

# Yellowdig and Pages

Encouraging Engagement and Analytical Thinking

## Context

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For my Sociology 202: Social Problems course project, we incorporated Yellowdig and Canvas Pages for student research projects. The main objectives for this project are increasing student engagement; encouraging students to apply theories and concepts from the course to real-world examples; and encouraging critical thinking through the course's research project.

Sociology 202 is an introductory and large-lecture course, which presents several inherent challenges. As a course that often has more than 110 students and no discussion sections, it can be hard to foster discussion. We have some large-group discussions and small-group work, but with so many students, having sustained discussions or participating regularly can be daunting for many students. When I submitted my proposal, I had originally wanted to more fully incorporate Canvas discussion boards into the course as a way to have students interact with each other outside of class and then use some of those outside discussion points to spark conversation in class. Early on in this project, it became apparent that Yellowdig would be a more dynamic, user-friendly format for both the teaching staff and students.

A second goal of these discussions is for students to apply course ideas to real-world examples. The study of social problems in sociology is very conceptual and often involves critically assessing media messages. Yellowdig will be a way for students to find and share their own illustrative, real-world examples of what they are learning in class. The first Yellowdig discussion this quarter has students finding examples of a group or person using "facts" to try to convince others that a social issue is problematic (e.g., a news segment). Student responses also allow me to identify issues in understanding course materials, which I can address in lecture.

Students will be encouraged to comment on other students' posts, challenging them to discuss their opinions regarding current social issues. For example, during our section on bullying, students will discuss online how schools and lawmakers should best try to prevent or address bullying among young people. These Yellowdig discussions will also help students prepare for exams, as well as their final project for the course—a research project analyzing how a social condition has come to be defined as a social problem.

In past quarters, students have done traditional research papers. Because this is an introductory-level course, this paper assignment was often challenging since it is a very conceptual task—deconstructing why a certain social condition (e.g., bullying or mass incarceration) has come to be defined as a social problem (something considered harmful in society). This analysis involves bringing together research on the problem itself (such as

statistics on the topic), media criticism, academic research and commentary, political dialogues, and historical understandings of the social issue. To make the project more dynamic this quarter, students will be constructing webpages using the Canvas Pages feature. These pages will teach the viewer why a social issue has come to be defined as a social problem. Students will integrate videos and interactive features in building their Pages. I believe this format will push students to think more analytically about their social problem and to strategically choose evidence to help build their argument. The webpage aspect will also encourage and challenge students to present a sophisticated analysis in a coherent, clear, and engaging manner.

## Project

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The Canvas project for the class is twofold:

1. Incorporating Yellowdig as part of participation. The innovative component of using Yellowdig is to go beyond basic discussion board models where students post but do not really engage with each other. Since Yellowdig resembles social media sites like Facebook, hopefully it will add a more social and interactive dimension to the course.
2. Students (working independently or in groups of two) will do nontraditional research papers by building a webpage using the Canvas Pages feature. The project format is intended to help students analytically develop well-supported arguments for their projects. In addition, being able to visually present an idea or argument is important in our social media- and computer-based world. Students will learn many practical skills—everything from how to develop effective Prezi and PowerPoint presentations and produce short videos to how to create tables and integrate text into a visual presentation.

## Objectives & Outcomes

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The course is now under way. Students have seemed receptive to using Canvas and Yellowdig for assignments. Soon, we are going to start discussing the research project webpages.

## Results

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I anticipate that many students will be more engaged in the Yellowdig discussions than in prior years where I relied on discussion boards. With the Pages research project, I hope that students will take this opportunity to push themselves to create webpages that are both educational and sociological. I do think projects overall will be more analytical than when I used a more traditional research paper format, but I do anticipate that there will be a range in the technical sophistication of incorporating apps, videos, interactive features, etc. Hopefully students who are not as comfortable with developing presentations in programs like PowerPoint or using app-based tools will learn more about how to better use digital resources in creating presentations.

## Lessons Learned

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I definitely plan on using these assignments again when I teach Social Problems next year, so part of the project for me will be assessing student performance over the course of the quarter and gauging feedback (students will have the opportunity at the end of the quarter to tell us what they liked and did not like about Yellowdig and Canvas Pages).