

Voiceovers and Do-overs: Increasing Our Chances to Connect

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In tools, mindset, and energy, it's been a year of rapid change. I will be happy to leave behind many activities when we return to in-person classes in Fall 2021. But there are parts I'll definitely be hanging on to. Last year, my first semester of purposely online classes involved one synchronous and one asynchronous class. So from the start, I had a controlled experiment in modalities. It was also my first semester back to fulltime teaching after an administrative stint, so I had some renewed enthusiasm, tempered with some real fear. And it was my first time building a class in the Canvas learning management system (LMS) as well. So many new interfaces at once! In short, I was jumping headlong into the pedagogical fray. To temper this, I'd done a campus learning center bootcamp to start thinking about better ways to align teaching modules and learning outcomes. And I've been taking an Association of College and University Educators course in effective teaching practices. Both of these were partly because the emergency version of online teaching was so intensely, round-the-clock draining—specifically, creating and posting short video lecture sequences was never ending—that I wanted to find some skills that would allow me to survive and even improve as we moved forward.

So, of the things I was not doing a year and a half ago, what will I keep? In creating materials, five steps helped me to connect with students when I wasn't present to read their initial reactions.

I learned to add voiceover in PowerPoint, which was a great boon for the past year of online conference presentations, too. But for class purposes, it let me keep the structuring power of a slide deck and the ability to re-edit my lecture notes, yet avoid stressing about being filmed. I reduced the amount of slide text, annotated quotes, and added more graphics to the slides, making sure to not just read the slides aloud, but to supply background information from a fuller, interactive script. Right? I'll keep this approach. For all the audiobook and podcast fans with buds in their ears, I hear you! It took multiple attempts to get a clear, friendly sounding reading. I now have a great respect for voice artists.

I made sure to create auto captions in YouTube, then go back and fix them up with punctuation, corrected names and terminology, and better line breaks before I posted each lecture. For all the viewers who turn off the sound and read the presentations, I see you! I'm glad I learned to do this cleanup and will keep it up. It's satisfying to review each video late in the day when my energy for creating new class content is long gone.

I worked to make each lecture chunk only 8-15 minutes in length, even if some weeks had a couple of chunks. I'll definitely keep this up. I see this length as easier on the viewers, and a check to keep me from rambling on. But also, as the "director" of the material, it was hard enough to go back and re-record a tricky 2-minute stretch in the middle that would add some better explanations. I can't envision re-doing a one-hour take!

I also labeled each chunk with the chapter or module it matched, not with the date. This way, students, who needed to catch up on multiple days of work at once, knew which lectures aligned with which readings. Having no date stamp also means that I can selectively re-use pieces of the lectures when putting the class together next time. (I can swap out the thumbnail used as the cover photo for each video. So if that's where a title or date showed up, it's separable from the rest of the video without any splicing.)

Those were changes in what I sent them. I also began to offer each class my name and pronouns, and then invite them to send me an audio or video clip of them saying their name, and optionally, their pronouns. I loved being able to play back their pronunciation of their preferred names as I got to know them. This first-day task will remain, solving an ever-present memorizing problem, even in face-to-face classes.

Confession: I really like working asynchronously, both as a student and as a teacher. This surprised me, because I've always found the real-time engagement created when we are live together in class to be one of the energizing pleasures of teaching. A self-paced modality is easier, of course, when your students choose to register for this format, rather than getting stuck in the section based on their other scheduling needs. However, even though I'm not likely to teach these same classes asynchronously again, that doesn't make the last year's work a loss. In fact, having experience with making lectures available outside of the class meetings (I stashed mine, unlisted, on YouTube) is a very big step towards setting up a flipped classroom. That is, for at least some of my meetings with each new class, from now on I'll be arranging for students to watch targeted, short lectures before we meet, and then we'll apply those concepts as we talk together face to face, and practice working with data in class. I've always used small group activities in class. But previously, I feared that I could not count on everyone being up to speed for each activity, so I used to spend some of each class presenting the lecture content first. But the disruption of the pandemic forced us all to be more reliant on the LMS. Now I am more confident that the module organization that I built will help them find the content as they need it, including the ability for them to circle back to seek clarifications on their own time.

Finally, remote work has given me an even greater respect for students and the incredible juggling required in their lives. After so many times when I assumed modules were fully open, that were not--because I missed hitting a button. After watching students log on from their cars, unmute with their children climbing their laps, submit assignments through the text box on their phone when they could not get to a computer that ran Word, I no longer have any reason to doubt their explanations of connectivity issues, family illnesses, and changing work schedules. The exhaustion brought about by the rapid online pivot led many teaching colleagues, in

increasing desperation, to grumble about students missing ever more deadlines. Reflecting on this made me realize how much I had assumed before that students needed to meet me when and where I was. But during the pandemic, cameras let us know each other's lives more fully. I've seen the energy students are putting into keeping up, and I want to refocus my efforts to meet their effort. I've now seen so many ways that a class can become more flexible, that I can no longer believe in a one-chance schedule for assessments. Instead, I know that meeting students where they're at each week means giving them opportunities to keep (re)engaging with the class. I want them to think and to practice until they master the work. Talking, laughing, teaching, learning. It's clearer now more than ever that we're in this together.