

Teaching Note

The Means and the End

Teaching Digital Literacy to Nonprofit Students

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Abstract

For their future career, nonprofit students need to attain the necessary skills and knowledge to leverage the power of technology appropriately to serve their communities. As faculty, we need to design our courses to improve the digital literacy of our students and therefore improve their ability to effectively communicate, manage, and lead public service organizations. This article examines an undergraduate course called Community Organizations in a Digital World that responds to the new demands for innovations in nonprofit organizations. We present the overall course design, including assignments, and the findings of a pretest and a posttest of individual student digital literacy and student reflections on their digital literacy. Based on the two-stage survey, students' digital literacy significantly improved when they completed the course. Moreover, students appreciated the importance and the difficulty of using social media in their future career. They also recognized the effect of algorithms and social justice issues of accessing technology. This evidence demonstrates the active learning exercises used in this course successfully improved students' digital literacy.

Keywords: technology; digital literacy; nonprofit education

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Nonprofit undergraduate students, generally part of the millennial generation, are digital natives and have grown up with technology all around them. They use it on a continual basis every day, mainly for entertainment, jobs, and school. However, rarely do they have the opportunity to assess their own digital literacy, the social justice of access to technology, or social media for civic engagement and fundraising. Digital literacy can be defined as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills” (American Library Association, 2013, p. 2). While digital literacy is widely understood to be essential to success in the workplace and modern life, it is sorely lacking in nonprofit organizations.

To address this issue, the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) created curricular guidelines for undergraduate and graduate study of nonprofits. For undergraduate nonprofit programs, technology is included in several standards, including ethics and values, leading and managing organizations, and nonprofit marketing. In addition to the curriculum guidelines, NACC also produced Indicators of Quality for nonprofit programs. One of those indicators is that programs should respond to the needs and issues of the nonprofit field. Technology is continuously changing the way we work and even the work itself, so our nonprofit students need to be prepared.

The nonprofit undergraduate program in Nonprofit and Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) Studies in the Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies at Northern Illinois University is a member of NACC and has adopted their curriculum guidelines. The major includes 18 credits in the Center, 33 credits outside the Center, and 15 elective credits. The course *Community Organizations in a Digital World* is a required 3-credit course in the Center that is taught by a core faculty member. Since the major began in 2012, this course has been included in the degree requirements. Since that time, the course has been taught three times (Spring 2013, Spring 2015, and Spring 2018) by the same faculty member. Originally, the course was designed for students to acquire technical skills such as evaluation of websites and creation of social media accounts similar to tasks they might do for an internship or an entry-level position. Over time, the course has incorporated a broader definition of digital literacy, which includes critical thinking and technical skills. As more online services and digital marketing to promote services are made available by nonprofit organizations, nonprofit employees need to understand their communities’ perspectives of digital literacy. For example, despite being cost effective for the organization, provision of services online may not have the desired effect.

Our main research question was to determine the extent to which this course supported the improvement of digital literacy of the undergraduate nonprofit studies students. To do this, the instructor designed the course with this overarching goal in mind, including readings, activities, and assignments. To measure digital literacy, we used a pre- and post-self-assessment of digital literacy developed by Dr. Jimmy Young (Young, McLeod, & Brady, 2018). In addition to the pre- and posttest results, students reflected on the extent to which their digital literacy was supported by the course design and content. Overall, we found that the students’ average scores on the digital literacy quiz improved by 13.65 points from the beginning to the end of the course, which was statistically significant. This finding lends support to the development of undergraduate nonprofit courses that support students’ digital literacy.

The Course

This course, Community Organizations in a Digital World, is required for the undergraduate degree in Nonprofit and NGO Studies. The course took place in a smart classroom with individual computer stations and projector screens around the outside of the room. The capacity of the room is 50 persons, based on the number of computers in this lab, and the course had full enrollment. The course and the research for this article took place during the Spring 2018 semester.

Course Description: This course examines digital and online efforts of community organizations to build community leadership and civic engagement. Focus is on how technological applications may provide more effective and efficient pathways for community organizations to communicate with their stakeholders and reach their strategic goals.

