Teaching and Learning with Video

Scenario
Before the pandemic, most instructors at Longfellow State College had limited experience using video in their teaching. When the campus abruptly closed, the institution and its faculty scrambled to figure out how to finish the term with essentially all students and faculty confined to their homes, and the most obvious option appeared to be conducting class by video. Faculty imagined that they could teach the way they always had, the only difference being that they would be speaking to a camera.

Staff at the Center for Teaching with Technology knew that the transition would be far more involved than that. Instructors were directed to a collection of resources that explain how to convert in-person teaching to an online environment, particularly the sections on synchronous video teaching. The CTT staff quickly put together some webinars for faculty to explain how to effectively incorporate video. Conducting this training through webinars allowed the small staff of the CTT to reach a large number of instructors, and the format was itself a demonstration of the strategies that can improve the experience of learning by video.

Heather Garcia, who taught a creative writing course in poetry, learned that simply trying to recreate a workshop-style course in Zoom didn’t work well. After trying several approaches, she and her students found that they preferred mixing asynchronous activities, in which students would record their work (the “performance of poetry” had long been a central aspect of Garcia’s class), with synchronous sessions in which students would discuss their classmates’ compositions.

Larry Watson had trouble connecting with the students in his course on European history. Though his was primarily a lecture-based course, in the classroom he would circulate and engage with the students, a dynamic he was unable to replicate in a video room. He redesigned his synchronous learning activities to be more participatory, to better involve the students. He continued his lectures, but he recorded them so students could watch them when convenient.

Some faculty found video teaching to be rewarding and exciting; others struggled to adjust and find a rhythm. Across the board, though, instructors learned valuable lessons about how they teach, lessons they can apply when campus reopens, regardless of whether they continue to use video as part of their teaching.

What is it?
The abrupt shift to emergency remote teaching brought on by the pandemic left many faculty scrambling to maintain instructional continuity. Chief among the tools that higher education turned to were video technologies. For the most part, the tools and services that were deployed were not new, but they were put to use in new and different ways, often by instructors who had rarely or never incorporated video into their teaching. Even faculty who had previously used video to support teaching and learning began using the tools differently. Today’s college students grew up in a world in which anyone with a smartphone and an adequate data plan can create, share, and access video. For many students, YouTube is their go-to source for entertainment but also to understand how to do something. Using video for academic learning, however, is a different experience, requiring a different mindset about consuming and creating video. The path to translating personal uses of video into educational settings isn’t always clear. This environment requires instructors to rethink teaching practices, including assessments and learning artifacts.

How does it work?
Probably the most common instructional accommodation of the pandemic was to transfer classroom teaching to synchronous video, using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or a similar application. This makes sense from the perspective of wanting to replicate an in-person classroom environment in a digital format. And, broadly speaking, the infrastructure was in place for such a transition—large swaths of the world have reliable, high-speed internet connectivity and the hardware to participate in video-based activities. That said, those without such access were often left isolated, unable to take part in these synchronous approximations of on-campus learning. Asynchronous video can cover many of the gaps left by synchronous activities. Asynchronous video can include recordings of Zoom sessions or from lecture capture systems, repositories of learning material, faculty- or student-generated video, and content curated from various online sources. The authors of an EDUCAUSE Review series, “The Power of Asynchronous Video,” explain how asynchronous activities can create and support human connections between students and their instructors and other students. As one observer noted, “When it comes to teaching well, the difference between synchro-
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Synchronous and asynchronous online learning is actually bigger than the difference between synchronous online learning and learning in person. Whether a video approach uses synchronous activities, asynchronous activities, or a combination, the traditional dynamic between instructors and students can shift to a culture of community and two-way conversation.

Who’s doing it?

Using video to teach is not a new practice, dating to the 1950s in the United States. The Khan Academy has been providing asynchronous video education since 2006, and Lynda.com (now a part of LinkedIn) began offering video learning even earlier. The pandemic pushed widespread synchronous video into institutions of all types and sizes, in every discipline. Some faculty will undoubtedly continue using video in their teaching even after the pandemic fades and in-person education resumes.

Why is it significant?

In 2020, hypothetical ideas about remote work and teaching became real, showing the resilience and ingenuity of higher education but also uncovering long-standing cracks in educational models. For some faculty, the past year has been the most exciting part of their careers; for others, it has been the worst. The pandemic showed that video technologies—even when hastily implemented—can be a lifeline for education in times of disruption, particularly for students at the margins who might otherwise be unable to participate. The same is true for shorter, local disruptions such as those caused by weather events. In the realm of technology, disruption is often characterized as beneficial, but sometimes it is technology’s ability to mitigate disruption that is valuable. Video technologies have been an important part of efforts among instructors to reexamine how they teach, enabling a broader definition of student engagement and a deeper understanding of expectations for student interaction and performance.

What are the downsides?

Logistical problems can impede video in education, including internet connectivity and properly functioning hardware and software to support the learning activities. These can be significant barriers, particularly for users who lack appropriate devices and adequate data plans. Some users don’t have private, safe spaces to participate in synchronous video learning. Requiring students to keep their cameras on can improve the experience for everyone, but such a policy can disenfranchise students who are uncomfortable allowing others to see their homes. Even as video can bring people together when they are physically separated, it can widen gaps between students of different socioeconomic groups, as well as between self-directed students and those who need more support. Meanwhile, learners with physical or cognitive disabilities face additional obstacles if equivalent experiences are not built into the video learning environment. Teaching with video can require substantial modifications to pedagogy, but in many cases, best practices for video teaching are still evolving.

Where is it going?

As video becomes more commonplace in education, the protocols and practices will evolve, helping faculty and students alike develop a shared understanding about what is possible and what is expected. Clarity will emerge about ideal lengths of video activities and about steps that can be taken to alleviate “Zoom fatigue.” Students might begin to see the connections between academic and personal uses of video, leading to more self-directed learning and exploration. Some faculty are looking for ways to use video to replicate the informal connections that often occur before and after an in-person class. Meanwhile, ventures such as MasterClass and Outlier have begun offering video learning that, in the case of Outlier, could provide college credit, which has implications for the cost of and access to learning.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Video can help faculty and students interact in meaningful ways while physically separated. The sense of presence is different in video settings. For a large lecture course, seeing the instructor on a videoconference screen might feel more intimate than in an auditorium, despite the digital interface. Although students in a video classroom can tune out, just as they might in the back row of a lecture hall, video might help shy, quiet students see themselves on equal footing with students who tend to dominate conversations in physical classrooms. With video, more instructors might invite guest speakers or pursue team-teaching activities with faculty from multiple locations. The pandemic is prompting a broad rethinking of teaching practices, and this movement will see larger numbers of faculty working with instructional designers and academic technologists to redesign their courses.

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