

Navigating the Challenges of Teaching Online

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May 24, 2022

Authors Note

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the home-made production of lecture video presentations to be used in place of face-to-face classroom instruction during periods of quarantine. Using the online platforms of Adobe and Ensemble together with the purchase of a few sound recording instruments a series of home-made video presentations of classroom lectures were produced.

The video presentations contained the standard classroom lecture and supplemented film clips and news reports on the topics as appropriate. "Easter Eggs" were placed at various points in the video for entertainment purposes and to keep viewer interest at a maximum. The results were formed from student comments discussing their perception of the videos for learning. These comments were overwhelmingly positive, and a sample are included. These videos together with the written lectures available to read or to be read to the student by Word will facilitate a variety of learning styles.

Not knowing if or when the next health crisis will quarantine our students implications from student comments are that having video lectures of content material helps to encourage student persistence in the absence of the positive classroom environment created by face-to-face contact with instructors and fellow students.

Navigating the Challenges of Teaching Online

By John Pierog and Jeremy Algire

As a college professor for over 25 years, one of my great joys in teaching has always involved the revealing face-to-face classroom interaction with students. Going Covid which forced the online teaching modality has presented unique challenges especially to many of us who routinely measure students' engagement by merely looking at their faces, a simple and time-tested process.

Even when returning to in-person instruction in socially distant arranged classrooms, protective mouth coverings disguise the curious, confused, and validating facial expressions instructors instinctively rely on to measure student involvement. The loss of this vital and organic feedback can leave any seasoned professor perplexed, wondering if students have grasped the concepts presented. This challenge becomes nearly insurmountable when moving to an asynchronous modality without the personal interaction that takes place when engaging face-to-face with someone.

This lack of personal interaction, along with the challenge of a detached environment that requires trying to learn from a lit screen mouthing words with no other fellow students

around further magnifies the task of developing genuine connectivity. From the work of Tinto and others, the positive relationships between students and their instructors- and the connectivity it creates- directly translates to student persistence and success. How do we communicate the importance of becoming a life-long learner if the only educational delivery system available to students is a turn-off to them?

As related to online teaching platforms, an Axios Poll of 822 demographically representative college students (margin of error of +/- 3.4 points) resulted in 77% of students reporting that distance learning “is worse or much worse than in-person classes.”¹

I do not expect that my students would respond differently.

Perplexed with this new online reality, I searched for a method to replace the animated classroom camaraderie that has traditionally steered my instruction and methods. I shared my concern with a former student and American Studies graduate of The George Washington University, my co-author. He had the background to identify appropriate supplemental materials for my US History course and with his acumen in Information Technology (IT) he suggested making video presentations of my lectures (in addition to the written lectures) in my online course.

As a result of our discussion, he suggested a project personalizing my online instruction with appropriate supplemental materials. Given his acumen in IT, he suggested methodology

¹ “Most student jobs have been canceled, delayed or digitized by coronavirus,” The Generation Lab, May 21, 2022, <https://www.generationlab.org/post/most-student-jobs-have-been-canceled-delayed-or-digitized-by-coronavirus>.

that would serve to enliven my written lectures, thus engaging students via a communication mode with which they are familiar and comfortable. Our objective was to develop a video presentation of my lecture material that would be entertaining in nature and together with the written lectures would facilitate a variety of learning styles.

With merely a subscription to Adobe, a new microphone and headset, and a limited budget the project began. We transformed my written lecture into a vibrant, entertaining video presentation. We began producing the videos by interlacing my written lecture with background music of the period along with news clips, interviews, and other relevant material as allowed under the “Fair Use Doctrine” as detailed in *Copyright & The Classroom: Using Copyrighted Material in Classrooms and Distance Learning* published in New Media Rights. Additionally, we included pictures of pages from the free online textbook offered through Openstax as the background in some of the video. Once the videos were converted to Ensemble, they were uploaded to the appropriate Blackboard shell.²

This new alternate vehicle for teaching not only combined entertainment with learning but also helped meet the learning needs of many of my students. The written lectures were also available in a Word document allowing students the added resource of reading it or having Word read it to them while they followed along on the screen. Students could self-select the modality best fit their learning style. Converting the video to Ensemble enabled Closed Captioning for hearing-impaired students substantiating the accessibility of our course.

² “Welcome to New Media Rights!,” Welcome to New Media Rights! | New Media Rights, May 21, 2022, <https://www.newmediarights.org/>.

Because it is entertaining, it will engage students, thus making the material easier for students to comprehend and recall and may further entice them to view more videos since viewing them may not be considered the chore that reading a lecture may be. Many of the videos contain an “Easter Egg” (a hidden surprise or joke in the presentation). The first video lecture ends with the last scene from the iconic movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* when at the end of the movie Ferris appears in his robe recovering from his ostensive illness, and he announces “It’s Over! Go Home!” as he “shoo’s” away the viewer with his hand.

Student reaction has been stunningly positive. This is especially noteworthy given the reticence many of our students displayed regarding the reality of online courses necessitated during the Covid pandemic.

My students have indicated that they enjoy the video lectures, finding them educational and would enjoy learning other subjects in a similar manner. Here is a sample of the student’s feedback:

“I find it easier to learn with visuals and audio, especially when told in a story format so this was particularly beneficial for me. I have a tough time retaining information the first time I hear it and having the ability to re-watch and /or rewind is so helpful. I was telling my sister about my classes at the start of the semester and told her that your videos were set up like a movie with credits and all-mission accomplished!”

“I really liked having lecture documents and videos to fall back on as well as the book. Honestly, I have barely used the book, just videos and lecture notes.”

Another student watched the video with his father and wrote *“I loved the visual. The pictures along with the explanations helped me remember some of the content better for sure. The music was great as well. I have seen some of the videos outside of class before such as the “Duck and Cover” PSA and it was a joy to revisit that in the context of learning history through a course watched a couple of these with my father—who is from the baby-boom era, and he enjoyed the lectures as well; and sang along to many of the songs you used as beds. The documentaries were compelling and entertaining. Also, I found the feature on the lectures that*

allows you to see the words said from each video and to be especially useful for quoting and revisiting information [closed captioning]. I feel like I will remember more of the content when this is all said and done because of the visual element.”

The critiques included *“Some of the words in the video lectures translated incorrectly to the script, although I was able to work around that for the most part.” [Ensemble added the closed captioning]*

Our objective was to develop a video presentation of my lectures that would be entertaining in nature and together with the written lectures would facilitate a variety of learning styles. Reading student comments indicates that we achieved our objective. Students were both informed and entertained and the hours it took to develop the videos were well spent.

As this article is being written indoor mask mandates are being instituted again in certain areas of the country. It has been predicted that there will be a widespread Covid outbreak this fall when classes are again in session. Should that occur the videos are ready for use asynchronously. If not, they are a great source of providing content material in an entertaining way for class use. Being able to select one’s own educational and entertaining material for use to communicate thoughts through a video is quite rewarding. As professional educators it is incumbent on us to find new ways to engage and teach students to help ensure that they become lifelong learners. It is our hope that the fruits of this project will aid in that endeavor.

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