Wayin—A New Tool for Student Engagement

By Kathryn Cramer Brownell

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"Don't Lecture Me," declared one recent article from Mindshift.com. It highlighted several professors at the University of Maryland and Harvard University who have shifted away from traditional lecture halls to more peer-based instruction and discussion.1 University administrators and college professors have both started to question the age-old lecture hall format of college courses. Educational studies and recent online journal articles have highlighted the problems inherent in an hour and a half lecture course where the professor has a one-way conversation with college students, telling them a narrative, or explaining a problem and its solutions.

The former president of Harvard recently issued a call to action to develop new educational strategies to enhance opportunities for critical thinking and analysis rather than rote memorization. In his article in the *Boston Globe,* former Harvard President Derek Bok urged top universities to "lecture less and experiment with new, more active methods of instruction" and to also explore "how technology can be used to engage student interest and help them progress."[2]

Enter Wayin™

For those educators looking for innovative ways to use new technology to transform the classroom into a more interactive and vibrant place, you have a friend and a potential solution in Wayin. Eager to develop innovative teaching technologies that would move my American history courses away from a one-sided lecture format, I worked with Wayin developers to brainstorm on the potential of their newly-created platform to enhance student learning. Wayin is based on various "games," or polling questions, which I first feared would only be a superficial way to engage students. I found, though, that embedded within the "fun" are great opportunities to make students evaluate scholarly arguments and prepare for classroom discussions.

This past semester, I incorporated Wayin into my "History of the American Presidency" lecture course. With forty students, the course was larger than a normal discussion-based seminar, so student engagement presented an interesting challenge, one I was determined to take on. My goal for the semester: to make the course an active exploration of American political history while also holding students accountable not just to me, but also to each other.

Studies have shown that student retention is at its best when students can explain their ideas and apply concepts to real-life situations.[3] Wayin provided the forum to facilitate this style of learning while also

capitalizing on the benefits of a visual-based learning style. On Wayin's website, I created an online "channel" for the course, and then had each of my students "follow" this channel. They could interact with it either on the internet via their laptops or on Wayin's free smartphone app. I was engaging my students in a way that was already second nature to them and just to make sure they stayed focused, I made this participation worth 15% of their semester grade.

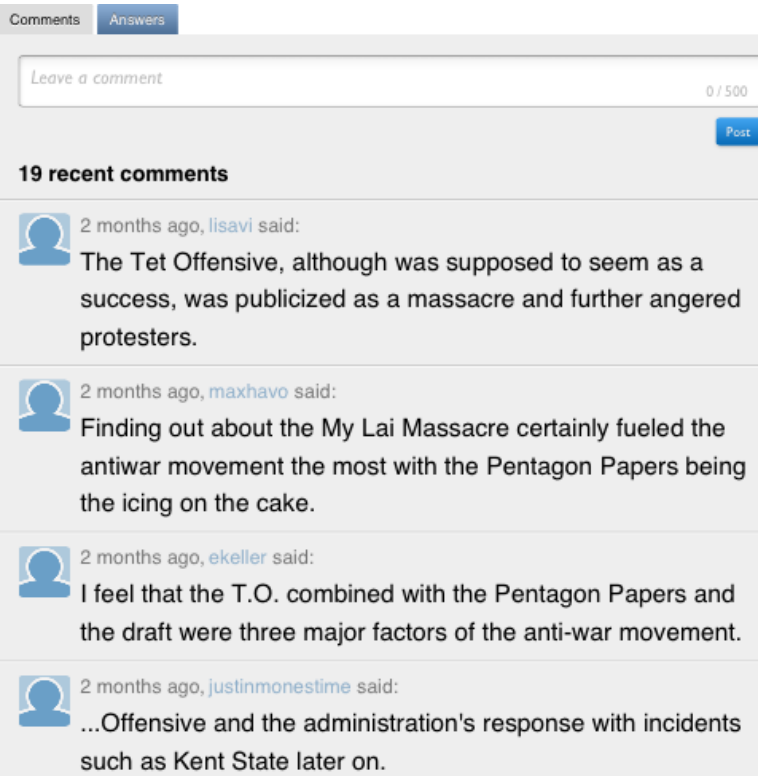
Each week I proposed questions based on the readings, which I then embedded in relevant historical images (very easy to do on Wayin). The students would choose one of four potential answers. While Wayin allows for a right/wrong format, I asked only opinion-based questions to encourage students to develop historical arguments about what drove certain political, social, cultural, or economic developments in American history. Students were forced to consider questions that the lecture material would also address, ultimately integrating class discussion within the lecture. As one student observed, the questions prepared students for a discussion as "it caused less wasted time because we could jump straight into discussion."

Ultimately, posing questions in advance—for my American presidency course the questions could range from "Did the New Deal prolong the Great Depression" or "What event marked the beginning of the Cold War?"—allowed students to construct a historical argument and come to class prepared to defend this interpretation with specific facts. They knew they couldn't simply check a box and be done with it.

Student Engagement

As the course progressed, students started to research into particular aspects of the American presidency. They would create their own Wayin question that they would present to the class, along with their research. This activity prompted them to think about the material in exactly the way any professor wants them to; *what are the big issues here, and how do I feel about them?* This led to important student-based discussions that ranged from exploring the impact of the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act to assessing Richard Nixon's victory in the 1972 election or evaluating Jimmy Carter's human rights foreign policy.

Students relied on one another to present well-crafted questions and sufficient research to explore the various interpretations of historical events.



