Chapter 6

The Human Element: Fostering Instructor Presence through Online Instructional Videos

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ABSTRACT

One of the affordances of instructional videos in online courses is that they provide the opportunity for faculty to increase their instructor presence in asynchronous learning environments. This chapter draws upon qualitative interview data collected from student perspectives about their experiences with online course media, and discusses emergent themes from student interviews related to increased instructor presence such as trustworthiness (social context, branding, production values, nonverbal communication), personalization (humor, colloquial language), and feedback. That is, videos that encompassed these qualities were evaluated and discussed in ways that reflected more social presence (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014) and instructor immediacy (Baker, 2010), and less social distance (Magee & Smith, 2013). Our findings suggest that online instructional videos can be an effective tool to reduce social distance between instructors and students. This chapter concludes with suggestions for online education practitioners on how to produce and use instructional videos to increase instructor presence and immediacy.

INTRODUCTION

The videos are definitely better than just reading the material because it has more of that human element. (Student interview, 2014)

The importance of the above student quote is made more significant when one considers the well-documented experiences of isolation that are commonly reported by students of online courses. In addition to feeling isolated from each other, Smith and Taveras (2005) point out that online students often

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complain about feeling as though their professors were absent from their online courses. However, we believe the above quote, taken from one of several in-depth qualitative interviews with online students at Columbia University School of Professional Studies, alludes to the felt sense of connection that can be communicated via asynchronous instructional video.

As a team comprised of instructional designers, media specialists, and online support strategists, we became interested in unpacking the notion of “human element” as something to actively strive to develop within our online learning courses. Achieved in a variety of ways, this chapter focuses specifically on instructional videos within online courses and our belief that these videos can be developed for, by, and with instructors as strategic tools to increase social presence (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014) and instructor immediacy (Baker, 2010), and lessen social distance (Magee & Smith, 2013). Drawing from qualitative interviews with students across numerous online courses, we offer suggestions at the conclusion of this chapter to that end. That is, we suggest a variety of ways for online education practitioners to produce asynchronous instructional video as a means of positively impacting students’ felt sense of instructor presence and immediacy by carefully considering both the verbal and nonverbal elements of instructional video. These findings have design implications for instructors, instructional designers, media specialists and subject matter experts. In offering these research-based suggestions, we would like to stress the importance of striving to understand context in any educational design process. That is, these suggestions are not meant as generic, tech-driven concepts, but rather as possible tools to be thoughtfully adapted across a variety of online contexts.

It hopefully is then fitting that we begin the following background section with information on our context, before discussing the history of educational videos as well as theories of social distance and immediacy that serve as our conceptual frame.

BACKGROUND

Context

The School of Professional Studies at Columbia University (SPS) is part of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. SPS offers a variety of master’s degrees and certificate programs built around emerging and interdisciplinary professions. Of these degrees and programs, approximately half offer courses that are delivered as online or hybrid, meaning that a significant amount of course activities occur both synchronously and asynchronously in online learning environments (although there are a handful of face-to-face residency sessions per semester). Courses in the online programs are hosted on the learning management system (LMS) Canvas, where the majority of the course materials are posted and social exchanges occur: syllabi, case studies, readings, quizzes, resources, discussion forums, assignments, etc. Most of the courses also have weekly “live sessions” integrated directly into the LMS and hosted on the webinar platform Adobe Connect, where students and faculty members meet for approximately 60-90 minutes in virtual real-time events that encompass lectures, class discussion, group work, student presentations, and other forms of classroom interactions.

An internal development team at this graduate school (including instructional designers, course developers, educational technologists, online instructional support, and media producers) collaborate with faculty to produce and execute these online courses. The production cycle for these courses typically occur the semester prior to when the course runs. By the start of the production cycle, the academic program
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