

STUDENTS' APPRECIATION OF MECHANISMS OF DIFFUSION

It is quite common to say that the majority of students who truly make use of help services placed at their disposal are those who, from the start, have no difficulty succeeding in their studies; while those who experience difficulties often tend not to make use of these services. Thus, according to a Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC, 2007) survey, one college student in five states that they do not know “whom to contact in case of a problem or to find out how well they are doing in their courses”. Given this context, it becomes crucial to increase the visibility of help services by developing relevant and inviting mechanisms of diffusion that will motivate students to undertake a process beneficial to their success.

Several researchers (Karabenick and Newman, 2006; Neyts, Nils, Parmentier, Noël and Verwaerde, 2006) affirm that it is important to assess the extent to which students make use of these help measures before assessing their effectiveness. Consequently, our research team decided to evaluate the relevance of the various diffusion mechanisms for these measures as implemented at the college level. The objective of this research was to determine the most appropriate actions to take in order to better promote the help services offered to students experiencing difficulties. This article presents an overview of this research.

■ A PROFILE OF THE STUDENTS TO INVITE

Within the framework of our research, we distributed a questionnaire to students in two CEGEPs, being careful to take into account both the opinions of students moving through a normal curriculum and those of students who were experiencing learning problems or difficulties¹. From this sample, 192 college students (of whom 67 were at *Collège Lionel-Groulx* and 125 at *Cégep de Sherbrooke*) answered our survey, and this on a voluntary basis. The majority of these students (51%) were in their fourth term at college while a minority (4.7%) were experiencing their very first terms.

We can therefore conclude from this data that a very large number of respondents had already acquired sufficient experience in post-secondary studies to be able to comment on our subject in an informed manner.

To the question, “During your post-secondary studies, did you ever experience learning difficulties relating to study strategies, orally, in writing or in calculation?” only 32.8% of respondents answered “never”, a large number of students answered “sometimes” (49.5%), and the rest answered “often” (10.4%) or very often (7.3%). Among the students who answered that they had “often” or “very often” encountered difficulties in their post-secondary studies, 35.5% and 30% respectively did not make use of the study help centre in their institution. This number is the same for students who declared that they suffer from a learning disability diagnosed by a professional and that they encounter difficulties very frequently; 35% of them state they have never been to the study help centre. In addition, several articles on the subject (notably by N’Guyen, Fichte, Barile and Lévesque, 2006) confirm this data while showing that more than a third, even half, of students who suffer from a learning problem or some handicap do not benefit from the resources that are put at their disposal within their school institution.

■ THE MEANS OF DIFFUSION EVALUATED

The questionnaire we developed was designed to determine the students’ appreciation of 25 means of diffusion implemented in colleges and universities or listed in scientific articles. The main section of this questionnaire, entitled “The Means of Diffusion of Information Used”, asks students about their interest in the different means listed as well as about the frequency (generally at what point in the term) with which they would prefer them to be used. This section is divided into several parts, the main ones dealing with the means used by the institution and those used by the teacher. The questionnaire also covers the means used by the student association (messages in the student newspaper, in the student agenda and on the website of the student association) and other means (advertising in the cafés and bars near the institution, as well as by word of mouth among the students).

The section entitled, “Means Used by the Institution” is the most important since it evaluates sixteen different means: three types of email sent to students, posters, theme days,

¹ It should be noted that the expression “learning difficulties”, which can refer to a variety of problems encountered by students during their academic journey, is very different from the expression “learning problem” that refers to an actual neurological problem affecting the student’s success.



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thematic workshops, a section on the website of the institution, Web 2.0 platforms (Twitter or Facebook, for instance), courses for credit on learning strategies, messages sent by viral marketing (an email that asks the student receiving it to forward it to friends), messages on windshields, on kiosks, computer services in the form of questionnaires, promotional flyers, classroom presentations, as well as messages in the newspaper of the institution.

In the section on “Means Used by the Teacher” we find fewer means than in the preceding section, and these can be summed up in four categories: messages in course syllabi, messages in the instructions for assignments, in contracts of engagement and prompting by teachers in individual or group meetings.

