# Teacher, Are You There? Being "Present" in Online Learning

## Being "Present" in Online Learning

### Richard E. West

What learning experiences have been most substantial in your life? How many of those were special because of the people there with you, assisting you in your journey?

One student, Steven, enrolled in an online program because it fit his work and family situation best. He enjoyed the content of the classes, but mostly he had forgettable experiences and even some frustrating ones. At the end, he could not name any of his teachers or fellow students, and consequently he felt no connection to the university at all—except for one professor. This professor had reached out to him, had conversations with him, and served as a mentor. When Steven graduated, he attended graduation ceremonies mostly to see this one professor, the one who had made a connection.

A common misunderstanding about education is that it is primarily focused on brains, information, and memory. While learning certainly involves attempting to get things to "stick" in our heads, it is much more—it is about change and growth. Education is the learning of new information, yes, but also developing new skills, values, behaviors, feelings (you can "learn to love" for example), culture, and ways of living and interacting with the world. These things are often best learned through relationships, as the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed, and he argued we first learn things with others before we can internalize them ourselves.

As online education continues to expand, we have learned that effective learning involves human relationships—even if we are not physically together in a classroom. While it is possible to participate in a course in which the student reads a textbook, completes assignments, and takes exams without ever communicating with an instructor, that type of experience is often hollow. Richard Culatta, former director of the Office of Educational Technology for the US Department of Education and current Chief Executive Officer for the International Society for Technology in Education, said, "Learning is inherently social," before adding, "We need to see a shift in using tech less for presenting content and more as a tool to design, create, explore, and connect."[Footnote1]

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--Richard Culatta

Video technologies are part of that shift in helping online learners feel connected to teachers and peers. This connection comes from people developing the sense that they are "present" in the class, even if they are not physically in the same room. How is it possible to be present when you are physically separated?

# 1. Show the Real You

In all human relationships, we feel closer to someone who seems authentic and similar to ourselves. For example, Jimmy Fallon, John Krasinski, and other celebrities were able to expand their popularity during the COVID-19 home quarantines of 2020 by recording their shows at home. Family interruptions, dressing "down," and sneak peaks at their homes [(Jimmy Fallon has a slide!)](#) helped them feel more real and human to their viewers.

As another example, Joe Wicks, [the "Body Coach,"](#) grew astronomically in popularity as he led the world in daily physical education exercises during the home quarantine period. One regular feature of his workout videos was that he would change out the items on the shelves behind him (see figure 1) and invite viewers to guess what was new. He would then describe each item and explain why it was special to him.

Figure 1. Joe Wicks workout at home

For teachers, although it may be inappropriate to share some aspects of our personal lives with students, we can still shorten the distance between us and the students by showing some parts of our authentic selves. One time I was recording a video to my students and my toddler climbed up on my lap, interrupting me. At first I was frustrated by this interruption. However, later my students said, "It's really fun to see you at home. You're like a regular person!" For another example, consider this video of Chris Haskell, a clinical associate professor at Boise State University. How do the items in his background help you understand Haskell as a professional? What about as a person?



Figure 2. Chris Haskell video showing part of his office

**Tip!** Record videos from different locations in your home, office, or community. While you should be careful not to overdo it, a few seconds showing your personality can make learning fun. As an example, Lloyd Rieber of the University of Georgia recorded introductions to his videos from his farm, sitting next to his favorite cow, before moving on to the formal instruction parts of the lesson. Years later, students may not remember everything Rieber taught, but they will remember who he was as a person.



Watch on YouTube https://edtechbooks.org/-DkfE

Lloyd Rieber teaching about needs assessment after feeding Anabelle

## 2. Express (the Right) Emotions

Our eyes, ears, and other senses have evolved to take in a tremendous amount of information each second. Not only do we hear or see what someone has said or shown us; we also notice, unconsciously, details about *how* the message was communicated. For example, a simple statement such as, "I am so happy to see you today!" can carry the opposite meaning if you say it with a furrowed brow, terse tone, rolled eyes, or crossed arms. As another example, animators have become so skillful at using nonverbal communication that an entire story can be told without any dialogue. See, for example, Pixar's popular shorts "For the Birds" or "Geri's Game."

For the Birds

Some teachers are skilled at showing emotion in online videos. They smile, get excited, show surprise, lean closer to the camera, and otherwise talk *to the students* instead of to the camera. Students notice this and feel more connected to these teachers. Consequently they are more likely to reach out to those instructors if they have questions or need assistance and to feel more engaged in the courses. As an example, these two student quotes illustrate the connections that are possible in a class where the instructor used asynchronous video:

> "It was like he was having a conversation with me even though I wasn't responding. He was talking to me as if I was right there in front of him."

> "It seems like we are actually having that conversation even though we're not."

