



Feedback in a Digital World

Technology is nothing. What's important is that you have a faith in people, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they'll do wonderful things with them.

—Steve Jobs, American entrepreneur and inventor

It was April of 2007. Presidential primary debates were beginning. Even if the major TV networks didn't cover them live, most were available via streaming Internet feeds. A unit on persuasion was next up for the English language arts class, and this seemed like a perfect opportunity to meet students on their favorite playground—the Internet. An online message board was created, and students were instructed on its use. I invited them to view a Democratic Party debate from South Carolina State University on an Internet newsfeed. While watching the debate online, students were to post comments and questions to the message board.

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That night, I sat at my old desktop computer scrutinizing the performances of eight presidential hopefuls, including eventual two-term president Barack Obama. The candidates' rhetoric, however, was far less exciting than the activity on our new classroom message board.

Only about four minutes passed before the first comment was posted. Soon another student joined, followed by a third and a fourth. Ten minutes later, there were 18 eager participants. Their comments and questions were awkward at first (this was, after all, new ground for these teenagers). They posted opinions on Hillary Clinton's hair, Joe Biden's tie, and Mike Gravel's age. Eventually, though, the cafeteria-style discussion turned serious. "He didn't answer the question," one student wrote. "Right," another chimed in, "he was asked about the war in Iraq, and he spent the whole time talking about a woman in New Hampshire." I smiled inwardly as this web-based conversation continued. I posted a couple of questions and responded to several comments, and the message board discussion raged on throughout the 90-minute debate.

The next day, students burst into the classroom chatting about how much fun it was discussing the debate on the Internet. They hungered for similar assignments and requested other message board activities. Students wanted to communicate about learning online, which was amazing considering the circumstances. It was late in the school year, when the only thing most students care about were their upcoming vacations. Had I asked them to watch the debate in class on a television and write about it in a notebook, the activity would have likely been a colossal failure. Given the opportunity, however, to interact with each other using a nonconfrontational platform, my students couldn't get enough. I didn't realize it at that moment, but the message board gave birth to digital feedback in our class and initiated what would later become Assessment 3.0.