RESULTS FOR TECHNOLOGICAL MEANS OF DIFFUSION

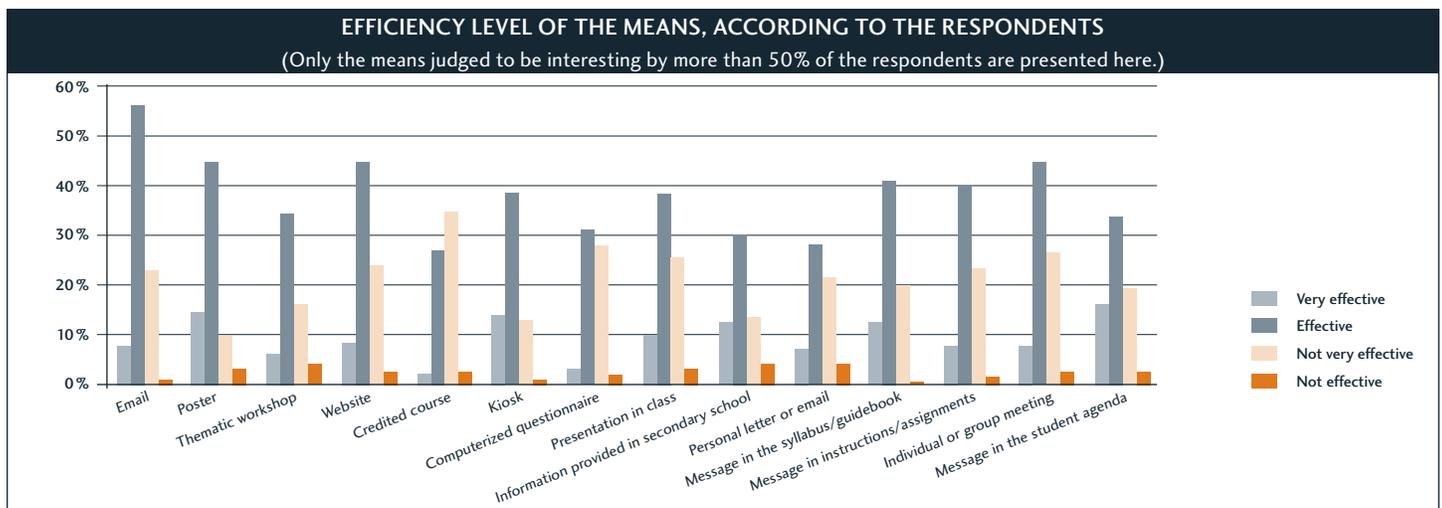
A priori, we would have thought that technological means of diffusion would have proved to be the most effective and the most popular for reaching college students, but clearly this is not so.

In recent years, several researchers have shown an interest in what we can call the “myth of the paperless office” (Sellen and Harper, 2002) and in the non-advent of a work mode totally dominated by technology (Uyttebrouck, 2005). In

fact, there is much less unanimity among students about so-called technological methods than we would have thought. While some attribute this phenomenon to the greater accessibility of paper compared to its digital substitute, we think that another aspect should not be overlooked, that of the compartmentalization of the different spheres in a student’s life.

The least popular means among students reveal that beyond the dichotomy of technological-traditional diffusion, there is the distinction between the personal lives of students and their school lives. Indeed, most of the means of diffusion that proved to be unpopular can be more closely associated with the students’ personal lives: short messages on services offered via the Web 2.0 technologies used by students (66.7% unpopular); viral marketing (78.6% unpopular); messages on windshields (87% unpopular) as well as ads in neighbourhood bars and cafés (73% unpopular).

Conversely, the most popular means among students are already an integral part of the academic sphere: email, whether in the form of an announcement urging students to use specific services of the institution (83.3% popular), or in the form of a message addressed to students in order to verify if they have been diagnosed as having learning difficulties (54.2%), posters (67.2%), a section on the institution’s website (73.4% popular), kiosks (64.1%), as well as presentations in class (70.8%).





These results show that students care about maintaining a separation between private space and public space. In this respect, email, which seems to be the big winner among the means of diffusion, is part of the academic sphere and does not, as some might think, intrude into the personal lives of the students. It has now entered into practice as a tool for work and for communication with the teacher, and the majority of students have a specific email address that is linked to their educational institutions (MIO Léa or COLNET, for example) and another personal email address.

