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Thinking Beyond Zoom: Using Asynchronous Video to Maintain Connection and Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities to move all in-person courses to a remote or online learning format. As a result, many faculty, including teacher educators, opted to transition their courses to live synchronous web meetings using web conferencing tools like Zoom. Despite benefits of synchronous communication, there are constraints with the use and overuse of synchronous live meetings (which many teacher educators ended up experiencing during the pandemic). In this paper, we describe the experiences of how four different faculty, at four different universities, used asynchronous video to maintain connection and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude with implications for practice and future research.

Keywords: asynchronous video; synchronous video; connection; engagement; social presence; community

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities to move in-person courses to some type of remote learning or online format (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Not surprisingly, many faculty opted to hold classes using web conferencing tools like Zoom (Lederman, 2020a, 2020b). Faculty likely have had some experience with synchronous video technology over the past few years. Further, for many, synchronous video perhaps best approximates their traditional classroom approach to teaching.

There are important affordances of synchronous communication. For instance, live synchronous meetings can help to quickly clarify problems, help decrease isolation, and improve social presence or community (Lowenthal, Dunlap, & Snelson, 2017; McDaniels, Pfund, & Barnicle, 2016). These affordances, though, come with some constraints. Synchronous class sessions often turn into long lectures (Lederman, 2020b), encourage multitasking and distraction, are difficult to participate in depending on situational factors (e.g., home life; broadband), and can leave people feeling frustrated, fatigued, and complaining of "Zoom hangovers" (Schulman, 2020). Specific security issues can also arise [i.e., "Zoom-bombing" or "online classroom hijacking," (see Seterea, 2020)]—prompting some schools to ban the use of Zoom in particular (Strauss, 2020).

RATIONALE FOR ASYNCHRONOUS VIDEO DISCUSSIONS

Confronted with the affordances and constraints of live synchronous meetings, when our institutions closed their doors, as teacher educators, we turned to asynchronous video applications to maintain connection and engagement. Applications like Flipgrid (https://flipgrid.com), VoiceThread (https://voicethread.com), Marco Polo (https://www.marcopolo.me), and EdConnect (https://www.edconnect.app) make it simple to have asynchronous video discussions. Further, the nature of asynchronous video communication can allow for more reflection, equitable opportunities to participate, more active learning, and fewer technological issues (Graham, 2006) all while modeling tools that teachers may use with their own students. In this article, we share how we used asynchronous video to increase student engagement and maintain a strong sense of connection while still providing our students flexibility when our four campuses closed.

PROCESS

Each of us independently turned to asynchronous video, using various applications and strategies, to support our students. Below we describe some approaches.

Wellbeing Check-Ins

As faculty and students alike found themselves dealing with unprecedented challenges, we each, in our own way, used asynchronous video to check the academic and emotional wellbeing of our students. Research has emphasized the importance of offering students emotional support when learning at a distance (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Ludwig-hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Tools like EdConnect and Flipgrid enable asynchronous discussions where students can use an app on their phone, or a web-based app on their computer, to record a short video (typically 1-3 minutes). Faculty and students can then post video replies. For instance, one of us facilitated an international teacher exchange initiative. When several participants had to return home, time zone differences made synchronous meetings difficult but asynchronous video, in this case Flipgrid, made it possible to conveniently touch base. Fellows described challenges they faced, the situation in their country, and their strategies for handling stress. Another faculty member created a thread for students to post about "COVID gratitude." While everyone was anxious and overwhelmed, it provided an opportunity to laugh and share good aspects of being quarantined, while enabling the faculty member to see how students were responding emotionally. Later when writing their final papers, students were asked for a quick video updating their progress. This simple "check in" helped students maintain consistent writing habits. During a capstone experience in another course and university, the fidelity of weekly video updates allowed the faculty member to easily sense frustration and excitement which in turn changed how he responded to students.

Class Discussion

Text-based asynchronous discussions are commonly used in online courses (Cheung, Hew, & Ng, 2008; DeNoyelles, Zydney, & Chen, 2014). However, it can be difficult to maintain student engagement in text-based discussions week after week; further, these discussions can feel like busy

work over time (see Cox, 2011; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Much like Zoom "hangovers," an overuse or emphasis of text-based discussions can be mind-numbing (Lieberman, 2019). Applications such as Flipgrid and EdConnect allow for the convenience of asynchronous communication similar to text-based threaded discussions but preserve the social connections established via video. One instructor created a discussion for students to share key insights via video posts about a design book they chose to read throughout the semester. He also created a thread for asynchronous "office hours," with the added benefit that everyone could view the video replies. Finally, in another class, weekly threads and discussion prompts were created for students to reflect and discuss class readings.

