Enhancing Student Engagement with Dynamic Online Learning Environments

How institutions of higher education can improve student engagement and retention rates with high-quality, interactive online videos

CONTENTS

3 Transitioning from the Classroom to the Web
4 Increasing Student Retention in the Virtual World
5 A User-Friendly Tool for Everyone
5 Accommodating the Mobile Movement
6 A plethora of Options
8 A Dynamic Learning Environment for All
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How institutions of higher education can improve student engagement and retention rates with high-quality, interactive online videos

By Shane Lovellette, Solutions Manager, TechSmith

With one in 10 students currently enrolled exclusively in online courses and 7.1 million American students engaged in online learning in some form, the proliferation of online education has expanded rapidly across the higher education spectrum. “As online learning garners increasing interest, higher education institutions are developing more online courses to both replace and supplement existing courses,” reports the New Media Consortium and EDUCAUSE in the Horizon Report: 2015 Higher Education Edition. “While the effectiveness varies from course to course, it has become clear that there is a demand from students for more accessible learning opportunities, and blended learning—the combination of online and face-to-face instruction—is a model currently being explored by many higher education institutions.”

For the instructional designers, information technology (IT) professionals, and faculty members who are creating and administering online content, this proliferation presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it gives all three groups a chance to put more educational opportunities in front of a larger swath of students—some of whom expect more than just a traditional higher education setting. On the other side of the equation is the plethora of content that has to be created, administered, supported, and updated in order to keep courses fresh, relevant, and engaging.

1https://www.uakron.edu/dotAsset/dd1dfebe-b663-486b-908c-51bd704fb7ac.pdf
Institutions of higher education are also challenged by the need to attract new students while also retaining existing pupils—a challenge that’s being driven by an average 0.3 percent increase in the number of college students over time. This trend has put increased pressure on both public and private institutions, both of which have been dealing with budgetary constraints since the national recession of 2008. Combine a lack of funding with stagnant enrollment and the need to drive continued revenue from tuition and you wind up with a highly pressurized educational environment.

In their quest to find ways around these challenges, many institutions have turned to online learning as a viable alternative to physical classrooms, live instructors, and a campus-based student population. By offering virtual learning opportunities, colleges can reach new students (i.e., those who reside outside of the institution’s geographic boundaries), serve their current student populations, and non-traditional pupils (i.e., those returning to school after working for several years and/or individuals who want to change careers). In many cases, these demographic groups were out of reach of the traditional college. These are the areas where online learning helps institutions attract new students, increase enrollment, and grow tuition numbers without having to make big investments in physical classrooms, buildings, and additional personnel.

**Transitioning from the Classroom to the Web**

Where some instructional designers and faculty members can easily transition from classroom instruction to administering online learning content, most require support and training to effectively make that switch. After all, teaching in front of a classroom of students is much different than creating and serving up online coursework. Faculty members must rethink how they deliver the e-learning, and instructional designers must be able to provide the right level of support to those instructors.

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the right level of support to those instructors. For example, it’s not enough to just turn a 50-minute classroom session into a PowerPoint presentation and hope that the points being conveyed are both clear and engaging. Text-based courses are equally as inefficient and even less effective than PowerPoints.
The good news is that technology as a whole has proliferated right along with the online learning movement, and today’s educators, IT professionals, and instructional designers have the tools that they need to create compelling, enriching online coursework. Using tools such as TechSmith Camtasia, a screen recorder and video editor, educators can develop quality videos that can be delivered online to students—many of whom are accustomed to learning via video in their personal lives using platforms such as YouTube.

**Increasing Student Retention in the Virtual World**

According to the *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, the key factors related to increased student retention in online learning are satisfaction with courses and programs; a sense of belonging to a learning community; peer and family support; time management skills; and increased communication with the instructor. When these five factors don’t align well—or when one or more fall by the wayside—completion rates for virtual learning can drop significantly.

On a positive note, student commitment, retention, and attention spans all increase when quality videos are integrated into the experience. For example, by helping to enhance the social aspect of online learning—an element that’s not always easy to capture on a virtual level—videos mimic the traditional face-to-face experience. They also help stoke interaction and collaboration between student and instructor, and among the students themselves. When pupils feel like they are part of something bigger, they tend to do better in class (and come back for more instead of getting discouraged and dropping out).
Quality videos also help create accountability in the e-learning environment, where students feel supported and faculty members know that their pupils are actively participating in the courses—both of which can be difficult to achieve online. By creating focused videos that align with the core coursework, faculty members can better involve their audiences, talk directly to them, and even create personal connections that would be impossible to build through slide presentations or a text-based curriculum.

**A User-Friendly Tool for Everyone**

It’s no secret that the pool of instructors in higher education comprises many different individuals who hail from varied backgrounds and who have different levels of hands-on experience with technology. For this reason, the video editing and screencasting tools that they’re using must be user-friendly and straightforward. Throw in too-high of a learning curve, for example, and it won’t be long before the software or cloud-based platform becomes yet another investment that “gathers dust on the shelf,” so to speak.

For example, consider the fact that creating videos for an online course, a tutorial, or even a course preview requires more than just a camera and a few minutes of a teacher’s time. To be as appealing and useful as possible, these clips should also integrate quizzes, Q&As, and other interactive elements that turn passive viewers of content into active learners.

