

COMPUTER LOVE: REMOVING THE DISTANCE IN ONLINE CLASSES WITH VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS

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Dr. Nancy Bell is a trailblazer instructor who uses real-time online sessions to enhance communication and student engagement for her online classes at El Durango College. From years of teaching, she has experienced the positive impact that her live online sessions have on her students' critical thinking and collaboration. Her students, who are geographically dispersed or whose schedules does not permit participation in a traditional classroom, report in her course evaluations that they learn a lot and receive engaging real-time class interaction in her online classes. Ernest Lee, however, one of Dr. Bell's students, is enjoying her class, but occasionally hitting roadblocks with maintaining Internet connection during her live online sessions. While Dr. Bell's live online classes produce positive teaching and learning experiences in live sessions, Ernest's experience with unexpected and uncontrollable technical connectivity issue is stressful. He is feeling isolated because he seems to be the only student in his classes experiencing connection issues. Although the live online sessions are recorded, he is missing the social connection with Dr. Bell and the other online students.

Keywords: interactive learning; online teaching; distance education; web-based learning; Internet access, student engagement; student isolation; faculty presence; transactional distance theory; Adobe Connect; asynchronous learning; synchronous learning; IT support

TRADITIONAL STUDENT MEETS THE ONLINE WORLD

Since Ernest Lee retired from the military a year ago, he has enrolled as a full-time student at El Durango College. While in the military, he completed his first two years at St. Petersburg College taking traditional classes in the evening to accommodate his work

schedule. The credits from his prior college transferred without issue, so now Ernest is classified as a first semester junior at El Durango.

El Durango College offers a significant number of online courses, which works best for Ernest's family schedule. He has a home office setup with his computer connected to his Wi-Fi network using AT&T Internet service with speed up to 50 Mbps, so he is set to move forward with his classes. In addition, El Durango College provides an online learning manual with navigational steps and screenshots to help the students better operate the learning management system (LMS).

Ernest has mastered the navigation of the LMS and doing very well in all of his classes. The layout of his classes consists of weekly assignments, discussion forums, and some recorded video lectures. His Business Management instructor, Dr. Nancy Bell, designed her online class to allow students to engage at their convenience during the first half of the semester. For the remaining portion of the semester, she has incorporated the use of live online class sessions using Adobe Connect to allow students to network with each other while increasing critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

Dr. Bell takes a student-centered approach to teaching, so she is adamant about encouraging creativity in her students' critical-thinking skills. Conducting live online class sessions gives her an opportunity to lecture and facilitate collaborative activities with her students.

THE POWER OF SOCIAL LEARNING

Dr. Bell's ten years of teaching experience fostered her interest in finding new teaching strategies to use with her students. She realizes that learning in the 21st century demands more interaction and faculty presence in online classes in order to enhance the learning experience for her students.

When El Durango College purchased a license to Adobe Connect, a web conferencing tool, Dr. Bell was one of the first instructors to sign up for the faculty workshop to learn how to use the tool. After attending the faculty workshop, she immediately set up her Adobe Connect account and used it to present at three virtual conferences, which eliminated the need of financial support from El Durango College for travel expenses. Dr. Bell is known as a technology change agent in her department. Her students enjoy the authentic learning activities from her classes and express their contentment with their class experiences in the course evaluations at the end of each semester. Dr. Bell actively reviews these course evaluations from the previous semester for potential instructional gaps. This allows her to analyze and revamp her course layout for the next semester.

REMOVING THE DISTANCE...OR IS IT?

The use of Adobe Connect in Dr. Bell's online classes helps her to build rapport with her students and encourages more interpersonal communication. Ernest loves it! However, for Ernest, there is a significant amount of Internet interruptions that causes a delay in the transmission of Dr. Bell's scheduled live video presentations. To avoid noise distractions, Dr. Bell has enabled the audio mute feature within Adobe Connect. Instead, her students use the chat feature to send messages to her during the live online sessions and she is able to address messages as she is presenting. Dr. Bell does record the live sessions to allow her students to replay at their convenience. This is especially convenient for students who are absent from a live online session.

Ernest has informed Dr. Bell of the Internet interruptions during the live online class sessions. She suggests that Ernest contact the IT department for assistance. The IT department is only open from 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., but Dr. Bell's live sessions start at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday evenings. Yes, the recorded sessions are available for Ernest, but he misses out on the social connection with fellow peers in real time. Ernest desperately needs technical assistance, but he lives 100 miles from campus and is unable to retrieve technical assistance after business hours. He is loving his online class but hating the technical challenges because he is unsure if his Internet connection is strong enough to handle multiple data devices.