The course begins with an examination of what digital literacy is and why it matters. We then spend time discussing how social justice is a lens for examining technology in society. While moving through the course, students use and study technology to meet course objectives, including the use of assistive technologies, fundraising and volunteer management, and advocacy. Course delivery, course content, and course assignments fully integrate the technologies we discuss in class and reinforce their own digital literacy.

The course has several learning objectives:

- Apply skills to manage information and systems.
- Reflect on use of technology in relation to professional development.
- Determine the appropriate social media platforms to meet the needs of community organizations.
- Identify and address the equity challenges of data and information.
- Assess organization values of privacy, ethics, information security, and trust.
- Implement a social media advocacy campaign.
- Create and manage online identity.

Students completed several key assignments, including a book review of *Weapons of Math Destruction* (O'Neil, 2016), a review of a podcast related to the course, a Twitter campaign, creation of an infographic, and a Wikipedia assignment. In addition, students wrote weekly reflections in a personal online journal shared only with the instructor through the course management platform. The Twitter campaign and the Wikipedia assignment were both worth 20%, the largest portions of the final grade. Each of these assignments is described in detail, including how each contributed to the course learning objectives. Assignment details are also included in the Appendix.

Nonprofit organizations rely heavily on digital technologies for stakeholder management, advocacy, and fundraising (Campbell, Lambright, & Wells, 2014; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Waters & Lord, 2009), so teaching the technologies is essential for cultivating future nonprofit professionals. Ng (2012) pointed out that to improve students' digital literacy, it is crucial for instructors to provide students with opportunities to use technologies with useful purposes. With proper explanation of technologies and frequent usage, undergraduate students can easily adopt unfamiliar technologies in their learning as well as for professional tasks.

Young (2018) emphasized the importance of educating students about the ethical and appropriate manner in which to use digital technologies; therefore, we asked students to complete assignments that required them to use social media and technology. This literature review includes research on the use of Wikipedia and Twitter, which as part of this course accounted for 40% of the students' overall grade.

The Wikimedia Foundation, a nonprofit organization, hosts Wikipedia. Wiki Education connects Wikipedia to higher education through a classroom program, professional development courses, a visiting scholars program, and educational partnerships at no cost. Wikipedia Classroom Program instructors can assign students to write or edit Wikipedia articles. For this course, students selected from Wikipedia pages chosen by the instructor because they related to course content. The Wikipedia articles were grassroots fundraising, charitable organization, nonprofit studies, fundraising, social media giving day, crowdfunding, cause marketing, charity assessment, nonprofit technology, philanthropy and crowdsourcing. The instructor assigned each student to edit one article and review another. To set up the process, the instructor created a WikiEdu log-in and profile and selected the timeline for the Wiki assignment and the site automatically created the schedule for students to follow, including the online training to get started on Wikipedia, find sources, evaluate articles and sources, draft the article, perform peer review, and move their work to Wikipedia. Instructors can see how students are progressing through the timeline and activities at any time and assign grades to the various tasks. For this course, the Wikipedia assignment took place over 6 weeks. In total, students made 352 edits to 11 articles.

Students may gain several benefits through understanding and editing Wikipedia through Wiki Education, which “connects higher education to Wikipedia, ensuring that the world’s most read source of information is more representative, accurate, and complete” (Wiki Education, n.d.). According to Booth (2015), having students interact with Wikipedia helps them to comprehend how digital literacy is embedded in the sociocultural structure, which in turn raises awareness of sociocultural injustice. Wikipedia also encourages both students and the instructors to be critical of their power and privilege over information. Moreover, the Wikipedia assignment allows students to see how facts can be interpreted and presented in different perspectives (Strassmann, 2015). Vetter (2015) also argued that through editing Wikipedia pages and seeing the history of how information is constructed and changed, students can realize how knowledge is affected by ideological limitations. These learning processes in turn raise students’ awareness about the digital divide and the importance of presenting information neutrally on social media.

