

August 25, 2006 Podcast

Topic: Online Pedagogy . . . Enhanced!

The internet has changed everything – thank you Al Gore! From MySpace and YouTube to online shopping and banking, the internet has changed and enhanced much of what we do. What about online teaching and learning? Has the same transformation occurred in education? Well it certainly is true that students have flocked to take online classes and more and more instructors are teaching them. But what about the educational experience – for students and faculty? Pedagogically, is the learning experience equivalent to a traditional on-campus learning experience? Speaking as an early practitioner and enthusiastic advocate of online teaching I would have to say: No. At least not typically anyway. What’s missing?

When students rave about a class being fantastic, wonderful, they usually are not commenting on the quality or amount of information they acquired from the class, they are talking about the instructor and the relationship the instructor had with the class. That instructor-student relationship, so important to facilitating student learning, is much harder to develop in an online class.

Now, however, instructors using the Blackboard system have an extremely valuable tool to help foster this important relationship. Blackboard’s partnership with Horizon Wimba has allowed us to install a number of voice tools that some instructors are beginning to use in their online classes. These tools and how to use them are described on the Academic Technology “How Do I” web page:

<http://www.palomar.edu/atrc/Training/How-to/HowDoI.htm>

Why use voice tools? We’ve all seen the research over the years that suggest the actual words we use in spoken communications carry a surprisingly small percentage of the received meaning. This body of research suggests that a large majority of the total effect of spoken communications are conveyed in nonverbal aspects of speech such as tone, intonation, pace, timing, and periods of silence. In short, the vocal component of a communication is extremely powerful. Up to now, this component has been missing from most online classes. But no more! With the voice tools available to Blackboard instructors, we can now more effectively communicate with our students, decrease confusion and misunderstanding, and establish the personal relationship that is so crucial to learning.

Here are a couple of pedagogical applications of the voice tools that truly are easy and simple to do (5-15 minutes) and also quite powerful. As soon as you begin using these tools you will think of many possibilities – and don’t be afraid to ask your students for their suggestions!

I suggest creating a menu item (Control Panel/Manage Course Menu/Add Content Area) and naming it something catchy like - Listen! - or at least something better than Voice Messages. You can use this content area to place all or most of your voice messages. The two tools I'll suggest you begin with are (1) Voice Recorder and (2) Voice email.

(1) **Voice Recorder** is really quite easy to use (see the web page referenced above for how to do it).

- Welcome to students – record a message welcoming students to your course and tell them you will be “talking” to them throughout the course so be sure to check back here often. Type a message that will display along with the recording that tells students how to play the recording. Make this available for the first two weeks.
- Give students a weekly preview – things to do this week – that will motivate and encourage them
- Provide a weekly summary – what was accomplished (or should have been) and perhaps some highlights from the discussion board
- Provide a vocal explanation or description of a problematic concept or issue, even though a written explanation may seem definitive, sometimes hearing someone say basically the same thing is what makes it click. Note that voice recordings can be placed in any content area and some instructors may prefer to place them in a Course Documents or Assignments folder.

(2) **Voice email** is another voice tool that is very easy to use but connects with students in a more personal way than written emails.

- Send a voice email to select students who haven't logged into the course in several days or a week (monitor this via the Performance Dashboard) and ask if everything is ok and/or remind them of the importance of logging into the course regularly.
- Send a voice email to select students commenting on the work they've done
- Periodically send voice emails to all students offering encouragement – after a couple of months or so into the semester who couldn't use a little encouragement!?
- Name a voice email “Ask Me” and explain that this is a voice email that will only go to the instructor and will enable the student to ask a private question.
- Unless removed, voice emails are archived; in addition, students can save them to their local computer