



Critiquing My Own Online Course against Online Best Practices for Online Instruction at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Abstract

In the video and film program, we offer some courses in our multi-camera production studios, editing labs, and a mobile production truck that, quite frankly, are not built for online instruction. One challenge has been to convince faculty that online offerings are necessary, and they benefit the students, the faculty, and the institution, but they do not have to be offered in lieu of our hands-on courses. I had already developed our 1080 Post Production I class for online delivery based on the standards set forth in the division of MTSU Online who dictate the criteria that online courses on our campus should meet. However, I got the idea to now compare my MTSU online version of 1080 to the standards set forth at our flagship institution, The University of Tennessee Knoxville (UTK), to gain perspective on any strengths or weaknesses I may have overlooked in an effort to help with show faculty how well the online version had been designed.

Keywords: online education; universal design for learning; film and video production; educational outcomes; online teaching and learning; assessment; university strategic plan; serving students; post production; elearning; Covid-19

Introduction

I started advocating for more online instruction in my department at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) after I was hired as a new Associate Professor in Video and Film Production in 2016. Prior to joining MTSU I had been tasked with researching the importance of integrating online curriculum at my previous institution, Valdosta State University (VSU). At VSU, because I had shown interest in the various delivery systems and methods for teaching outside of the traditional classroom, I became part of an initiative to develop an online curriculum that would be housed in my department as a joint venture between Mass Media and Speech Communication. Because my program had an increase in enrollment while other areas on campus were growing stagnant, and I had been championing for more online options for our students since I was hired in 2011, I was chosen by my dean and department head at the time, along with another colleague, to develop an online degree in Emergent Media and Communication. Over two years, we met several times with Strategic Planning, the Provost, Dean's Council, and the Division of ELearning to try and nail down who we would be targeting and how we would deliver a new online degree in the Department of Communication Arts. In the end, and under the wing of a new department head who had a different vision for the curriculum, the initiative became more about gaining enrollment than in quality online instruction. Thus, my efforts were handed over to new faculty members and new administration to craft the degree program in a new way.

It was because of this experience that I was able to champion for more responsible and quality driven online courses at MTSU. My passion for growing online options in the curriculum was tied to serving students from various backgrounds through universal design for learning and accessibility. According to Aparico, Bacao, and Oliveira (2016), "...e-learning is examined from different angles; some studies are focused on how platforms operate to deliver information; others focus on the classes' pedagogical content development, others focus on the user interaction." At MTSU I was finally able to strategically develop online courses in the video and film program by showing that sound pedagogy would lead to the best online experience for students, even in a highly technological and applied field of study. My love of technology played a role in this pedagogy.

It was not until my experience trying to justify why online classes are relevant that I learned the importance of pedagogy and andragogy in developing online classes. As Boetchner and Conrad (2016) point out in their book *The Online Teaching Survival Guide*, "...we know what a course is and what pedagogy, the study of teaching, is. But do we? Sometimes it is helpful to review the origins of the terms that we use every day. Particularly as we move to new learning environments, assumptions as to how we structure teaching and learning, the purpose of learning, and the resources and time for learning are worth a new look." I had heard many times from students in my on-ground courses that they could engage in the content I was teaching them on their own at their own homes. However, I knew that any online activities they did at home had to be engaging and provide for a good interactive experience outside of the classroom. I also knew that since my particular field of study is highly applied, I had to strike the right balance between delivering quality online instruction and still meeting the same outcomes as in the traditional classroom.

Thankfully, at MTSU, my advocacy for the importance of online classes in our curriculum has been made a priority in my program and my department. Now full circle, I have been involved in the development, redesign, or oversight of seven online courses in my program since 2016 and we are planning to develop more. I have also raised over \$150,000 in support funds for online teaching in my department and I have obtained 10 certifications from Quality Matters and The Online Learning Consortium. I feel that I now have the background to back up my opinions of online teaching and learning. The challenge at this time is to make sure that the courses we offer online are sound because we are a professional, applied major, and sometimes the skills needed to matriculate through our curriculum are not conducive for an online learning environment.

In the video and film program, we offer some courses in our multi-camera production studios, editing labs, and a mobile production truck that, quite frankly, are not built for online instruction. One challenge has been to convince faculty that online offerings are necessary, and they benefit the students, the faculty, and the institution, but they do not have to be offered in lieu of our hands-on courses. After convincing everyone that we did, in fact, have some classes that were good for converting to online sections, I had to show them how the online sections still matched the same deliverables as the on-ground sections. I had already developed our 1080 Post Production I class for online delivery based on the standards set forth in the division of MTSU Online who dictate the criteria that online courses on our campus should meet. However, I got the idea to now compare my MTSU online version of 1080 to the standards set forth at our flagship institution, The University of Tennessee Knoxville (UTK), to gain perspective on any strengths or weaknesses I may have overlooked in an effort to help with show faculty how well the online version had been designed. I chose this route because UTK offers several degrees in education around online teaching and learning and are held as the standard in the state for online development. Using their checklist that they use for developing their online courses would be a good way to show that MTSU has the same focus on responsible and sound online course development and that faculty could trust that our online 1080 Post Production I course would deliver the same outcomes as the on ground version.

