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Using Video to Connect Learners in the Online Course

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Abstract

One potential drawback to online learning is that geographically dispersed students can feel isolated, leading to negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration (Rovai, 2007; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). However, faculty can create an environment of personal connection and support simply by using communication channels in which students can hear and see their instructor and fellow students. Research shows that incorporating video into the online classroom contributes to students' more positive feelings about the learning experience (Whipp & Lorentz, 2009). City University of Seattle's academic technology support staff encourages instructors to add multimedia to their online courses as a way of reaching their students more directly. The support staff recommends several specific methods, including recording lectures and allowing students to record their own presentations, creating short announcement videos, and hosting web conferencing sessions. This chapter

will outline these practices – as well as look to future best practices – and present easy ways for instructors to use video in the online classroom to increase student engagement and success.

Using Video to Connect Learners in the Online Course

In the mid-twentieth century, the prevailing concept of learning in the United States emphasized repeated practice of isolated facts, concepts, and theories (Skinner, 1968; Bloom, 1971). Over time, the controlled environments and modeled processes of demonstration and repetition began to be criticized as inadequate education, and in response, new standards were developed that stressed deeper understanding of concepts and the relationships across subject areas to connect learning with personal experience and authentic contexts (Resnick, 1987). More recently, educational practices are again being upended by the explosion of online education, from K-12 through doctoral studies.

While online learning has many advantages, one potential drawback is that personal connections can suffer at the expense of isolated facts and concepts (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Research shows that students in online courses often feel isolated, causing anxiety and other negative emotions about the course, the content, and the instructors (Rovai, 2007; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). To maximize student engagement, instructors can find ways to combat student isolation and negative feelings about the course. Fortunately, there are helpful tools and strategies to reduce students' feelings of isolation by increasing the social presence of the faculty and fellow students (Rovai, 2007; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012).

Social presence in distance learning is a prime indicator for student satisfaction and perceived academic outcomes (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Weinel Bannert, Zumbach, Hoppe, & Malzahn, 2011; Whipp & Lorentz, 2009). By adding video to online courses, thus allowing students to hear and see their instructor and fellow learners, the instructor creates an environment where the student feels connection to both faculty and peers and contributes to students' increased learning and positive feelings about the course. This chapter presents several techniques and best practices for achieving these goals.

Video Technologies

Along with the rise of online learning, new video technologies emerged that have streamlined the processes of media creation and distribution at low cost. YouTube now tallies over 300 hours of video uploaded every minute by over one billion members (YouTube, n.d.). Equally intriguing is that mobile devices count for half of all media viewed on their service, suggesting that the portability of media assets is accelerating. Capturing, editing, and distributing video content is now in the hands of millions of people, marking the shift from media literacy to media fluency.

This comparative ease of video creation (rather than only consumption) greatly benefits instructors and students in higher education at the very moment when it is most needed. At City University of Seattle, many instructors have found that recording lectures and posting them in their online courses requires virtually no expertise in managing, editing, or publishing video files; instead, their efforts are simply focused on creating video content for their students to watch (and re-watch, if necessary) at their convenience. Adding "lecture capture" technology—that is, simultaneously recording the instructor's voice, video image, and computer desktop—allows instructors to demonstrate key concepts or review upcoming assignments in addition to recording traditional lectures. Furthermore, students can take advantage of the same lecture capture software to record presentations of their own, so it is not only the instructor who becomes more "real" to them but also their classmates. Seeing others present their work increases the students' sense of connection with peers because it is not only academic content but also social presence being shared.

Example Strategies for Using Video

An instructor in the City University of Seattle School of Management, for example, uses lecture capture to narrate key accounting practices as he shows his work in spreadsheets on camera. Because the instructor is talking through each problem, the concepts become more tangible than the static examples in the textbook. Research indicates that students respond better to instruction when they feel they are spoken to directly, particularly in a conversational rather than a formal style (Smith & Smith, 2012), and the accounting professor exemplifies this practice even in the online

environment. In his videos, his students see both his personality and his passion for teaching. Lecture capture thus achieves two important goals: it has been consistently shown to raise test scores (Sloan & Lewis, 2014; Terry, Macy, Clark, & Sanders, 2015), while at the same time it increases awareness of the instructor as a supportive leader committed to the students' success.

