Chapter 20

Hacking the Lecture: Transgressive Praxis and Presence Using Online Video

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ABSTRACT

This case study will detail the experience of one composition instructor and her efforts to adapt a collaborative, student-centered freshman composition course to the online environment using a lecture video-focused course delivery. Lectures can be understood as “content lectures” or “presence lectures,” which are recorded lectures meant to model writing skills or communicate concern and support, rather than delivering information to be recalled on an exam. Effective composition pedagogy, because it is often more emotionally labor intensive than lecture-based pedagogy, can be compromised if online writing classes are only conducted textually. Auditory and visual communication creates richer social presence than text-only interactions, but it also introduces logistical challenges of creating an authentic digital space and ensuring the materials are accessible to all learners. To overcome these obstacles while still giving students a feel of the instructor’s social presence, pre-recording short presence lectures can be a useful compromise as writing instructors explore the potential of online learning.

INTRODUCTION

At state comprehensive universities and elsewhere, online composition classes are proliferating as the number of higher education institutions offering online courses continues to grow. By Fall 2011, almost one third of all college students took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2012) as digital learning impacted every corner of post-secondary education, including state comprehensive universities. Called the “workhorses of American postsecondary education” (Schneider & Deane, 2015, p. 4), these universities serve 70% of undergraduates who attend public universities (Schneider & Deane, 2015). They

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1718-4.ch020
compete with two-year colleges, online universities, for-credit massive online open courses (MOOCs),
and for-profit credentialing programs for the tuition revenue that accompanies general education courses
– revenue that often subsidizes upper-division courses, specialized programs, and student life services
at state comprehensive universities.

At one such university, administrators developed an initiative called “Staying Connected” in an at-
tempt to keep first and second-year students connected to the university as they completed their general
education requirements over the summer, as well as to support institutional degree completion goals.
Such goals clearly benefited students and university administration because improving time to degree
is a high priority; an additional benefit to the university would be economic, since tuition would not be
diverted to other credit providers. The Staying Connected initiative was designed to support instructors
in core disciplines as they transformed their lower-level courses into online sections. To make course
navigation consistent, participating faculty were required to use a content-centered course template
outlining the number of units, a defined set of instructor-produced content, and types of activities and
assessments developed. Faculty benefited from the formal training in designing online courses, working
closely with an instructional designer, and financial compensation to develop the course. However, the
expectation for video-based content lectures as a central piece of the student experience was a challenge
for a composition instructor whose pedagogy was not compatible with delivering content lectures.

It is impossible for the modern composition instructor to ignore online education or the potential
and hazards of technology in the contemporary classroom. Therefore, composition instructors must
reclaim the language and scholarship of their pedagogies to protect the design and delivery of these
courses. This case study will detail the experience of one composition instructor and her efforts to adapt
a highly collaborative, student-centered freshman composition course to the online environment using
a lecture video-focused course delivery. It will challenge common beliefs about video-based lecturing,
particularly for instructors who resist institutional expectations that quality online courses are designed
like brick-and-mortar, lecture-based courses, as well as ideas for managing the workload challenges
associated with online writing classes. In short, we resist the assumption that online courses, massive
or otherwise, should be structured as containers to transmit content by using video lectures or other
media. This assumption rests on the outdated banking model of education, a notion long ago discounted
in composition scholarship.

COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY: FROM PRODUCT TO PROCESS

Composition scholars are familiar with how the field evolved from a focus on product to process. The
current-traditional focus on the rigid rules of “good writing” to focusing on teaching the writing process
itself (“process” pedagogy) was a more realistic and effective way to help novice writers improve their
skills. Under the current-traditional paradigm, writing instructors spent much of their time presenting the
“explicable rules” they believed made up the construction of effectively written prose (Connors, 1985,
p. 65). Crowley (1990) describes the current-traditional method of pedagogy as “full frontal teaching,”
since instructors relied on a lecture method of describing the features of a well-crafted, finished written
product (p. 147).

This “paradigm shift” to process pedagogy, as Maxine Hairston (1982) rightly calls it, emerged from
a robust body of composition research in the late 1960s and early 1970s responding to a wave of college
students arriving unprepared for college writing classes, a clear demonstration that current-traditional