Chapter 11
Using Video and Web Conferencing Tools to Support Online Learning

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines effective methods for using video and web conferencing tools to support online learning. The authors discuss the concept of presence, how web conferencing can be used to support presence in online courses, and why it is important to do so. Because of the impact web conferencing can have in learning, this chapter explores a variety of teaching roles that best leverage these conferencing tools. The chapter includes information on various web conferencing software programs (paid and open source). Best practices for using web conferencing tools in online learning are also explored.

INTRODUCTION
Without physically meeting students, faculty may think it difficult, if not impossible, to provide a similar classroom experience online as in a face-to-face class, with a goal to achieve similar learning. Miller and Williamson (2008) assert that excellence in distance education courses depends in part on the instructor’s subject and technical expertise but also on the instructor’s willingness, both psychologically and emotionally, to acknowledge and accept differences between distance education and traditional instruction.

Faculty members can find it difficult to establish an instructional relationship with students in an online learning environment. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) state that planning for the learner’s involvement and engagement is vital for success:
The involvement of the learner in the course, whether one calls it interaction, engagement, or building community, is critical if an online course is to be more than a lecture-oriented course in which interaction is primarily between the learner and the content or the learner and the instructor. (p. 6)

Therefore, the challenge in planning and designing online courses is in planning for interactions and humanizing the online learning experience. Many things change when instruction and communication are moved from a face-to-face classroom setting into an online course delivery system. Humanizing the online learning environment increases the student’s comfort level and reduces the psychological distance between the instructors and students (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2005).

Many of the challenges associated with delivering instruction via a distance can be overcome through the use of video or web conferencing. Video and web conferencing tools provide an opportunity for the instructor and students to have immediate access through synchronous communications (interaction among faculty and students occurring at the same time albeit from different locations).

Web conferencing also allows the instructor to offer immediate student support in learning content, progressing with assignments, and accessing technology. Certainly, this immediacy of information has the potential to impact the delivery of an online course. Along with immediacy behaviors (i.e., behaviors that portray a sense of closeness), web conferencing tools can help humanize the course through fostering social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence.

Video and web conferencing are already improving distance education by offering various degrees of support for online learning. The objective of this chapter is to identify effective methods for employing video and web conferencing tools to improve student learning in an online course. Best practices to consider when using these tools are outlined. Various web conferencing tools are described. Recommendations for future research are provided, as well.

BACKGROUND

Online learning generally involves two types of interaction: interaction with content and interpersonal interaction among the instructor and students (Berge, 1995). Both types of interaction are related to humanizing the online learning environment. Humanizing the course can be accomplished using immediacy behaviors, which reduce the perceived distance between the teacher and the student (Anderson, 1979, Baker 2010).

Social psychologist Albert Mehrabian has been credited with defining the concept of immediacy in terms of his principle of immediacy. Mehrabian shared that people are drawn towards persons or things they like, respect or simply prefer to be involved with (1971). In an effort to support learning in an online environment, it is important to plan for interactions and methods of communication. It is also important to remove any barriers that might prevent students from engaging with the instructor. By conveying warmth and support, immediacy behavior increases the closeness or the appearance of closeness between teacher and student through behaviors such as encouraging communications and student input, the use of humor, self-disclosure, and calling students by name (Baker, 2010).

By humanizing the course and planning for immediacy, the instructor not only influences the learner’s sense of belonging, but also establishes presence, including social, teacher, and cognitive presence. Presence creates an environment where the learner feels part of a learning community.

Humanization may include methods of communications, audio files, pictures or video clips, and instructions on where to post or “talk” with