Meanwhile, other instructors are less skilled at showing emotions in their videos, and they come across as disinterested. Students in these classes do not feel the same sense of connection with their instructors and may even prefer text communication instead.

**Tip!** Your students will be more connected to you if they feel that you are talking to them directly. When recording your video, look at your camera instead of at your screen and imagine the student(s) you are talking to. They are really there…on the other end of the internet! Also, remember to smile, and greet your students when you begin, before launching into your instructional material.

**Tip!** Just as we can show positive emotions in a video, we can also easily show negative ones. For this reason, be careful not to record a video while you are frustrated—the students will probably notice and might misunderstand what you are trying to communicate.

**Practice!** Rewatch a video you record for your class, or ask a friend to watch it and provide you with feedback. Try watching it with and without sound. What emotions do you see, or is your video emotionless? (Remember ["Bueller? Bueller?"](#)) Are those the emotions you want to express? Now try recording the video again with a different emotional angle. Can your friend pick up the difference? Which would they prefer to see from their instructor?

# 3. Personalize Your Videos

When we communicate in person, we personalize the way we talk by referring to someone's name, or referencing something we have in common ("Isn't the weather great today? Are you enjoying your walk?"). Using the exact same phrases to talk to everyone, without any variety, would feel awkward. Similarly, in online communications, we can increase the feeling that we are "present" with our students if we customize our communications with them. Undoubtedly, there are times when it is better to be efficient. If most students make the same mistake on an assignment, we might copy and paste a reply to them. If we didn't do this, we might not have time to give them feedback at all, and students appreciate receiving the feedback!

However, when we are trying to establish a connection with students, these canned responses can seem cold and clinical rather than personal. Instead, if we reference shared experiences or specific things about the student we are talking to, that student feels important and understood. For example, an instructor might provide feedback on an assignment by using the student's name and referencing their work or a snippet of a past conversation: "Sara, I remember you said you were from the Midwest, and I loved seeing you reference your hometown in your paper. It made me want to visit! I do have some feedback for you...."

**Tip!** In large classes, keep a notepad or computer document handy where you can write notes about students so that you can refer to them later. Doing this can help you remember what conversations you have had with which students—it is unlikely that they will forget! Referencing these previous interactions will give the students, and you, a sense of a continuing conversation—one in which they are active participants.

**Tip!** Sometimes creating video discussions that are not directly related to the content of the class can be really helpful in establishing a positive learning community atmosphere. With in-person learning, teachers will often chit-chat with students before, during, and after class. This casual conversation can be helpful in making students feel noticed and important to the teacher. Online, these conversations need to be created intentionally. Try creating a "chit chat" thread for students to talk to each other and you about off-topic things, or have a weekly thread where you suggest a current-events topic and ask students to record video responses. Be sure to reply to them and continue the conversation! As one example, when the 2020 COVID-19 quarantine began in the United States, I created a thread for students to share short, asynchronous video clips about how they were handling the directive to stay at home, which helped us find the good in the situation. They shared that they enjoyed spending time with family, watching movies, and catching up on sleep, and we developed a greater sense of a shared experience as we talked with each other about the current state of society.

# Conclusion

Charles Graham, well known author on blended learning, said, "Many learners want the convenience offered by a distributed environment, and, at the same time, do not want to sacrifice the social interactions and human touch they are used to in a F2F classroom."[Footnote2] We can increase this sense of the "human touch" in all of our interactions, including through text. However, video has a particular power to convey our humanity. In particular, asynchronous video can provide some of the convenience of online learning without sacrificing the human connection. If we personalize our videos to the students, express emotions, and strive to show them a little of who we really are as people, this can increase the feeling that we are "present" together in the class, even if we are physically separated. This feeling of presence can increase student engagement and satisfaction with the course, as well as students' feeling of connection and appreciation for the instructor.

# Acknowledgment

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## Notes

1. Richard Culatta, personal communication, December 21, 2020.
2. Charles R. Graham, "Blended Learning Systems: Definition, Current Trends, and Future Directions," in *The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs*, eds. Curtis J. Bonk and Charles R. Graham (San Francisco: Pfeiffer Publishing, 2006), 9.
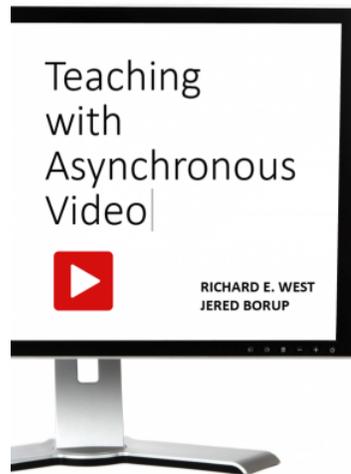
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