At the start of every class I would project my Wayin channel up on a big screen where we could all see how each student answered as well as the aggregate opinion of the class. This made for lively debates right off the bat. Each answer reflected a certain historical argument or interpretation about significant scholarly questions ranging from the rise of national security state to the impact of the 1960 television debates or the roots of the Vietnam War. Most importantly, students knew to come prepared to defend their choices. I could easily say, "Peter, you thought it was wrong for Truman to drop the bomb. Tell us a little about your thinking..."—a much preferable strategy to, "Peter, we haven't heard from you in a while."

Results

The end result? Students participated. They debated with one another, researched different views, and stood eager to share their opinions with the class. In the eyes of one student, Wayin "allowed for the classroom to not be restricted as simply a lecture hall." Instead, the program transformed the classroom "into a place of friendly debate and conversation."

In another course where I did not use Wayin and instead relied on a more traditional lecture/discussion format, about 15% -20% of students regularly contributed to discussion. In my American Presidency course 40%-50% actively participated in course discussions—rates of participation I have not been able to achieve before.

Moreover, for those students intimidated by speaking up in a large lecture hall, the comment section of each of the question allowed for them to support their argument or offer an alternative perspective that I could then address through lecture. I could also gauge student understanding of the material before the

class, and could redirect the class material each week to focus on a new historical lens that interested students. As one student explained, having students research a topic, develop a historical question, and then lead classroom discussion made the course address important historical themes through "an endless opportunity of debate, which is led by students and involves students."

Wayin provided a new forum for me to answer the call for more engaging and participatory classrooms, and after just one semester, I look forward to the educational future of this social media. Throughout the semester, I worked closely with Scott McNealy, who is the founder of the online educational resource curriki.com (and the former CEO of Sun Microsystems) and Scott Johnston, who was an adjunct professor at Yale. As the founders of Wayin, both have shown their commitment to making Wayin an effective educational tool and have plans for expanding its educational features in the upcoming months.

As the company releases new features, its integration into the classroom holds potential to enhance learning and encourage scholarly analysis in alternative ways. As their user base grows, opportunities abound for teachers to combine Wayin's entertaining forum with academic information that will give substance to polling questions and provide a basis for educational debates and discussions outside the classroom.

Next Semester

Next semester, I plan to take advantage of Wayin's links with other social media forums and integrate my questions into a course Facebook page, a simple task that takes only a click. With a teaching assistant, I plan to use Wayin's live event feature, whereby my teaching assistant can pose discussion questions in real time during lectures and get immediate responses to media clips or lecture material. For large lecture classes, frequently necessary in major research universities like Boston University, the program will break down the barriers of communication inherent in these highly populated lecture halls. Moreover, during an election year, my political history courses can pose questions about live televised debates or campaign events *as they happen* and give students credit for participation outside the classroom.

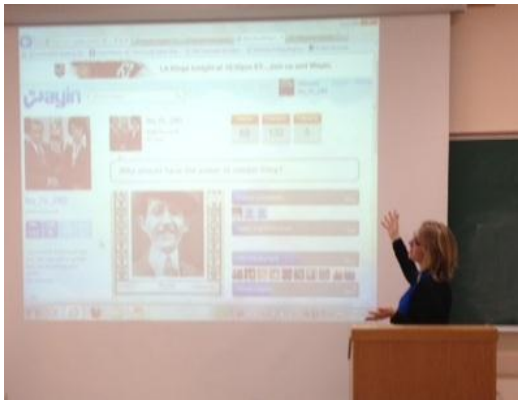
For history courses, the program helped students learn about historiographic debates in a way that wasn't simply "regurgitation education," as a high school teacher of mine used to put it. Rather, they developed their own perspectives about how different events fit into broader narratives of cultural, economic, social development. I quickly learned about the positive results of abandoning the traditional lecture format and focusing instead on guiding student discussions and presentations to have them "discover" important historical trends. Rather than simply lecturing the students on the impact of Watergate or the "rise of the imperial presidency," I used Wayin to craft questions that would create a scholarly debate among the students where the students themselves crafted different interpretations, created their own analysis of what drove certain historical events, and identified key themes of American history.

While history was a natural fit, Wayin holds potential appeal across academic disciplines at a university, and its accessibility through smart phones and online means that students can immediately answer questions posed during lectures. While showing similarities with the more science-based "clicker" programs, Wayin provides more opportunities for engagement with its comment section, and its ability to create questions from pictures and videos. Another advantage over clickers is that engagement can continue all week long, not simply during class. And, importantly, Wayin is completely free. No need for department budgets to be used on clickers which can be easily lost.

My experience has shown me that the explosion of online resources, the technological innovations of computer programs, and the reach of social media do not mean the end of the traditional classroom. Rather, new technologies can transform lecture halls into something new, something better.

As one student explained, "great classroom experiences are rare. Without fail the best ones revolve around two things, an engaging lecturer and an energized student discussion."

Wayin has introduced an exciting teaching tool that has the potential to enhance the content of the lecture material and propel university lecture halls into the digital age by making the college classroom collaborative, educational, and, dare I say it, fun.



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1 Emily Hanford, "Don't Lecture Me: Rethinking How College Students Learn," Sep 13, 2011, http://mindshift.kqed.org/2011/09/dont-lecture-me-rethinking-how-college-students-learn/ (Accessed 12/1/2011)

2 Derek Bok, "Harvard Can Provide Educational Leadership," Boston Globe, Oct 16, 2011.

3 Sciences in particular have pushed this trend for over a decade, see: Hanford, "Don't Lecture Me," Shri Ramaswamy, Ilene Harris, and Ulrike Tschimer, "Student Peer Teaching: An Innovative Approach to Instruction in Science and Engineering Education," Journal of Science Education and Technology, Vol. 10, No.2, June 2001.

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