Another way to add video to the online course to enhance student learning and engagement is for instructors to record themselves in environments other than the classroom. Lauren Resnick contended that out-of-school thinking engages the physical world more than in-school thinking: "Outside school, actions are intimately connected with objects and events... School learning, by contrast, is mostly symbol-based... connections to the events and objects symbolized are often lost" (Resnick, 1987, p. 14). Thus, it is important to extend the classroom experience beyond traditional physical environments (Witfelt, 2000). Fortunately, video technologies have the potential to do just that, by capturing real-world events and situations for application to in-class education.

An instructor in the City University of Seattle Albright School of Education, acknowledging this, uses videos to connect with her students through weekly "check in" videos. In these videos, she films herself presenting information pertinent to that week of the course, including feedback on the previous week's work, what they will be covering during the upcoming week, and topics and ideas she would like students to focus on and consider throughout the course. On camera, she is able to compress a lot of information into personable and easy-to-digest segments. Students require much less clarification and take in her words more naturally than if she had typed them out as a course announcement or email.

Discussion on Using Video in the Online Classroom

Research supports this idea that text-based communications lack the information-rich social cues that come with hearing a voice and seeing a face and thus are prone to misinterpretation (Curtis & Lawson, 1999). Using only text-based teaching techniques greatly limits the ways instructors can reach their students, particularly in the online class. In the education instructor's videos, she is communicating more than just words. She is turning weekly announcements into a social communication, as her

students can see and hear her talk. By contributing to her social presence online, she appears more approachable and makes her students feel more connected to her. She is also communicating through her appearance and demeanor: by dressing and speaking professionally, she is modeling behaviors she would like to impart to her students. Such modeling is very difficult to teach through text alone. Thus, this instructor successfully uses video to create different types of learning opportunities as well as to reach students with a wider variety of learning styles, while at the same time showing her personality and caring for the students.

Very little is needed in the way of specialized video equipment to create the types of videos discussed above. Lecture capture software requires a webcam, either built into the instructor's laptop or connected via USB to their PC. Creating videos like our education instructor's video does require a video camera, but many still-image cameras can record video, as well as most smartphones and tablets. Academic technology support staff offer both instructors and students guidance and support in creating video content, from selecting the appropriate software for a specific project to demonstrating video editing and publishing options.

To maximize success, instructors can start with a small project before committing to a multi-part series or high-stakes event. Simply taking the first step and posting a short video for students starts to generate social presence and awareness in the online class. If an instructor has created several videos, it can be most effective to require students to watch the first video early in the quarter to establish the value of the videos. This practice has been shown to increase students' voluntary consumption of video content later in the course (Sloan & Lewis, 2014).

Future applications of video in online courses can include wider adoption of short videos embedded in context within the online course. For example, a small thumbnail of instructor video can be inserted in any otherwise text-based announcement, introduction, or assignment—no separate "Videos" section is needed. Another important future application is video feedback on course assignments. Students absorb both positive and negative feedback more effectively when they hear it directly from their instructor than when they skim text comments attached to their assignments and papers (Jones, Georgiades, & Gunson, 2012). In addition, Jones, Georgiades, and Gunson found that instructors' comments are perceived as more personalized on video, and students better understand their strengths as well as areas to focus on in the future.

Conclusion

The increasing ease of creating videos dovetails with an increasing need (and expectation) on the part of students in online courses for personal connection, social engagement, and shared experience with their instructors and classmates. Educational practices have been disrupted in the past by new understanding of human behavior and learning, and the rapid expansion of online education has stimulated similar upheaval, development, and adaptation. To take advantage of online education's great strengths, its potential pitfalls must be addressed. Minimizing students' feelings of isolation and anxiety by promoting social presence and personalization requires new instructional tools in the online environment. Adding video allows instructors to speak directly to students—and allows students to speak to one another—to increase positive feelings about the course and to promote deeper engagement.

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