Twitter is a powerful social media for nonprofit organizations to engage their stakeholders. According to Guo and Saxton (2014), Twitter can target stakeholders and call for action, which in turn can facilitate social changes. In terms of stakeholder communication, at the national level larger nonprofits utilize Twitter for one-way communication channels (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). At the community level, Twitter has been a better channel for nonprofit organizations to create dialogue with their stakeholders compared to traditional websites (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Yet, as Waters et al. (2009) stated, maximizing the 140 characters or less to promote stakeholder engagement is tricky. Learning how to use Twitter strategically requires practice.

The Twitter assignment provided students with opportunities to discover Twitter and its embedded social network. The assignment also expected to cultivate students' skills in critical evaluation, attention management, and critical thinking (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Hitchcock & Young, 2016). In social work courses, educators can also consider Twitter a learning tool because of information sharing and current events trends on Twitter (Anthony & Jewell, 2017). Moreover, according to Woodall and Lennon (2017), students who are required to tweet course-related topics weekly and share political information have higher political knowledge and engagement than students who do not receive the assignments. Therefore, through the Twitter assignment, we expected students to see the possibility of using Twitter as an advocacy and stakeholder management tool. Also, we expected students to realize that using Twitter for professional purposes requires critical thinking and management skills.

Students first had to select a cause they would use for their advocacy campaign on Twitter. To practice Twitter, we live tweeted during a TED Talk shown in class using the course hashtag and I showed the students their Tweets during the class. For their own Twitter campaign, they had to Tweet a minimum of twice a week over 4 weeks using the course hashtag (#NNGO350). The campaign was graded on quantity as well as quality and on how many people liked or shared the Tweets. Students also had to reflect on their Twitter campaign experience throughout the 4 weeks.

To evaluate students' overall digital literacy, we conducted two sets of surveys. On the first day of class, students completed the pre-assessment of digital literacy developed by Young (Young et al., 2018). Students completed the same survey in the last class 16 weeks later. After completing the online survey, they had to enter their score and their name in a separate online survey. This researcher only had access to the overall scores rather than their individual responses. Out of the 50 students in the course, we had pre- and postsurvey scores for 44 of the students. In addition to these scores, we also had students respond to an anonymous online survey about their overall experience in the course.

To analyze the pretest and posttest survey scores, we used Stata 12.1. As an inferential statistical analysis, we conducted a paired-sample *t* test to demonstrate that students' improvement on digital literacy score was statistically discernible from zero. We estimated a paired-sample *t* test to compare posttest and pretest scores of students' digital literacy. The mean difference between the posttest ($M = 236.20$, $SD = 3.58$) and pretest ($M = 222.55$, $SD = 2.41$) digital literacy scores was statistically discernible from zero, $t(41) = -4.3645$, $p < 0000$.

Table 1

t Test: Student Digital Literacy Score

Score		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pretest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Posttest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)			
222.55 (2.41)	236.20 (3.58)	41	-4.36	< .000

These results indicate that the course had an effect on students' digital literacy levels. Specifically, the results suggest that after the class, students' literacy scores improved 4 points on average.

In addition to the quantitative assessment, the qualitative survey revealed that students learned the benefits, challenges, and application of technology to community organizations. The students indicated they learned about social media in general, but by following and engaging with thought leaders, community activists, and high-profile nonprofit organizations, they specifically learned how Twitter can raise awareness of an issue. Students felt that knowing how to create a social media campaign would also help them in their future careers.

“The benefits were learning about another social media platform that I could actually apply to the marketing world.”

Students felt they could directly apply these skills to help nonprofit organizations build awareness and expand their reach. We discussed how branding is both organizational and personal and that it was important to understand both as they developed in their career.

“My understanding of social media will help with the marketing side of any kind of career path within the nonprofit sector. Online presence is very necessary for businesses of any kind. Being able to market a company through social media is a very necessary skill.”

“I think this will allow me to help innovate and expand a nonprofit.”

“Knowing how to do social media will help enhance the public's knowledge of the organizations, what they are accomplishing, and upcoming events.”

