



Taking Sociology online: Boosting teacher presence and student engagement through rich media

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This poster reports an initiative to redesign the teaching of Sociology for the digital age. In 2009, the core of Massey University's Sociology undergraduate major was redesigned to renew the curriculum, clarify student pathways and exploit new digital technology to improve the experience of distance learners. Major goals were to create an engaging and personalised learning environment and to utilise the expertise of a team of staff to broaden the scope and choice of student study. Teacher presence was prioritized as a key element in achieving these goals. The poster reports some of the decisions that led to the design and implementation of extensive rich media materials in efforts to provide a more immediate teacher presence. Qualitative and quantitative student responses to the redesign were gathered via an online survey and these data are helping to inform the delivery and standard for further work that will be ongoing for some years to come.

Keywords: Distance learning, rich media, teacher presence, social presence, student engagement

Introduction

Massey University has invested heavily in new digital technology and support infrastructure to enhance online learning in recent years. The Sociology programme in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences was eager to engage early on with these new technologies. Distance students contribute a large percentage of enrolments each year. It was perceived that the experience of these students could be considerably enhanced with a positive effect on retention, completion and enrolment rates. Analysis of existing distance offerings showed little or no use of technology, limited teacher interaction and a heavy reliance on printed course readings. A move to web-based teaching was seen as a way to provide students a more immediate experience through increased teacher presence and interaction. Research has shown the benefit of teacher immediacy in fostering positive student attitudes to both course material and the teacher (Rodriguez, et al. 1996). Teacher immediacy behaviours can be used to bridge transactional distance, increasing student satisfaction and engagement. Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) "community of inquiry" framework also points to teaching presence as a critical element in the design of effective learning environments.

Developing useful rich media content

In the backdrop of this theoretical framework, rich media was defined as any audio and/or video enhanced content that could provide effective augmentation to other teacher contributions in the form of forum postings and email messages. Three types of media content were identified for production: Course introductions (video), topic introductions (audio) and reading guidance (enhanced presentations). Guidelines were produced for lecturers concerning length, content and even tone for each of these media types. A template was devised for the enhanced presentations to ensure consistency across the programme. Staff were supported to proficiency with all the production tools that were used.

- Course introductions: Short video clips (less than 5 minutes) of paper coordinators introducing themselves and their course. This was an opportunity to define the content of the paper, demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject matter and to set expectations. Advice on where to begin and what initial tasks students should undertake were included. It was decided that these clips should be short and informal. They were recorded using webcams, converted to Flash video and uploaded to the LMS.
- Topic introductions: Short audio introductions designed to put each topic in context. Created using Audacity and uploaded as MP3 files to the LMS. Video was deemed unnecessary and a waste of bandwidth.
- Reading guidance: Short media enhanced presentations that focus students on important concepts and questions. Intended to engage students and stimulate cognition and response. The presentations were also used to 'bridge' topics and assignments to help students link their learning through the course. Produced with Adobe Presenter and published as interactive, searchable Flash objects with notation and live links to further resources.

Student feedback

Quantitative and qualitative feedback was sought from 71 participating students in three papers via an online survey. Students were asked to respond to questions about whether online activities and resources had influenced their learning experience. Feedback was sought about each of the media types that were provided to students to assess their value to students and if they had been successful in increasing perceptions of teacher presence. The poster presents highlights from this study, including generally positive student responses to the online delivery. Notably, students report that the addition of short topic introductions in Adobe Presenter was the most beneficial feature of the new online experience.

Major lessons

The Sociology experience at Massey has revealed three major lessons about curriculum redesign with and through new digital technology.

The teacher is crucial: Students valued the increased interaction and presence of lecturers in their courses. Comments focused on the appreciation of lecture-like materials, responsiveness of staff and the sense of being part of a community led by an expert. Several students mentioned the more personal nature of the online Sociology courses compared to others they had studied with consequent feelings of greater engagement in their studies.

Ease of using the technology: Feedback focused on the immediacy and logical structure of learning materials as well as the variety of modes and materials available. Students appreciated this variety and again reported increased engagement and motivation. The ability to pause rich media to take notes and to replay for revision purposes also featured. Ease and variety of interaction with peers and staff was also valued.

Value of locally produced rich media: Locally produced content helps to convey a real sense of teacher presence. Even though this content may not have the same level of production polish as centrally developed learning resources, it has an authentic quality that makes the teacher appear real.

Conclusion

In conclusion, digital technology is playing an increasingly essential role in the design and delivery of distance education. Student expectations are changing as new technology becomes more familiar and they appear to be demanding and responsive to increased teacher presence in online environments. While teachers have limitations on their time and availability this study shows that rich media offers a powerful means to boost presence in online courses without necessarily increasing workload and actual teacher interaction time.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank staff involved in the Sociology programme for their willingness to participate in this initiative. We would also like to thank Dr Mark Brown for his assistance in preparing this poster.

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Please cite as: Symonds, S., Jamieson, A.S., Bell, A., Wood, W., Patterson, L. and Ryan, A (2010). Taking Sociology online: Boosting teacher presence and student engagement through rich media. In C.H. Steel, M.J. Keppell, P. Gerbic & S. Housego (Eds.), *Curriculum, technology & transformation for an unknown future. Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2010* (pp.948-950). <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2010.2118>

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