Student Presentations

Asynchronous videos allow students to record and share presentations that others can watch and respond to at their convenience. Tools such as VoiceThread enable students to upload and narrate a presentation and then others can add comments, provide feedback, and/or discuss the presentation through their preference of text, audio, or video (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017). In one of our courses, students were required to present on their capstone project using VoiceThread. This allowed asynchronous video discussion to occur. The format provided the opportunity for additional questions and more thoughtful responses than what are typically possible in a synchronous setting.

Video Feedback

Research has demonstrated benefits of asynchronous video to facilitate faculty and peer feedback (Borup, West, Thomas, & Graham, 2014). One of us used a combination of Camtasia and EdConnect to provide screencasting feedback on student projects, and another had students provide peer reviews on students' instructional units using screencasts. We found that screencasts were especially helpful when providing feedback on digital projects (e.g., websites), where it is difficult to provide context without the visuals captured in screencasts. Hattie (2009) concluded that "feedback was among the most powerful influences on achievement" (p. 173). Detailed feedback can also have an affective impact on students (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). While there are advantages to text feedback, asynchronous video can pro-

vide students with specific feedback while also helping to develop a sense of social presence (Borup et al., 2014). In this way, instructors can provide important feedback while also communicating visually their affective support.

EARLY RESULTS

When COVID-19 abruptly shut down in-person teaching, there was a natural rush to synchronous video. However, informed by our experience teaching blended and online courses, as well as prior research (e.g., Borup et al., 2012, 2014), we each turned to asynchronous video in our own ways, with the ultimate goal of maintaining connection and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, we each found asynchronous video helped accomplish this goal. Students actively participated in the asynchronous video discussions and appeared to appreciate the ability to see and hear their instructors and their peers but at a time that was convenient for them. During one of the well being check-ins, one student described that this was exactly what she needed at that moment--the ability to reach out, see each other, and support one another. An added benefit of our implementation of asynchronous video was that it enabled us to model tools and instructional strategies that K12 teachers might later use with their own students.

As we shared our experiences with using asynchronous video with one another, we identified specific strengths and weaknesses of using asynchronous video.

Strengths of Asynchronous Video

- Mobile devices allow for easy posting, in situations where text-based discussions would be slower or cumbersome.
- Asynchronous video enabled some introverted students (who rarely talked in web conference meetings) to share powerful insights.
- Asynchronous video increased flexibility during a difficult time and in turn eased the pressure of participating in a live session.
- Some apps allow students to preview/edit videos before submitting them, similar to text-based discussions.

Weaknesses of Asynchronous Video

- Following posts and replies can be more challenging than in text-based threaded discussions.
- Having course discussions outside of the learning management system (LMS), in any format, can be challenging for students to follow; embedding these tools in an LMS and consistent use should make this easier.
- Finding the right balance between asynchronous and synchronous means of communication takes time to figure out what works best in different contexts.

IMPLICATIONS

During this time it is important for faculty in colleges of education to model effective online teaching techniques. Preservice teachers traditionally receive little, if any, preparation on how to teach remotely or online (Archambault et al., 2016); experiences like these will likely shape their online or blended teaching moving forward (Norton & Hathaway, 2015). While asynchronous video will not be a good fit for every situation, using it effectively can help model for current and future teachers different ways they can connect and maintain student engagement from a distance. Based on our experiences teacher educators should consider using asynchronous video in a variety of different ways. First, asynchronous video can be used to emphasize student reflection (see Griffiths, & Graham, 2009a, 2009b). It can also be used to establish and maintain emotional connection with students (see Borup et al., 2012). In addition, asynchronous video can also be used to provide feedback on assignments, particularly for more creative assignments where feedback requires nuance (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017). It can also be used for students asking questions where a response by the instructor would benefit the entire class. Finally, asynchronous video can be used for class interactions across time zones or family/work situations where time flexibility is key (see Barksdale, Inkpen, Czerwinski, Hoff, Jones, Roseway, & Venolia, 2012).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Past research has investigated affordances of asynchronous video (Borup et al., 2012; Griffiths, & Graham, 2009a, 2009b). However, future

research is needed on the use of asynchronous video and specifically with its use by teacher educators. However, asynchronous video is not a panacea. Design-based research in particular should be used to investigate effective ways asynchronous video can be used to prepare preservice and inservice teachers as well as how they can use similar approaches with their current and future students.

DISCLOSURE

The first three authors have served or currently serve on an advisory council for EdConnect. However, EdConnect did not fund or have any involvement with this research nor do any of the authors endorse the tool.

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