Adventures in Converting to a Semi-Hybrid Class

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Introduction

The introduction of various technologies into the classroom has ushered an era of heavy use of online and video teaching techniques, as is evident in the rise of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and so-called “flipped classrooms” (classes in which the majority of lecturing is done online outside the classroom). The challenge is to find the combination of such techniques that will enhance student learning for the particular class one is teaching.

The basic question of this project is how does one orchestrate the available video and communications technologies to maximize the learning and comprehension of the subject matter in a class that is information dense and complex. If one can free some class time for more interactions and discussion, will this expanded forum help the student USE what they have learned in lecture and readings? The following is a preliminary report.

Methods

The target of this proposal is a course – Psychology 322 – Introduction to Drugs and Behavior” which had 173 students. As a survey of all drugs that impact behavior, this course is rich in details as well as a variety of complex issues involved with drugs and behavior. One fundamental problem with this course over the years has been how to generate meaningful discussion in a class this size while still introducing the fundamental materials. I report on two technologies for this project: 1) short (approximately 8 to 10 minute) online pre-lectures (so-called “Gateway” lectures) that the student view before the week of in-class meetings; and 2) Top Hat Monocle – a service which allows the students to use their smart phones, texting phones, tablets, or laptop computers to respond to short 2-minute extemporaneous prompts. The purpose of the Gateway pre-lectures was to free class time for more discussion without making the online assignment prohibitively too long.

Student responses to a Mid-Quarter and to an Exit Survey concerning these various devices were the main data set.

Results

169 of 173 students responded to the Exit Survey. Concerning the Gateway pre-lectures - 81% responded that the Gateway lectures enhanced the class; that was up from the mid-quarter survey in which 74% said the Gateway lectures enhanced the class. In addition, 88% responded that the length (approximately 10 minutes) was “about the right length”. 91% responded that I should continue to offer Gateway pre-lectures in future classes. Concerning the Top Hat mini-papers: 74% responded that these were thought provoking and an addition 13% responded that the Top Hat 2-minute papers were “a good part of the class – but not long enough”, so overall 87% essentially liked the 2-minute paper vehicle, and 81% responded that I should continue to have these 2-minute papers in future classes.

Conclusions

I learned that for this particular Neuroscience class that online lecture assignments can not be too long. The extremely low completion rates of those MOOCs that have been analyzed (Daniel, 2012; and Jordan, 2014) punctuates the caution that must be taken when one posts long online videos for a class. I also learned that students want to express themselves and their opinions, and that using their common communication devices seems to work well to this end.

The importance of this work is how it addresses what should be an overriding University pedagogical goal - information fluency, namely finding, evaluating, and USING information. This hybrid redesign may help the students better sharpen their critical thinking skills as well as their communication skills concerning the issues at hand. More importantly, these preliminary data sets emphasize the need to tailor your technology tools to meet the needs of your students while serving your pedagogical goals (Gibe, and James, 2015).

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Literature