RESULTS FOR TRADITIONAL (OR HUMAN) MEANS OF DIFFUSION

It is not surprising that a great number of respondents mentioned that they preferred it when teachers encourage them directly (person to person) or indirectly (by means of the syllabus) to go to the help centres. To this effect, Larue and Hrimech (2009) had already indicated that, “in order for students to be convinced of the benefits they can obtain [from the help put at their disposal] [...], during their course preparation, teachers must take into account what motivates students and that is often passing the exam”.

However, for the students, the fact of following the teacher’s advice to the letter can guarantee passing the exam... In addition, “human techniques” make students feel that they are not enrolled in a “standardized success path” (*Ibid*, 2009), but rather in an approach adapted to their needs as learners, needs that are well known by the teacher.

RESULTS WITH REGARD TO THE TIMING OF THE DIFFUSION

As to the moment during the term and the type of invitation appreciated, although students prefer general invitations at the beginning of the term, they also seem to want to receive encouragement that is more personal at critical moments. On the one hand, they prefer being informed of the help mechanisms at the very beginning of the term, and this by various means, all of them general: 52.6% of the students say they want to receive a message in the course syllabus, 49% prefer receiving an email and having a kiosk in the college, and 39.6% would like to attend a presentation in class on the different services that are offered to them. On the other hand, “critical moments” constitute the second period of time during which students want to be solicited. When, using an essay question, we asked them to define what they considered to be a “critical moment”, they answered in large number that it is the moment when they started to sense failure, generally after mid-term and just before the end of the term. It must therefore be stated that many students expressed the desire

for help resources to be presented to them as a “safety net” when their very success in a course is in question.

During these critical moments, students want to be encouraged to turn to the help services by means that are sometimes more personal: whereas 32.3% of the students would like to receive an email and 27.1% are attracted by posters, that leaves no less than 29.7% who would like teachers to encourage students to go to the help centre by way of the instructions on various assignments given during this period, while 33.9% would like the teachers to encourage them to ask for help during individual meetings.

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The students’ preferences as to the timing for diffusion sheds light on what Romainville (1993) qualified as “pedagogical misunderstanding”, namely the fact that students are generally looking more for immediate success while teachers are aiming for the long-term development of students’ competencies. The fundamental difference between the students who deem it to be relevant to receive information and, consequently, assistance, at the beginning of the session, and those who prefer receiving it at critical moments or even sometimes during end-of-term exams, relates to the goals pursued by the students. While the first group is pursuing a goal of mastery — by means of which they would like to develop their competency —, the second group is aiming rather to achieve a performance goal — by means of which they would like to demonstrate their competency. Ultimately, some may also make a strategic retreat, seeking more to avoid demonstrating their incompetence.

IN SUMMARY

Our research brought to light the fact that, although students are part of a society in which new technologies are growing in importance, they do not adhere to this tendency in a systematic manner. It is important for them to maintain a strict separation between what pertains to the school sphere and what pertains to the personal sphere. They also seem to be more inclined to frequent study help centres when the recommendation comes directly from the teacher. They appreciate personalized approaches, whether by way of email, comments written on an assignment or a meeting with the teacher.



Although the students in our sample agree on the importance of having help resources at their disposal, although they all agree, also, on the necessity for these services to be presented to them via mechanisms of diffusion, some of them remain concerned about what they call “hype”. Excessive redundancy in the motivational messages can thus have an effect of repelling some students, and that is clearly not desirable. One of the answers we obtained on our survey is conclusive evidence of this, not only in terms of its content, but especially by the way she had of expressing it:

“If you push people too hard to go, they won’t go. I myself received several letters telling me to go to the help centre in French and I didn’t go. I worked things out by myself and I succeeded. Often it’s pride that kicks in...²”

Finally, the greatest danger of having an excessive variety of means of diffusion would be to overwhelm students with these motivational messages and thus to obtain the opposite of the desired effect, which in certain cases, can have unfortunate consequences. ●

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² Comment made by one of the respondents to our questionnaire.