BETTER INCITEMENT FOR BETTER HELP

STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF METHODS OF INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

It is quite common to say that the majority of students who truly make use of the help services placed at their disposal are those who, from the start, have the ability to succeed in their studies, while those who experience difficulties often tend not to make use of these services. Thus according to a survey by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2007), 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 attractive methods of dissemination 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) state that it is important to evaluate the extent to which students make use of these help measures before evaluating their effectiveness. Consequently, our research team decided to evaluate the appropriateness of the various methods for disseminating information about these measures, as implemented in CEGEPs. The objective of our study was to determine the most appropriate actions to take in order to better promote help services offered to students experiencing difficulties. This article presents an overview of the study.

▶ A PROFILE OF THE STUDENTS TO TARGET

As part of our study, we distributed a questionnaire to students in two CEGEPS, being careful to take into account both the opinions of students on a regular track and those of students who had learning disorders or were experiencing learning difficulties.[1] Of this sample, 192 college students (67 at Collège Lionel-Groulx and 125 at Cégep de Sherbrooke) responded. Responses were voluntary. The majority of respondents (51%) were in their fourth term of CEGEP; a small minority (4.7%) were in their very first term.

We can conclude from these 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 strategies for studying orally, in writing, or in calculating?", only 32.8% of respondents answered "Never", a large number answered "Sometimes" (49.5%), and the rest answered "Often" (10.4%) or "Very often" (7.3%). Of those who answered that they had "Often" or "Very often" encountered difficulties in their post-secondary studies, 35.5% and 30% respectively had not made use of the help centre in their institution. The figures are the same for students who declared that they suffer from a learning disorder diagnosed by a professional and that they encounter pronounced difficulties: 35% stated they had never been to the study help centre. In addition, several articles on the subject (in particular N'Guyen, Fichte, Barile, and Lévesque, 2006) confirm this finding, showing that more than a third and up to half of students who suffer from a learning disorder or a handicap of some kind do not benefit from the resources that are put at their disposal within their academic institution.

▶ EVALUATING THE METHODS OF DISSEMINATION

The questionnaire we devised was designed to determine students' evaluation of 25 methods of dissemination implemented in colleges and universities or identified in scholarly articles. The central section of the questionnaire, entitled "Methods for Disseminating Information", asked students about their interest in the various methods enumerated, as well as about the frequency (the moments in the term) with which they would prefer these methods to be used. This central section was divided into several parts, the main ones being those that dealt with the methods used by institutions and those used by teachers. The questionnaire also covered the methods used by student associations (notices in the student paper; notices in the student planner; information on the student association Website) and other methods (advertising in nearby cafés and bars, word of mouth by students).

In this central section of the questionnaire, the part headed "Methods Used by Institutions" was the most significant, since it evaluated sixteen different methods: three categories of

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[1] It should be noted that the expression "learning difficulties", which can refer to a variety of problems encountered by students during their academic careers, is very different from the expression "learning disorders", which refers to an actual neurological disorder affecting student success.

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email sent to students; posters; theme days; thematic workshops; the relevant section of the institution's Website; social networking (Twitter, Facebook, etc.); credit courses on learning strategies; viral marketing notices (emails that ask recipients to forward the message to friends); information booths; leaflets on windshields; promotional flyers; online questionnaires; classroom presentations; and notices in the institution's newspaper.

Concerning the central section headed "Methods Used by Teachers", it covered fewer methods. They can be summed up under four headings: notices in course outlines; notices included in instructions for assignments; *contrats d'engagement*; and incitement efforts by teachers during individual meetings or group meetings.

RESULTS RELATED TO HIGH-TECH METHODS OF DISSEMINATION

At the outset, we were inclined to think that high-tech methods of dissemination would prove to be the most effective and popular for reaching CEGEP students; but it became clear that this is not the case.

In recent years, many researchers have examined what might be called "the myth of the paperless office" (Sellen and Harper, 2002) and the failure to materialize of a way of working wholly dominated by technology (Uyttebrouck, 2005). The fact is,

there is much less unanimity among students about so called hi-tech methods than we would have thought. While some attribute this phenomenon to paper's greater ease of handling as compared with digital media, we think another consideration, that of the compartmentalization of the different spheres of a student's life, should not be overlooked.

The methods of dissemination least popular among students reveal that, besides the high-tech/traditional divide in methods of dissemination, there exists a distinction between students' personal and academic lives. Most of the methods of dissemination that proved unpopular can be viewed as being more closely associated with students' personal lives: brief notices via social media used by students (66.7% unfavourable); viral marketing (78.6% unfavourable); leaflets on windshields (87% unfavourable); and ads in neighbourhood bars and cafés (73% unfavourable).

Conversely, the methods most popular among students are already an integral part of the academic sphere: email messages, whether in the form of notices urging students to use specific services in their institution (83.3% favourable) or in the form of message addressed to students to verify whether they have been diagnosed with learning difficulties (54.2%); posters (67.2%); a section of the institution's Website (73.4% popular); information booths (64.1%); and classroom presentations (70.8%).

