

Effectiveness of Guests in Large Enrolment Online Courses as an Instructional Strategy

Jane Costello, Linda E. Rohr

Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, jcostello@mun.ca

School of Human Kinetics and Recreation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, lerohr@mun.ca

Abstract

This paper introduces preliminary findings of an evaluation of the design-effectiveness of the guest instructional strategy focusing on guest speakers' effectiveness for learning (Costello, 2012; 2014a, b) and enhancing social presence (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976) in a networked learning course. HKR 1000, Fitness and Wellness, is an introductory online course widely subscribed by students at Memorial University, seeing about 1000 yearly registrations. In each of the three (fall, winter, spring) thirteen-week semesters, sections of 80 students are virtually combined into one course shell within the learning management system (LMS), Brightspace, formerly Desire2Learn (D2L). In the spring and fall 2015 semesters the design-effectiveness of the guest instructional strategy was evaluated based on students' perspectives (N=688). Effectiveness was determined by whether guests impacted student learning, related to course content, provided real life relevance, and fostered social presence. While large enrolments in online courses are not typical or favoured, it is possible to effectively design instructional strategies that use social learning (Rohr & Costello, 2015) to enhance learning and social presence. Content for HKR 1000 focuses on key topics for living healthy, active lifestyles, including basic principles of physical fitness, cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, body composition, nutrition, stress and weight management. To further highlight the link between real world experiences and course content, guest video presentations and discussions were included in the online course environment. Guests bring a unique perspective to a learning community as an integral, authentic resource impacting student success both in their learning and their professions (Costello, 2014b, Finkelstein, 2006). The use of guests as an instructional strategy (Costello, 2014a, Lowenthal, 2009) also served as a means to increase social presence in the course. The guests each appeared for a week during the semester, their topics being tightly linked to specific course content. Each had a unique, relevant area of expertise to share and provided a short 2-4 minute video clip and engaged in discussion with the students in the LMS discussion forum for the remainder of their respective week. An anonymous survey was administered in the learning management system to collect student feedback on these matters. Questions explored whether the students viewed the videos, posted questions, and read the discussion forums. In addition students were asked to reflect on the approachableness and warmth of each guest. Results indicate a positive guest impact on student learning, provision of real life relevance and enhancement of social presence.

Keywords

Human Kinetics and Recreation, guest speakers, social presence, networked learning, learning design

Research Context

This paper introduces preliminary findings of an evaluation of the design-effectiveness of the guest instructional strategy based on students' perspectives. The study looked at guest speakers' effectiveness for learning (Costello, 2012; 2014a, b) and enhancing social presence (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976) in an online (networked learning) course. HKR 1000, Fitness and Wellness, is an introductory online course that is widely subscribed to by students at Memorial University, with approximately 1000 registrations each year. In each of the fall, winter and spring semesters, sections of 80 students are virtually combined into one course shell within the learning management system (LMS), Brightspace, formerly Desire2Learn (D2L). Each section has a designated teaching assistant (TA) who initiates contact with their section during the first few days of the course. Through a common introductory email the TA of each section shares their appropriate contact information. Students only

need to be aware of their section division when sending questions to their TA; otherwise students are part of one learning community spanning all sections. Each TA however, is responsible for grading and corresponding via email and the LMS to their assigned students.

Course content is shared with all registered students concurrently. Content for HKR 1000 focused on key topics for living healthy, active lifestyles including basic principles of physical fitness, cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, body composition, nutrition, stress and weight management. Content is clearly relevant to all, regardless of program of study, age, gender, etc. Even without any formal health or wellness training, all students would have some experience with physical activity and nutrition. This prior familiarity with course content lends itself well to students' learning as they attempt to bring meaning to their experiences and further deepen their knowledge (Driscoll, 2005).

