



# Understanding Private Discourse in an Online Public Forum

*Clare Brett and Jim Herwitt, IKIT Summer Institute 2010.*



# Data Source

- ◆ 12 Graduate-level OISE courses taught by 10 instructors.
- ◆ Instructor interviews;
- ◆ Students interviews
- ◆ Tracking data
- ◆ Database notes



An accidental study.



# Initial Goal: Allow people to privately save in-progress drafts of notes.

## What Jim Hewitt sees:

- ☆ [Bios, Learner Centered, Visuals & Play](#) by Doris Calvin, #154, Today, 4:23 PM
  - ☆ [Some thoughts...](#) by Carl Pride, #157, Today, 4:26 PM
- ☆ [Self-regulated learning and Online learning](#) by Carl Pride, #156, Today, 4:25 PM
- ☆ [My current understanding \(private\)](#) by Jim Hewitt, #158, Today, 4:28 PM

## What everyone else in the class sees:

- ☆ [Bios, Learner Centered, Visuals & Play](#) by Doris Calvin, #154, Today, 4:23 PM
  - ☆ [Some thoughts...](#) by Carl Pride, #157, Today, 4:26 PM
- ☆ [Self-regulated learning and Online learning](#) by Carl Pride, #156, Today, 4:25 PM



# Surprising Development #1

- ◆ Instructors began writing co-authored “Private” notes to provide private “embedded” feedback to individual students.



# Private Co-Authored Notes

## What the Instructor and the student (Carl) see:

- ☆ [Bios, Learner Centered, Visuals & Play](#) by Doris Calvin, #154, Today, 4:23 PM
  - ☆ [Some thoughts...](#) by Carl Pride, #157, Today, 4:26 PM
- ☆ [Self-regulated learning and Online learning](#) by Carl Pride, #156, Today, 4:25 PM
  - ☆ [Nice work Carl! \(private\)](#) by Instructor and coauthors, #161, Today, 4:46 PM

## What the rest of the class sees:

- ☆ [Bios, Learner Centered, Visuals & Play](#) by Doris Calvin, #154, Today, 4:23 PM
  - ☆ [Some thoughts...](#) by Carl Pride, #157, Today, 4:26 PM
- ☆ [Self-regulated learning and Online learning](#) by Carl Pride, #156, Today, 4:25 PM



# Instructor Interviews

- ◆ **Why provide private feedback to students? Some responses:**
  - ◆ Public criticism (and even praise!) embarrass some students;
  - ◆ One instructor felt that instructor responses sometimes become a “prize” sought by students. This produces competitiveness among learners. He wanted students to focus on ideas instead.
  - ◆ One instructor wanted to minimize his online presence. He wanted the student discussion to be the focus of attention.
  - ◆ One instructor viewed it as “behind-the-scenes coaching”.



# Instructor Interviews

- ◆ **Why didn't the instructors provide private feedback via email?**
- ◆ Using private notes for communication purposes was viewed as advantageous because it maintained a contextual link with the student's online work.
- ◆ Instructors felt embedded comments were superior to email because that they could examine a view and identify all of the feedback that he or she had given individuals. They could also determine whether or not students had read their feedback.



# Example:

- ☆ [Research Questions](#) by Monica Resendes, #163, Sat January 16, 2010, 11:42 AM
  - ☆ [Re. Research Questions \(private\)](#) by Jim Hewitt and coauthors, #172, Sat January 16, 2010, 12:45 PM
  - ☆ [Great questions](#) by Tonya Noel, #179, Sat January 16, 2010, 11:03 PM
    - ☆ [frameworks and methodologies \(and the Truth!\)](#) by Monica Resendes, #205, Mon January 18, 2010, 10:26 PM
- ☆ [Research Approach Decisions](#) by Selina Glynn, #165, Tue January 19, 2010, 3:12 PM
  - ☆ [Re. Research Questions \(private\)](#) by Jim Hewitt and coauthors, #173, Sat January 16, 2010, 12:57 PM
  - ☆ [Well done.](#) by Tonya Noel, #178, Sat January 16, 2010, 10:56 PM
- ☆ [qualitative/quantitative questions](#) by Rena Billimoria, #190, Sun January 17, 2010, 4:55 PM
  - ☆ [HR/\\$ questions](#) by Tonya Noel, #195, Sun January 17, 2010, 8:34 PM
  - ☆ [Question 5 quantitative approach](#) by Selina Glynn, #197, Sun January 17, 2010, 9:13 PM
    - ☆ [thanks!](#) by Rena Billimoria, #198, Sun January 17, 2010, 10:42 PM
- ☆ [Quantitative and Qualitative questions](#) by Roger Bernardes, #193, Sun January 17, 2010, 6:36 PM
  - ☆ [Wonderful Examples](#) by Tonya Noel, #194, Sun January 17, 2010, 8:24 PM
  - ☆ [Re. Quantative and Qualitative](#) by Jim Hewitt, #216, Tue January 19, 2010, 3:43 PM
  - ☆ [Nicely done. \(private\)](#) by Jim Hewitt and coauthors, #217, Tue January 19, 2010, 3:44 PM



# Surprising Development #2

- ◆ Students began writing co-authored “Private” notes to each other.





# Student Interviews

- ◆ **Why write private build-ons to other students?**
  - ◆ One student described private notes as a way of offering support and thanks without “cluttering up” the database with commentary that added little in the way of new thinking. They felt this increased a sense of social cohesion.
  - ◆ Students felt that private notes allowed them to ask questions or share information that was unrelated to actual course content.



# Surprising Development #3

- ◆ Students started using “Private” + “Coauthored” to have private group discussions with each other.





# One Instructor's Course

- ◆ **An Example:** At the conclusions of a recent graduate course, it was discovered that students were using “Private” + “Coauthorship” to privately work on group projects “behind the scenes”. The course instructor was unaware that these discussions were going on. These private discussions collectively contained more than 300 notes.



# Student Interviews: Private Groups

- ◆ What did students feel were the advantages of private group discussions?
- ◆ Private discussions were viewed as a safer place to ask questions within a smaller committed and trusted group.
- ◆ Private discussions were viewed as a safer space in which to acknowledge confusion, or fear, or uncertainty. e.g., “I am totally confused.” (Group members responded to this note with a three-note set of helpful explanations).
- ◆ Student felt they could adopt a more informal tone in private discussions.



# Student Interviews: Private Groups

- ◆ **What are the advantages of private group discussion? (cont'd)**
- ◆ Students used private discussions to explain themselves, for example, sharing what had been going on in their lives that was affecting their work plans or timetables.
- ◆ Private discussions provide a location for groups to plan and negotiate aspects of collaborative assignments;
- ◆ The private discussions we examined tend to be characterized by an unusually high number of notes that contain peer support / encouragement.



**Summary:** What are the potential advantages of supporting private discourse in a public online forum?



# Summary

- ◆ **Allows instructors to provide private individual feedback without distracting from the student-led discourse;**
- ◆ **Embedded nature of private comments (i.e., not email) maintains contextual information.**
- ◆ **Students and instructors can make supportive comments (that contain little of substance in the way of new ideas) without cluttering up the database. Improves social cohesion.**
- ◆ **Students felt safer asking questions, admitting confusion, offering ideas in a private, small group format.**



# Implications and Questions

- ◆ Is there a developmental relationship between Idea improvement and community size?
- ◆ Can large communities inhibit the collaborative development of Ideas? (e.g., the Bystander effect)
- ◆ Should Knowledge Forum provide improved functionality for private communication and the spontaneous formation of private subgroups?