LEVELS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF METHODS OF DISSEMINATION, BY RESPONDENT
(Only the methods deemed of interest by more than 50% of respondents are presented here.)
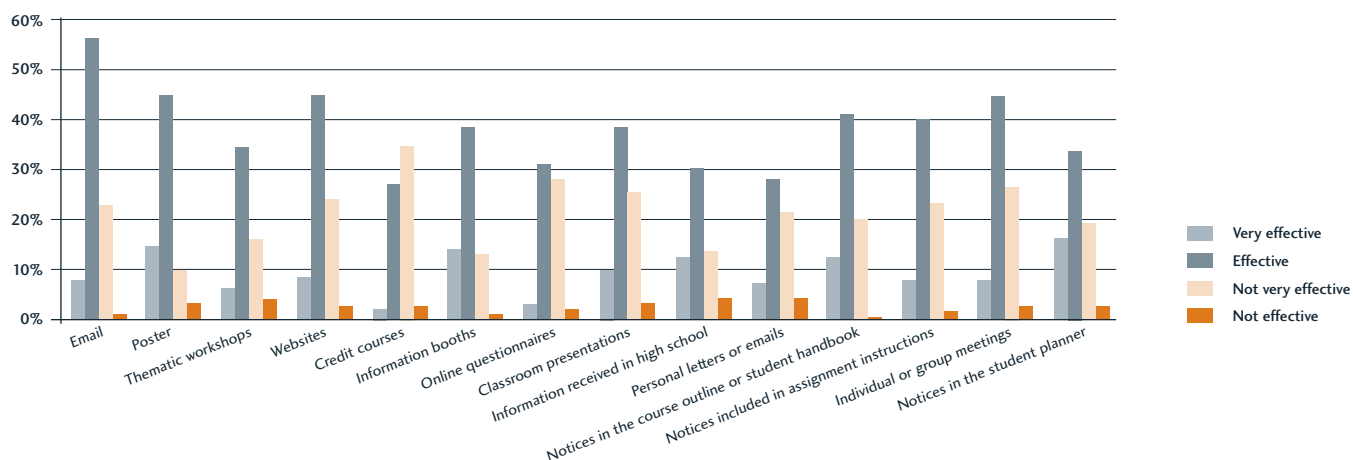
These results show that it is important to students to maintain a separation between private and public space. On this score, email, seemingly the big winner among methods of dissemination, is deemed a part of the academic sphere and is not, as might have been thought, perceived as an intrusion into students' private lives. It has now become a part of regular practice to use email as a tool for work and communicating with the teacher; and most students have both a specific email account linked to their educational institutions (MIO, Léa, or COLNET, for example) and a personal email account.

RESULTS RELATED TO TRADITIONAL (HUMAN) METHODS OF DISSEMINATION

It is not surprising that a large number of respondents said they prefer it when teachers encourage their use of help centres, whether teachers do so directly (person to person) or indirectly (through the course outline). In this vein, Larue and Hrimech (2009) have already written that:

> "in order for students to be convinced of the benefits they can obtain [from the help put at their disposal]…, teachers must take into account, during their course preparation, what it is that motivates students; and that is often passing the exam."

And for students, following the teacher's advice to the letter is what ensures passing an exam… As well, "human techniques" make students feel they are not travelling a "standardized path to success" (Ibid, 2009), but rather are following an approach adapted to their needs as learners, needs well known to the teacher.

RESULTS RELATED TO THE TIMING OF THE DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

Regarding the evaluation of the moments in the term and types of incitement, although students preferred incitements at the beginning of term to be general, they seemed to want more personal incitements at critical moments. On one hand, they preferred being informed of help resources by various methods, all of them general, at the beginning of the term: 52.6% of students said they wished to receive a notice in the course outline, 49% preferred receiving an email and having an information booth in their CEGEP, and 39.6% wished to attend classroom presentations on the various services available. On the other hand, "critical moments" constitute the other periods when students wished to be approached. In responding to an open question asking them to define what they considered a "critical moment", many wrote that this is the moment when they begin to sense failure, generally just

after mid-term and just before the end of term. Accordingly, we must conclude that a large number of students were expressing 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 incited to turn to help services by means that are sometimes more personal: while 32.3% of students wished to receive an email at this time and 27.1% respond to posters, it is still the case that 29.7% would like teachers to use instructions for assignments during this period to incite students to go to the help centre, and 33.9% would like teachers to use individual meetings to incite students to ask for help.

> *Most of the methods of dissemination that proved unpopular can be viewed as being more closely associated with students' personal lives.*

Students' preferences as to the timing of the dissemination of information reveals what Romainville (1993) has referred to as an "educational misunderstanding", namely, the fact that students are generally seeking more immediate success while teachers are aiming for the long-term development of students' competencies. The fundamental difference between students who deem it appropriate to receive information and, accordingly, assistance at the beginning of term and those who prefer receiving it at critical moments and even sometimes during final exams, relates to the goals they are contemplating. While the first group pursues a mastery goal —by means of which they hope to *develop* competency — the second group pursues a performance goal — by means of which they hope to *demonstrate* competency. As well, ultimately some may make a strategic retreat, seeking rather to avoid demonstrating their incompetence.

▶ SUMMARY

Our study brought to light the fact that, although they are part of a society in which new technologies are taking on increasing importance, students do not systematically follow that trend. It is important to the students to preserve a watertight separation between their academic and personal spheres. They also seem to be more inclined to go to study help centres when recommendations to do so come directly from their teachers. They appreciate personalized approaches, whether by way of email, comments on assignments, or meetings with teachers.

Although the students in our sample agreed on the importance of having help resources at their disposal and on the need for these services to be presented to them via methods of

information dissemination, some remained concerned about what they call "hype". Excess redundancy in the motivational messages sent out could thus have the effect of repelling some students; and that is clearly not desirable. One of the answers to our questionnaire provides compelling proof of this, not only through its content, but in particular through the way the student expresses herself:

> If you push people to hard to go, they wont go. I myself got lots of letters telling me to go to the help centre for writing skills and I didnt go, I figgered it out by myself and I past. Often its pride that kicks in....[2]

The greatest danger of having an excessive variety of methods of dissemination would appear to be that of overwhelming students with these messages of incitement and thus achieving the opposite of the desired effect — which could have unfortunate consequences in some cases. ◗

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[2] The comment in the original French, as made by one of the questionnaire respondents, featured numerous grammatical and spelling errors. The translation presented here reflects an effort to convey the effect of those errors.