Chapter 3
The Use of Asynchronous Video Communication to Improve Instructor Immediacy and Social Presence in a Blended Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Instructors in a blended learning format struggle to find an effective balance between face-to-face instruction that is high in fidelity and online instruction that is high in flexibility. This chapter presents three cases where asynchronous video communication was used to help offer students instruction high in fidelity and flexibility. Although the medium for sharing asynchronous video varied between the three cases, findings indicate that video was a useful tool to improve instructor immediacy and/or social presence with a minimum amount of face-to-face instruction. The instructors in all three cases saw asynchronous video communications as an effective way to communicate with students, and the majority of students responded positively to asynchronous video communications.

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INTRODUCTION

A report by the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that over 90% of public colleges and universities offered distant learning courses during 2007 (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). University administrations have used online education as a cost-saving tool. Online learning also proves to be beneficial to instructors and students who require an amount of flexibility and access that cannot be found in a face-to-face classroom. However, online education lacks much of the quality of interaction and pedagogy found in a face-to-face environment and many are turning to a blended learning model (Graham, Allen, & Ure 2005). Graham (2006) defined blended learning as any community of learning that combines face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. In an attempt to improve online education, a growing number of public colleges and universities are combining the two modes of instruction. The NCES documented that nearly half of four year public colleges and universities offered blended learning courses. That percentage rises to 66% when examining two-year public colleges (Parsad & Lewis, 2008).

In addition to increasing cost effectiveness, flexibility, and access, Graham (2008) also cited that blended learning can facilitate more effective pedagogical practices by increasing active learning, cooperative learning, and learner-centered strategies. Rice, Starr, and Spencer (2005) reported that faster Internet along with the availability of hardware and software has allowed blended learning environments to more efficiently incorporate a "media cornucopia" (p. 216) into learning. Rice et al. acknowledges much of the same media can also be incorporated into face-to-face classrooms. However, it is the time and space flexibility of a supportive blended learning environment that can foster more in-depth independent learning. Asynchronous group communications may also include a larger diversity of viewpoints because the nature of the discussion allows time for more people to participate including shy or anxious students who normally do not participate in face-to-face group discussion (Graham, 2006; Rice, Starr, & Spencer, 2005).

Online Communications in a Blended Learning Environment

The nature of online education limits the forms and quality of personal interactions a student has with instructors and peers. All communities of learning have dimensions of interaction in space, time, and fidelity (Graham, 2006). A face-to-face learning environment requires student and instructor to share the same physical space; however, it also allows synchronous communication where ideas and information can be shared with a very short lag time. Also, in this environment there is a high level of fidelity were the senses of sight, audio, touch, and smell are active in the learning process (see Figure 1).

In contrast, in an online environment the student and instructor do not need to share the same physical space. Similarly, the time dimension of interaction is also commonly distributed through the use of asynchronous communication. These qualities of distributed interactions in both time and space are what give online education the flexibility that has made it popular with instructors and students. However, interactions found in an online learning environment have a low level of fidelity with most interaction being text based (see Figure 2). Both models of instruction have their affordances and constraints with face-to-face instruction providing a high level of fidelity but also providing little flexibility and online instruction providing a high level of flexibility with a low level of fidelity (Graham 2006).

By combining face-to-face and online instruction, the level of fidelity will increase as compared to online only learning environments. However, the more face-to-face class time a blended learning course employs the less flexibility it will have.