Some instructional strategies which use social learning and social networking technologies (Rohr & Costello, 2015) may be effectively designed to enhance learning and social presence. The use of guests as an instructional strategy (Costello, 2014a, Lowenthal, 2009) also serves as a means to increase social presence in online courses. Guests bring a unique perspective to a learning community as an integral, authentic resource impacting student success both in their learning and their professions (Costello, 2014b, Finkelstein, 2006). To further highlight the link between real world experiences and course content (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009), guest video presentations and discussions were included in the online course. The use of guests has been found to enrich learning events through discussion (Wearmouth, Smith, & Soler, 2004). Three guests, each with unique, relevant areas of expertise provided a short 2-4 minute video clip during weeks 2, 7 and 13 of the course. Specifically the guests spoke about recreation and leisure facilities available to students on campus (week 2), the benefits of including yoga in a fitness regime (week 7) and mental health and counselling resources available for students experiencing stress (week 13). The video topics were coupled with additional course content (readings, PowerPoint slides, etc.) with the themes of each week being introduction to health and wellness (week 2), flexibility and back health (week 7) and stress (week 13). Within D2L a discussion forum was available for students and guests to interact. Students were encouraged to post questions or comments to the guest. Guests responded within a week to all student posts. This design offered students the opportunity to reflect on the dialogue with guests who were experts in their field (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of including guest activity in the course as an instructional strategy to increase learning and foster social presence. To this end we evaluated whether guests' contributions increased student learning, related to course content, provided real life relevance, and fostered social presence.

Design

The anonymous survey was administered during the last week of class in each semester. The instrument contained 23 questions within four sections: guest videos, guest dialogue within discussion forums, guest contributions to learning and general comments. Survey questions explored whether the students viewed the videos, posted questions, and read the discussion forums. The questions were presented as multiple choice, Likert-style, or short answer. More specifically students were queried about what guests added to the learning topic, additional knowledge guests brought to the course content, the topicality of guests' contribution to course topics, foreseeable benefits from guests' presence to students, and potential increase of students' interest in guests' contributions. It also asked students to reflect upon the approachableness and warmth of each guest. Survey results underwent content analysis in relation to the research aims. The instructor invited students to participate through a news message in the course environment. This invitation was followed with a reminder to complete the survey a few days later via email and Twitter.

Results

A low response rate to the survey was evident for the spring 2015 semester (7.58%). Although HKR 1000 is an introductory course the spring course offering at Memorial typically attract students who have already completed two or more semesters of regular study. Initially the third guest was embedded in week 13, leaving little time for student reflection before the end of the term and the ensuing final exam schedule. For the fall 2015 offering, the stress topic was moved back to week 12 so as to provide students with more opportunity to learn about ways of dealing with stress towards the end of the semester when their anxiety levels tended to rise due to

increasing demands of academic work and deadlines. This realignment of course content also provided an opportunity to potentially address the low response rate attained in the spring and gather feedback on the use of all three guests in the final week of the course, week 13. This adaptation provided more robust results during the fall semester (17.03%). As the majority of HKR 1000 students are enrolled in their first semester at university in the fall, this could help explain the increase in participation. Regardless, data from each semester mirrored each other and have been combined here for dissemination. The combined response rate yielded was 13.95%.

Preliminary results from both semesters suggested that videos enhanced student's knowledge about the topics and encouraged dialogue between students. The guests' visits were timely and topical in relation to the course content according to 92% of participants. Ninety-three percent of participants reported viewing the guests' video presentations but only 20% posted questions to the guests. The primary reasons for not posting questions included: the video was comprehensive, students' questions were already asked, students found answers themselves elsewhere, or they had no time. For those who posted questions, 67% were satisfied with the responses provided by the guests. Overall, the guests were viewed as warm and approachable, with 72% of respondents indicating they agreed or strongly agreed with these descriptors. Guests were characterized as knowledgeable experts in their field, with 82-84% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, as relates to their postings in the discussion forum (82%) versus their videos (84%). Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that discussion participation was perceived as encouraging (77%) and inspiring (61%). For 59% of respondents, the discussions made them feel connected with the guests; with 78% indicating that they felt the dialogue added additional knowledge to the topics covered in class. Approximately 39% of respondents indicated that guests increased their interest in the respective topics when noting that they were inspired to read more about the topic after the guest video or speaking with others outside of the class about the topic (25%). Sixty-nine percent felt they gained a personal benefit from the guests' presence. These findings speak to the real life relevance of the guests and provide a foundation for future work in this area.

Initial analysis indicates that guests' contributions provide a positive learning experience for students by fostering student learning, social presence and real life relevance. Future surveys will need to address the issue of limited student interaction with the guests and explore additional ways to increase student engagement. Adjustments to the course learning design to include additional means of fostering interaction between the guests and students may see an improvement in engagement. Additionally, identifying ways guests can be more inspiring to students could help promote their use as an effective learning strategy.

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