Using Camtasia’s quizzing capability, educators and instructional designers can embed questions right into the video itself. When students watch the video as part of their online courses, it will automatically pause and prompt the viewers to answer the questions (before moving onto the next lesson).

The technology then allows the faculty member to paint a more accurate picture of each student and determine exactly how he or she is progressing in class. This instant feedback helps enhance student retention by allowing instructors to intervene (when necessary) at the right point—and not after the student has already become frustrated with a specific topic within the course (or, the course as a whole). By providing these analytic checkpoints at regular intervals throughout the course—rather than just at the midterm or the end of the semester—the video software creates a formative, built-in approach to student engagement and retention.

**Accommodating the Mobile Movement**

With nearly two-thirds of American adults (64 percent) owning a smartphone of some kind (up from 58 percent in 2014), today’s faculty members expect to be able to manage

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2 http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/chapter-one-a-portrait-of-smartphone-ownership/
and/or create at least some of their online coursework via their mobile devices. To accommodate this growing trend, Camtasia integrates across desktop and mobile by way of the TechSmith Fuse app (available for download on iOS, Android, and Windows). This integration allows the user (i.e., the faculty member, instructional designer, or IT professional) to leverage their phone’s high-quality camera to create compelling videos. Personal messages (“Hey, we reached a milestone this semester!” or “Keep up the good work.”) can be recorded from a mobile device and shared on the spot, or they can be uploaded to Camtasia for use at a later time.

Instructors are also using TechSmith Fuse to record more than just their screen. A professor of a culinary course, for example, could create a video about how to fold a napkin correctly or prepare a specific dish. In the healthcare field, an instructor can use the mobile capability to show students how to properly dress a wound, and in a science class the same functionality is often used to demonstrate the proper use of a lab kit. Using their mobile devices, instructors are simply recording video on the spot, and then leveraging Camtasia’s editor to enhance clips, add other elements (such as quizzes) and share the videos. Not only is this a time saver for instructors, but it also gives students a true, hands-on look at what’s taking place and what’s expected of them.

A Plethora of Options

A screen recording and video editing software that allows instructors to easily create content for distance and online courses, Camtasia can be used to record a walkthrough of a course syllabus, record a lecture, send weekly check-ins, or provide feedback to students. The platform includes features built specifically for online courses, such as ADA-compliant captioning; SCORM-compliant quizzes that integrate well with an existing learning management system (LMS) or grade book; the ability to easily include footage from a webcam in screen recordings to add a “human element” to courses; and hyperlinks that let instructors share valuable information (or add a table of contents, so students can jump right to what they need).

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Of course, there’s always a balance between ease-of-use and the number of features and functionalities that are packed into a software suite. At TechSmith, we intentionally keep things simple, because we know educational designers and instructors are already overscheduled and over-burdened. We provide the right balance for both the instructor who...
has never made a video before and the instructional designer who has successfully created hundreds of virtual courses. Tracy Schaelen, for example, is a 15-year veteran of online learning, distance education faculty coordinator at Southwestern College, and long-time user of online videos who continues to see excellent results from her use of Camtasia with students. “Videos allow me to get in front of my students in a way that’s not always achievable in the virtual learning space,” says Schaelen.

We’ve also tailored our software to appeal to a wide range of users—from the basic “I just want to create a 5-minute clip and post it online” instructor to the instructional designer who wants to integrate a number of creative and interactive elements into his or her video. The software’s green screen capability, for example, allows users to shoot footage with a plain background of a single color, then remove that background and replace it with something more useful in post-production. This feature not only makes videos stand out and look more professional, but it also gives teachers yet another way to boost their online courses. “Imagine how cool and engaging it is for students to see us standing and talking in front of the Eiffel Tower during an online lesson about Paris,” says Schaelen, who is currently experimenting with Camtasia’s green screen functionalities.
A Dynamic Learning Environment for All

In higher education, online video use isn’t limited to the virtual learning space. With blended and flipped learning gaining popularity in the traditional classroom, for example, Camtasia is enabling both of these innovative approaches by making it easier for instructors to create and share mini-lectures with their classes in advance. Then, class time can be allocated to hands-on and group activities and other types of enrichment.

By adding interactive elements such as quizzing to the equation, faculty members gain a better understanding of exactly where their students stand and what additional support is necessary. And with a number of professors already requiring Camtasia as part of their student materials, we also see more potential for student use of the software as more and more videos are integrated into student assignments.

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Going forward, we expect online video to play an increasingly important role in both the online and offline learning spaces in higher education, where financial challenges and the need to capture student attention are both creating a growing need for more quality, relevant content online. Using the analytics, quizzing, green screen, mobile integration, and other features of the Camtasia platform, faculty members and their support teams can keep the interest of current students and attract new pupils to their dynamic learning environments.
About TechSmith

TechSmith provides screen capture and recording solutions for lecture capture, online learning, professional development, and more. Record easily from anywhere, and share videos in class or beyond campus. With intuitive options for quizzes and captioning, our effective solutions are designed to bring out the best in educators and learners.

Learn more at www.techsmith.com. Email us at education@techsmith.com.