The primary challenge expressed by students was the difficulty of attracting followers, especially over a short 4-week campaign. They felt that celebrities have a very public persona and a built-in Twitter base to use for their advocacy that makes it easier for messages to spread. By following others, they were more likely to get people to follow them. Also, if they could link their advocacy campaign to current events, their Tweets were more likely to be noticed. Students also followed politicians on Twitter and tried to engage with them online. They also searched for other hashtags and added those hashtags to their own Tweets. Being strategic is important on Twitter, but this also takes planning and time.

“A personal challenge was remembering to go on the app and tweet. The benefits were raising awareness about a cause and the challenges were remembering to post.”

When asking about the biggest aha moment in the course, students revealed they learned the importance of privacy of information.

“Never really considered how easy it is for companies to access my information. My knowledge about that was very minimal.”

Through the assignments in the class, readings and discussions, students felt they were more aware of how the digital divide affects communities. Furthermore, the use of algorithms is very widespread, and we examined how they reinforce a person's biases, resulting in systemic racism, sexism, and other inequities in society.

“The algorithms! Learning about how biased they are! Because when you think algorithm, you think math, science, and complete fairness. You don’t think about the bias involved.”

“The biggest aha moment I think was definitely being informed about the possible disastrous effects of algorithms. Every time I interact with any organization, corporation, or business, the possible pros and cons are calculated, and I have become more adept to the way of the powers that be.”

Conclusion

The ability to use technology effectively to communicate, manage, and lead public service organizations is increasingly crucial for students. Nonprofit educators have to teach students how to professionally and productively use technology; students’ understanding about technology needs to be expanded from daily entertainment, school work, and jobs for students to be able to evaluate, produce, and communicate information on multiple digital platforms. More important, nonprofit students need to cultivate their ability to assess the social justice of access to technology and to utilize social media for civic engagement and fundraising.

In the Community Organizations in a Digital World course, we designed a series of learning activities, such as a Wikipedia assignment, Twitter campaign, podcast review, book review of *Weapons of Math Destruction*, and infographic assignment, to enhance students’ knowledge about digital platforms and provide students the opportunity to understand the practical implications of technology. Based on the two-stage survey, students’ digital literacy significantly improved when they completed the course. Moreover, students appreciated the importance and the difficulty of using social media in their future career. They also recognized the effect of algorithms and social justice issues of accessing technology. This evidence demonstrates the active learning exercises used in this course successfully improved students’ digital literacy.

The digital world has evolved rapidly. Public service leaders are required to have the ability to adapt to these changes. To prepare students for their future careers, instructors in the nonprofit field also need to monitor the progress of technology and keep incorporating new digital platforms into the classroom. This article provides a series of tangible and effective exercises to cultivate students’ ability to use technologies for nonprofit management. Future classes can adapt the exercises discussed in this article and incorporate newly developed digital tools in the class design to keep nonprofit students up to date and prepare them for their future nonprofit careers.

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Appendix

Course Requirements

Elements of grade	Weight
Reflection Journal	10%
Integration Assignments and Attendance	15%
Assignment #1: Book Review, <i>Weapons of Math Destruction</i>	15%
Assignment #2: Podcast Review	10%
Assignment #3: Twitter Campaign	20%
Assignment #4: Infographic assignment	10%
Assignment #5: Wikipedia Assignment	20%
Total	100%

- **Reflection Journal:** Once a week, you will reflect on your own thoughts and feelings about what we are learning in class, your assignments, your in-class experiences, the readings, or things happening in your life that relate to the course content. This journal is not public and is a personal narrative written from your experience. There may be some class time to work on your journal but expect to complete it on your own if necessary. I will be looking for one entry per week of class, a minimum of 250 words, of reflective writing. This assignment is to reflect on the course content and class each week. It is a way for me not only to check on your learning progress but also to determine ways to improve the course.
- **Integration Assignments and Attendance:** There are required readings each week that we will discuss in class, in addition to having guest speakers, films, videos, and class exercises. Come to class prepared to discuss these readings. You may be assigned homework or to continue the discussion online (integration assignments) based on the readings and exercises that day. You will be graded by completing the assigned task. These assignments will tell me to what extent you are able to integrate readings into our research, discussions, etc. Work cannot be made up for integration assignments (homework) unless you have a medical reason and can provide documentation. I will take attendance every class.
- **Assignment #1 Book Review:** Your book review should be 750 words (double-spaced, 1-inch margins). Spelling, grammar, and format of your paper will account for 20% of your overall grade for this assignment. The other 80% will be the quality and completeness of your review. A book review tells you not only what a book is about but also whether it achieves what it is trying to do. Therefore, a book review is more than a summary of the content (even though this is an important component); it is a critical analysis of the book and your reactions to it. Your written book review should have the following components:
 - Brief overview of the theme and purpose of the book (½ page)
 - Summary of the key concepts from the book (1 page). Paraphrase the information and only use short quotes when absolutely necessary.
 - Select one of the cases she talks about in the book and relate this to your own experience (such as college rankings; 1 page)

