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Online course design has gained increased attention in education, given the global health crisis brought on by COVID-19. Students need to familiarize themselves at the beginning of an online course to be successful. An important item often overlooked, however, is the inclusion of a course tour video, which can help serve as an effective orientation for a student new to the course. This article will share best practices and insights on how to make a brief video guiding students to navigate a course more effectively, setting them up for success.

Introduction

On the first day of an in-person course, students are welcomed by the instructor and introduced to the course through a physical copy of a syllabus. The instructor shows the required textbook to students. Ice breaker activities also might be part of the day 1 agenda so that students get to know others in the course, as well as their instructor.

However, courses delivered fully online require students to be more autonomous in locating the course in the learning management system (LMS), finding the course syllabus and book information, and navigating to a discussion board to introduce themselves. Unlike a physical class located in a building, online courses must be created in a way to avoid any confusion for the students who might develop negative first impressions of the course if little or no direction is given to them. Online course design has gained increased attention in education, given the global health crisis brought on by COVID-19.

To be successful and know their instructor, students need to familiarize themselves at the beginning of an online course. An important item often overlooked in the course design is the inclusion of a course tour video which can help serve as an effective orientation for a student new to the course. Video content can help students to engage with online courses, but creating a course tour video should be different from the lecture videos that instructors record. These brief, walk-through

videos can serve as early methods to set a positive first impression for the course, enhancing a relationship-rich education in teaching and learning. This article discusses the importance of creating videos to help students navigate through an online course. In this article, best practices will be shared for instructors to consider when making a short video guiding students to navigate a course more effectively, setting them up for success.

Program Context

The focus of this article stems from the author's use of course tour videos primarily in graduate online courses at a four-year regional public university, but the videos also have been included in undergraduate courses. The videos appear in the announcements section of the courses. When learners log into the course for the first time, they see the video, accompanied by a brief description of what the video will show. Having a brief orientation video is particularly helpful for adult learners, many of whom are not familiar with a learning management system. However, including such a video in every online course to help learners navigate the course elements helps to establish a best practice in learning design.

Overview

The use of video to walk students through an online course is supported in the literature (Draus et al. 2014; Taylor et al. 2015; Ozan & Ozarslan, 2016). Class orientations establish social presence (Borup et al. 2011). Short orientation videos at the beginning of the course are a way for the instructor to establish a social presence — in other words, to show the student that the instructor is a real person who is available to support the students in the course (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).

Social presence is central to online learning and is a key dimension in the community of inquiry (CoI) framework. According to this theory, social presence is one of three core elements along with cognitive presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al. 2000). The use of asynchronous video is one way for online educators to increase social presence in online courses (Borup et al., 2012; Fadde & Vu, 2014; Lowenthal, 2015; Pancansky-Brock, 2014).

Research suggests that video can improve social presence in online courses, but the success of video use depends in part on how and when it is used (Lowenthal, 2022). A course tour video, therefore, could improve social presence for the student, as long as the video is placed prominently and early in the course. In

addition to social presence, as well as adequate course design and layout, course tour videos can help students to focus (Kumar & Skrocki, 2015).

Course tour videos, usually no longer than five minutes, can lead students to improved success in the online environment. However, creating videos can overwhelm instructors, especially those with novice experience in video recording or production. By considering tips and best-practice, instructors who are beginners in video creation will be guided on how best to produce a simple video. As they gain more experience and comfort, they may choose to explore other technology.

This section provides a few main best practices for instructors to keep in mind when creating course tour videos: scripting, course placements, technology, and learner activities. Each is explained briefly.

Start With Scripting

Course tour videos are effective when they are planned with clear language and helpful images. An instructor should begin this process with an outline to script the main points to emphasize in the course tour. Such highlights could include where in the course the student should start first, where the syllabus and course information can be obtained, how the student should contact the instructor, and where the lessons and assignments can be found. While a script can help an instructor to know what to say, the delivery should be conversational with the student. In addition to the text, the instructor should script the images or other visual material into the outline. For instance, if a slide deck such as PowerPoint will be used at certain points in the video, the instructor could prepare the slides with greater intention, taking into account the design of the slides as well as the text. Additional images that an instructor could include are icons, photos, and even videos. Other elements that an instructor might need to consider as part of the video script are music, directional arrows, or highlights that emphasize words or course components.

Explore Technology Options

Sophisticated equipment is not necessary to record a course tour video. In fact, the technology is available immediately for most instructors to use. Instructors with minimal video recording experience should begin with the recording tool that is embedded or integrated into the learning management system (LMS), if one is available. Using the LMS-embedded technology can help instructors record a screen capture to navigate students around the LMS, allowing the instructor

to explain the essential features that will be used in the course (Black, 2021). In screencast recordings, instructors also can show students where assignments should be submitted and where instructor feedback can be found. Resources for support also can be shown and explained in a course tour video that uses a screencast recording.

Further, video tools such as Screencast-o-Matic, Loom, and even PowerPoint have simple interfaces and require little recording knowledge. Tools such as Camtasia and Adobe Premiere Pro contain more features than recording tools in the LMS platforms, but they also involve a greater learning curve. Therefore, instructors are encouraged to choose technology that will not overwhelm them and that they are comfortable in using.

Decide Where the Video Tour Should Appear in the Course

The placement of the course tour video is important to consider. Many courses feature the video tours on the course home page, but the videos also can appear in a section that describes the course, such as "About this course," or in course announcements. In addition to having the video appear in the front matter of the course, some instructors might send their students a welcome email with a link to the video. Multiple locations for the course tour video are encouraged.

Use Learner Activities

Course tour videos can orient students to online courses, but pairing them with a few learning activities can help students with course orientation (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014). For instance, connected low-stakes or no-grade quizzes can encourage students to watch the video. A discussion board also can be set up for students to post parts of the course tour that helped to ease their concerns about the online course.

Consider Additional Points

A course tour video is a student's first glimpse into the course — and the instructor. Therefore, being intentional is the main idea throughout the course tour production experience. When creating a course tour video, these final points should be kept in mind. First, being mindful of accessibility is important. This includes making sure the video contains captioning or is accompanied by a transcript. Second, consulting the institution's teaching and learning center (or a similar department) could be helpful. These centers are resources for faculty, and the staff (i.e., directors, instructional designers, instructional technologists)

can provide guidance on how to record video within the LMS and offer other assistance.

Conclusion

Although students need to familiarize themselves at the beginning of an online course to be successful, they also need to believe they are supported in their online education journey. Instructors can create course tour videos to assist with this goal. Not only are these videos used to orient students to the course, but they also connect the student to the online educator, enhancing a relationship-rich education in teaching and learning. As the research by Borup et al. (2011) and Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) discussed, course tour videos enhance social presence because they demonstrate to the student that the instructor is real and seeks to support the student in the course. While the research in this article raises the importance of creating and including course tour videos, additional research could focus on the student perspective through the social presence dimension to help advance course tour videos, which are vital for online learner success.

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