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Short Videos and Faculty Social Presence

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Recently, I worked with a colleague to conduct student surveys with currently enrolled students and alumni from the first decade of our distance MDiv program. We asked students what they would like our faculty to know about their teaching strategies for the online portions of classes. About two-thirds of respondents mentioned a desire for increased faculty presence and investment in the course. In some cases, these were very strongly worded:

"Faculty participation and engagement online is a make or break factor for the class."

"Beyond a reasonably well-designed course, the instructor(s) showing they are present and attentive is the most important aspect."

"And seriously folks, just because the coursework is online is no excuse for the instructor to not be present in the class Be present with us. Respond to our posts as if you were responding to our embodied voice breathing the same air at the same time. Don't make us self-teach ourselves with your materials and not with your experience/presence."

Now, faculty responses to this data were mixed. Rightfully so, they felt that in the structuring

of the class, the selection of materials to engage, the formation of discussion questions, responding to student posts, providing instructions for written assignments, and numerous other ways, they were regularly “in” their classes. But all of this work that the faculty member put into designing and implementing the course did not always equate to the student’s *sense* that faculty were present in real time, invested in student learning, and cared for them as people. And for most of our students, this social presence was the most critical factor for good online teaching.

Faculty simply weren’t perceived by students as “being there” when they were present in textual form. And, here I am stretching a bit beyond my data, but I believe students often experience textual communication from faculty as evaluative, directive, and disembodied. In creative nonfiction and memoir genres many writers can make themselves socially present through the written word. But, this feat takes a different kind of writing than most faculty are trained to do. The ways we are trained to write as academics tend to communicate a distant expert, a not-so-humanizing aspect of our teaching selves.

One nearly effortless way for faculty to make themselves more socially present in an online course is by creating a kind of connective tissue throughout the class in the use of short, informal videos. As a teaching coach to online faculty, I was initially pretty anti-video. I worried that talking head videos were just a non-dialogical information dump, either through reading written lectures to present content or worse, recording lectures in a residential class and using them later for an online section. These were not the kinds of videos our students desired.

The videos that the students felt created social presence often involved faculty just hitting record on their laptop and chatting in real time. Faculty were using these videos to share weekly updates about how the class was going, to give brief lecturettes to help students navigate difficult material, to provide a frame for the topic of the week and identify its importance, to offer introductions to readings or other course materials, and to coach for success on writing assignments.

While it feels awkward to stare meaningfully into the top of your computer screen and speak directly to students, these videos presented faculty in a very different way than either voice recording or textual communication. Students felt more connected to those faculty who used these short, informal videos. Most of the time, these videos contained the kind of offhanded explanatory speaking that you might do in the first and last five minutes of class, when you present an assignment, or in response to student questions.

Our students marked the importance of these video appearances in their sense of having access to and benefitting from the expertise of the professor, establishing a relationship and sense of trust in the professor, helping with course integration, and believing that the professor was actively guiding the course. Of course, their power to invoke the presence and care of the faculty diminished when the videos were obviously designed for an earlier class, which makes me regret my choice to ever change my hair length and style. Professionally staged or highly polished videos also reduce the communication of a caring human presence.

Sitting in the office speaking into a phone camera may feel like a ridiculous way to connect with students, but it turns out that the vulnerability of offering your regular teacher-self helps you be present to your students in powerful ways.

<https://wabash.center/2019/12/short-videos-and-faculty-social-presence/>