- Conclusion (1 page): Give your overall opinion about the book. Is the book easy to read or confusing? Is the book interesting, entertaining, instructive? Does the author support her arguments well? What are the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the book? Whom would you recommend the book to?
- **Assignment #2: Podcast Review:** You can subscribe to podcasts through iTunes or other platforms such as Google Play, Sirius XM, or online through the podcast website. Listen to at least **three** episodes of one of the following podcasts and write a 500-word review of the podcast. It should be clearly organized, be well written, have proper grammar and sentence structure, and be engaging for readers. No citations required. Indicate on the cover page of your assignment the podcast you reviewed, the three episodes you listened to including date and title, and your name.

Podcasts: (select ONE of the following for your review)

- **Spark:** <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/spark-from-cbc-radio/id263242885?mt=2&i=1000396822810>
- **Nonprofits Are Messy:** <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/nonprofits-are-messy-lessons-in-leadership-fundraising/id1088587697?mt=2&i=1000395535384>
- **TED Radio Hour:** <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/ted-radio-hour/id523121474?mt=2&i=1000375100940>
- **The Science of Social Media:** <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/the-science-of-social-media/id1153119945?mt=2>
- **Social Good Instigators:** <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/social-good-instigators-podcast/id1030520794?mt=2>
- **Stanford Social Innovation Review:** <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/podcast/stanford-social-innovation/id990835722?mt=2>
- **Aspen Ideas to Go:** <https://www.aspenideas.org/podcast>
- **Assignment #3: Twitter Campaign:** You will tweet about an issue to raise awareness for an advocacy campaign created by the instructor or a campaign that has already been created over 4 weeks (Weeks 6–9). Your Twitter campaign will be graded based on your tweeting frequency (a minimum of twice per week), the quality of your tweets (thoughtful, engaging, well written), and how many people like and share your tweets. We will incorporate the weekly tweets into the class discussion. You can use your existing Twitter account or create a new one for this assignment. You must include the #nngo350 so I can “see” your tweets and you receive credit. There is a grading rubric in this assignment folder.
- **Assignment #4: Infographic Assignment:** You can select any topic or issue from the class. Upload your image file (JPEG/PNG) in Blackboard.

You can create your infographic in any of the following ways:

1. Use slide presentation software such as PowerPoint or Word to generate infographics.
 - Use a single slide as a canvas to copy and paste pictures, insert shapes, or add text.
 - Use Word processing software in the same way with a few techniques such as disabling text wrapping or moving all graphics and objects to the front of the page.
 - Download SnipIT to then crop anything and turn it into a JPEG: <https://snipit.en.softonic.com/download>
 2. Use Internet applications as simple and powerful resources for infographic composition. Free versions:
 - <https://www.easel.ly/>
 - <https://piktochart.com/>
 - <https://infogram.com/>
- **Assignment #5: Wikipedia Assignment:** Work in groups to edit Wikipedia articles selected by the instructor related to the course content of the course and major. Individually, you will write about your overall experience with Wikipedia, what you learned about Wikipedia in particular and media literacy and research in general. You will work through the assignments in the Wikipedia site and will be graded based on adequate completion of those tasks.
 - 5% Getting started on Wikipedia training
 - 15% Evaluating and editing a Wikipedia article