

Lights, Cameras, Action: Using Video to Create Instructor Presence in an Online Information Studies Course

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Abstract

By definition, social presence involves making individuals feel connected and part of a community. Yet, creating social presence among the students and the instructor does not happen automatically and can be challenging to develop in online courses. In these learning environments, interactions are typically conducted via text-based and asynchronous media. The visual and auditory cues that are often associated with face-to-face interactions are absent in this form of communication. However, easy-to-use and inexpensive technologies that can foster presence are emerging. This project investigated the use of rich media to promote visual thinking and increase the instructor's social presence. More specifically, instructor-created videos were used to enhance the sense of presence in a fully online course. Based on surveys, reflections, and unstructured follow-up interviews, the students responded favorably to the richer mode of communication and indicated that they felt a greater connection to the instructor, as well as their classmates.

Keywords: community of inquiry, engagement, epresence, media richness, online education, presence

Need/Rational

Instructor ePresence and Videos

Technology use and wireless access is on the rise, which can enable ubiquitous educational opportunities. This may create greater learning independence, but the technology itself is not a replacement for the teacher. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) developed a "community of inquiry" framework to emphasize the importance of teaching presence and its role in designing effective learning environments. In an online course, the primary mode of communication is lean, asynchronous, and text-based. There is typically no opportunity for face-to-face interaction among the students and the instructor. While this design is convenient for the students and offers opportunities for reflection, it can pose challenges in developing effective teacher presence.

Digital camcorders are small, versatile, and inexpensive. These mobile devices often enable the user to transfer the content with minimal effort to social media sites such as YouTube or Facebook. These affordances enable instructors to use these devices to create videos for educational purposes. The unpolished appearance of this video content gives it an authentic quality that conveys the presence of the teacher. Through these videos, students can be introduced to course content, while at the same time, see and hear their instructor. Further, the consumption and creation of video content is aligned with the concept of digital literacy, which is an important 21st century skill.

This poster will investigate an instructor's use of rich media, in particular video content, to create a sense of presence in a fully online Information Studies course.

Description

This Project

For the purpose of this project, video content was created for a fully online Information Studies course. The majority of the students in this course were at the graduate level. Four types of videos were created by the instructor: 1) a personal introduction; 2) modular introductions; 3) video check-ins; and 4) modular “cool tools” introductions. The personal introduction was designed to set the tone for the course and to help students connect with the instructor. In this course, there were seven modules that were introduced via videos, as well. The purpose of these videos was to introduce the readings to the students, highlight key concepts, and present questions for the students to think about as the class moved into the discussions. Another type of video created for this course was a video check-in. While the focus of these videos was less on the content of the module, they provided the instructor the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings, address questions that surfaced during the week, and present related materials that could supplement students’ understanding. The function of the video check-ins was to enable the instructor to maintain a connection with students as they moved through the multi-week modules.

One of the assignments associated with each module involved a “cool tools” presentation. For each of the module topics, students were instructed to select a cool tool to virtually present to their peers. These presentations, which investigated the positives, negatives, and pedagogical practices of the selected tools, took place in the course management system (i.e., D2L) discussion forum. Videos created to introduce this portion of the course activities were shorter and more “playful” than the other types created for this course and emphasized creativity over content. At the end of the semester, the students were surveyed to assess the effectiveness and to determine ways to improve this type of content.

In the initial stages of this project, the intent was to use a Flip digital camcorder to record the videos for this course. This device was used to create videos used during the first weeks of the course. Throughout the semester, rich media alternatives (e.g., Jing and Animoto) were investigated as the instructor became more comfortable with the video creation process.

Evidence of Effectiveness

To determine whether the inclusion of this type of content had an impact on students, open-ended surveys (midterm and final) and a reflection activity (conducted during the last module of the course) were employed. Students were strongly encouraged, but not required, to complete the surveys. In contrast, the reflection was a required activity in the course. A selected group of students were also invited to participate in unstructured follow-up interviews to understand in greater detail their reflection comments and/or survey responses.

Data collected via the surveys and reiterated in the reflection activity indicated that more than half (n=13) of students were skeptical at first about the educational potential of videos posted to YouTube. As this student noted on the survey, she did not consider watching YouTube to be part of the learning process and described her dislike in this way: “I have a terrible habit of getting stuck in YouTube cycles that waste hours.” In addition, many of the students worked full-time as K-12 teachers or school librarians at institutions that blocked social media tools, which contributed to the mindset that online information is “bad.”

By the end of the semester, students recognized the value associated with the videos. One student described the educational potential of this medium in this manner: “I feel like this approach [the use of instructor-created videos] can be very effective, because the teacher’s obligation is to surround the student with resources.” Another student liked the ability to access the video content multiple times: “The videos are easily reviewable, and they ensure that students understand the concepts that they are being taught.” Students found it helpful to see the ways in which the technologies we discussed in class could be put into practice: “These videos were very inspiring for me, as it showed that our recently developed capabilities are already finding their way into the learning environment.”

Challenges

Technological changes are occurring rapidly. On April 12, 2011, Cisco announced that it planned to discontinue the production of the Flip camcorder (Grobart & Rusli, 2011). Because of the ephemeral nature of devices such as the Flip, alternative video production options were investigated. The screencasting site, Jing (<http://www.techsmith.com/jing/>), and the video slideshow maker, Animoto (<http://animoto.com/>), are examples of these sites. With Jing, full-motion videos that captured information presented on a computer screen, sound, and voice could be quickly created. Animoto transformed pictures, video clips, and music into videos. While the monetary costs of creating video content for students is low, there are other costs to consider. Many of these tools are easy to use, yet they still require a time investment on the part of the instructor to learn how to use them effectively. Another aspect of creating video that can take time is editing this type of content. Further, determining how to make the videos accessible to students is an additional point to consider. Instructors may want to create a YouTube Channel to post class-related videos. These videos could be uploaded to the course management systems (CMS), as well.

Applicability for Other Instructors/Institutions

At present, many mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets enable individuals to create short videos that can be uploaded to a wide variety of social media sites. The costs associated with creating an epresence via video include the recording device, the learning curve that accompanies the use of the video creation tool, the editing software, and the location where the videos will be housed. Nevertheless, many of the creation and publication tools are relatively easy-to-use. As a result, instructors who are not professional videographers can experiment with this type of rich media as a way to enhance their online presence and create a more effective learning environment.

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