial experiences with a backchannel chat were positive across smaller STEM and larger Social Sciences courses, it became apparent that student usage might differ across disciplines. As such, this study aimed to directly compared the use of backchannel chat in second year Engineering (ENGG*2400; N=418) and Human Sexuality (FRHD*2100; N=263) courses at the University of Guelph.

Kountu, a web-based online chat and polling application, was utilized during each Fall 2016 lecture for both courses. The majority of students (72% of FRHD*2100 and 64% of ENGG*2400) tried the chatroom at least once, with an ANOVA demonstrating that the FRHD*2100 students logged in significantly more often ($p < .001$; $m = 9.53$ lectures) than ENGG*2400 students ($m = 6.55$ lectures). ENGG*2400 students, however, posted ($m = 14.34$) and 'liked' ($m = 15.25$) significantly more messages per person during each lecture than FRHD*2100 students (posts $m = 4.38$; likes $m = 5.64$). Interestingly, an online survey of 79 participants indicated that ENGG*2400 students engaged in significantly more off-topic conversations and found their chatroom to be significantly more distracting during lecture than FRHD*2100 students. Additionally, FRHD*2100 students felt significantly more comfortable participating in their chatroom as compared to ENGG*2400.

Using live examples and audience participation in Kountu, we will demonstrate the potential reasons for these differences as well as highlight discipline-specific advantages and limitations of using backchannel chat during lecture.

KEYWORDS: Backchannel, synchronous online chat, large lectures, class engagement