

Article: “Technology and Teaching: Reacting to 9/11”
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Technology and Teaching: Reacting to 9/11

Charles Hauss, Jed Miller, and Alexandra Samuel

Academics often treat political crises as “teachable moments.” They step back from their syllabi and use breaking events in the “real world” to spark classroom discussions that engage their students and also help them see aspects of the planned course material more clearly.

There has never been a bigger teachable moment than the events of September 11 and their aftermath. In this case, the “moment” isn’t restricted to the classroom. Or, perhaps put positively, our “classroom” includes everyone whose life has been touched by those tragic events.

In this article, we present preliminary results of projects by the two organizations we work for—Search for Common Ground and Web Lab—that encourage online discussions about this teachable moment.

Our inspiration came as the three of us sorted through the flood of emails we got in the days after 9/11. We noticed that the world had changed online as well as offline. Even the non-political listserves and newsgroups we belong to had hundreds of messages about the terrorist attacks. Musical theater fans, people who do agility training for dogs, or fans of the “Computer Guys” radio show (a sort of “Car Talk” for nerds)—it didn’t matter. People seemed desperate for a place to talk and listen and learn.

So, Search for Common Ground and Web Lab independently decided to launch online dialogue

groups on the events of 9/11 and their implications. The two are by no means the only groups using the web to talk about terrorism. They are unique in that they are trying to host a particular type of discussion—dialogue.

In Daniel Yankelovich’s (1985) words, a dialogue is a discussion that is “so active and effective and highly chared that it leaves none of the participants untouched and unchanged.” We encourage dialogues because it is through them that people transform their basic principles, and societies come to what Yankelovich calls “public judgments” that undergird lasting political change in a democratic society.

The focus on dialogue reflects the overlapping missions of the two organizations. Search for Common Ground is the world’s largest NGO working on conflict resolution <www.sfcg.org>. Web Lab is a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing innovative web-based projects that bring fresh perspectives and new voices to the discussion of public issues so that the Internet can be a positive, even transformative, force in people’s lives and in society at large <www.weblab.org>.

Web Lab’s project is based on its Small Group Dialogue technology (SGD). Through the *Give & Take* dialogues, Web Lab offers people a way to discuss the rush of opinions, feelings and concerns we’ve all faced since September, and to explore responses as individuals, as

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members of religious groups, and as Americans. In her controversial *New Yorker* article from September 24, Susan Sontag wrote that the “politics of democracy entails disagreement and promotes candor.”

The SGD technique is designed and built to make candor more comfortable, and to make disagreement safer. It creates in-depth forums, limiting the size and lifespan of discussion groups and fostering commitment and accountability, by highlighting member biographies and high-quality exchanges.

As we write, four beta test groups have just concluded. Each had about 60 members and lasted for about two weeks. Of the almost 240 people who signed up for Web Lab’s Give & Take Dialogues, more than 120 posted at least one message during the two-week event. For our purposes here, perhaps the most important finding from the beta test was that every discussion group included numerous instances where members qualified previous statements, apologized, stepped in to mediate each others’ differences and, in several cases, explicitly acknowledged differences and continued dialogue. Phrases such as “agree to disagree,” “apology accepted,” “I think what Jane meant was . . .,” “I thought about what I said before, and . . .” are

scattered throughout the two-week archive of exchanges. As the groups ended, Web Lab received numerous requests from participants for a means to contact each other outside the forum, so that discussion and newly-formed bonds could continue. Requests like this are compelling evidence that on line dialogues enable real connections and that even this unmoderated forum can provide gentle incentives to seek and hold quality conversation.

Search for Common Ground adapted the Web Lab model for its own purposes—finding areas of agreement. As such, it is using online dialogues on the events of September 11 to develop a prototype for what it calls *Common Ground Discussions* which it will launch on all the issues it works on in the United States. Because it has different and in some ways more ambitious goals than Web Lab, Search’s dialogues are facilitated by trained conflict resolution professionals.

During the course of running its four beta groups, Search for Common Ground settled on three goals, which, in this patriotic time come with a

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USA acronym—to help participants.

- Understand their similarities and differences
- Search for areas of agreement on the issues
- Act on those agreements at the conclusion of the dialogue

Because of those goals, these dialogues have been smaller (about 25 participants each) and have lasted longer (about a month each).

By the end of November, those four test groups had also run their courses. One flopped because people stopped participating. The other three were lively and often had heated exchanges. These were true beta tests in the sense that not all of Search for Common Ground's goals and facilitation procedures were clearly laid out at the beginning. They also used chains of emails rather than the more sophisticated SGD software.

Still, three key conclusions emerged from the groups:

1. Participants were grateful for the opportunity to share their views and learn from their peers.
2. It is not everyone's first instinct to seek common ground, and online dialogues need more active facilitation than do face-to-face ones.
3. Through online dialogues, it is possible to reach agreements to act. Thus, several members of one group agreed to host Jewish-Muslim-Christian dialogues in their communities.

Both experiments also yielded one surprising conclusion. At least some participants felt that they were more honest, open, and willing to try out unconventional ideas online than they were in face-to-face conversation. That may be the case because many people do not feel "safe"

expressing dissenting views during a time of such intense patriotism. That was especially true of the Web Lab dialogues, since most people joined using anonymous screen names. The Search for Common Ground Groups were much less technologically sophisticated and were based largely on Hauss' and Samuel's networks of friends and colleagues. At least half of the participants knew one or the other of them (and thus also included a lot of political scientists). There was little opportunity, too, for anonymity because participants knew each other's email addresses.

The two organizations were satisfied enough with the beta tests to continue and to do so together. On December 5, Web Lab began a two month relationship with MSNBC in which visitors to the latter's news and opinion pages would be invited to join *Give and Take* dialogue groups. Search for Common Ground and Web Lab together will recruit a smaller number of people

to participate in *Common Ground Discussions*. Some of these will be on general reactions to the current crisis; others will focus on specific topics such as the status of Muslims in the United States or the appropriate use of force.

We expect that over a thousand people will have participated in *Give and Take* groups and several hundred will have been in *Common Ground Discussions* by the time you read these words. At that point, we will analyze the results to try to shape both public opinion and the policy debates.

Web Lab will provide the software and technical support for both projects. Hauss and Samuel will swap their conflict resolution hats for their political scientist ones and analyze what occurred. If you would like to see the results, drop any of us an email.

Reference

- Yankelovich, Daniel. 1985. "How the Public Learns the Public's Business." *The Kettering Review*, winter.