My Experience as a Participant of My Own Course

I took a look at my class through the lens of being a participant instead of a designer to assess what information about the course students first encounter. The course teaches students basic video non-linear editing on the Adobe Premiere Pro platform. It is taught on a regular semester timeline of 15 weeks. The content covers editing workflow, importing and organizing media, working with clips, video editing transitions and keyframing, editing and mixing audio, video color grading, graphics, and exporting projects. The assignments include weekly chapter quizzes, watching weekly LinkedIn Learning videos and uploading certificates of completion, two tests consisting of a midterm and final exam, and turning in three edited final projects using footage provided by the professor. From the perspective of a student, my course is straight forward and delivers what a learner should expect from a class in basic video editing.

1080 Post Production I at MTSU was traditionally offered face-to-face (F2F) since its development in the curriculum. It had just become a stand-alone class when I arrived as a new faculty member in the fall of 2016. LinkedIn Learning had also just been brought to campus in the fall of 2016. I taught two sections of 1080 F2F in the spring of 2017. I had a mix of students who either knew nothing about post production or knew more than this pre-candidacy, lower division, basic editing course had to offer.

Because of my past experience with judging whether or not certain courses would be viable online at VSU, I hypothesized that 1080 would be a good online course at MTSU. I based this on the way the students responded to my teaching – I found myself showing them editing techniques, having them perform the tasks themselves, then apply the tasks to their own projects. I felt as though I was participating with them as both a student and an instructor because Adobe had radically changed its platform in 2017. I got to see first-hand what it was like for the students to decipher the technology and then apply it to their own projects. We relied heavily on LinkedIn Learning, and the new use of several courses offered by LinkedIn Learning that taught all of us. At the end of the semester, I surveyed both sections of students asking them if they thought this was the type of course that could be

offered online. The overwhelming response was ‘yes.’ I then developed the course over the summer and next fall and we started offering 1080 online in the spring of 2018.

Again, I was learning with the students as I was tasked with populating the course shell with content from LinkedIn Learning and constantly asking myself what would work for students in the online course shell. My experience became putting myself in the role of student in order to see their perspective in taking a highly technical and applied aspect of Video and Film Production and completing the course in an online environment. As if this was not hard enough, the task was compounded by the fact that online courses at MTSU are only offered asynchronously. Therefore, I had to put myself in the shoes of a young adult coming to college for the first time and being tasked with learning not only the skills for the course, but also an online delivery system in which the course is housed.

It was these factors that made me realize that the course could be successful as I saw major potential for giving students options but also in improving the course over time to reach all students. For example, I recently read the chapter “Orientation to Online Teaching Learning” in the textbook Essentials of Online Course Design and was happy to find that many of the components that I embedded in the course were in line with the suggestions made in the text (Vai and Sosulski, 2016). Still, I wanted to compare the course to UTK to make sure that what we are offering in our department was sound in terms of online engagement. I examined two components of my 1080 course design that worked well, and two that did not, to reflect on my findings.

Two Aspects of the Course Design That Work Well

To facilitate this analysis, I completed the “Best Practices for Developing and Delivering Online Instruction at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville” checklist and performed an initial comparison to those asynchronous standards. This analysis was completed on a four-point scale with attributes of NW (Needs Work), A (Acceptable), X (Excellent) and N/A (Not Applicable). The results showed that the two aspects of my course that work well are the Course Introduction and the Instructional Design and Delivery units. The Learning Management System (LMS) we use at MTSU is D2L Brightspace. One of the things I made sure to do when I built the course was to implant the objectives of the course in the News Tool, the Calendar, and the Content section of the course. That way students can clearly see that no matter when they begin, what is expected of them and what I am looking for in terms of them meeting their outcomes is clearly defined in several places in the course shell. In The Online Teaching Survival Guide, Boettcher and Conrad emphasize that “Developing and communicating explicit expectations reduces uncertainty and encourages good time and learning management” (2016). The layout and information in the online version of VFP 1080 is consistent between all the modules in the Content section, the News Tool, and in their Calendars where all the information on the course activities is contained thus promoting communication and reducing uncertainty. My welcome statement stays up all semester and outlines how to be successful in the course, as well as multiple ways to reach out to me and how to navigate the LMS which is another important way to promote communication. I also made sure to build all of my content in an accessible way using HTML in all of my modules for screen readers and I provide statements on accessibility and Student Support Services on campus. All of this helps in communicating the expectations of the class to a variety of students all with kinds of different needs. Please review below a few screen grabs of my welcome page and instructions in one of my modules:


Post-Production I - VFP-1080-D03

News ▾

Welcome To VFP 1080 Post Production I Online! ▾ ×

Posted Jan 14, 2019 12:01 AM

My name is Marie Elliott and I am your instructor for the course.



VFP 1080 Post Production I is a 3 credit hour course. There is no pre-requisite for the course.

You can reach me via email at melliott@elearn.mtsu.edu.

Directions for the course and due dates for your assignments are located in the "Content" section of the course, click on it above to take a look at your upcoming semester and check it frequently. I have also linked your due dates to your calendar as a reminder for when things are due.

I look forward to having you in my online class this semester!

Another thing I did when I built the course was to utilize the technology available to me to deliver this highly technical course. When it comes to technology tools and their specific pedagogical uses, Boettcher and Conrad recommend creating “a media-rich learning environment to provide variety, choices, and depth of processing opportunities...audio and video lectures and resources, such as TED talks” (2016). In my course the students use LinkedIn Learning in order to learn the techniques associated with basic editing, and they also edit short projects that they upload to YouTube and also Dropbox for Business on campus. We also use our own servers to provide footage to students to practice with as they watch the tutorials on LinkedIn Learning. Specific criteria are provided for completing projects, and there are clear expectations and rubrics for guiding the students through completing the course outcomes.

There is a discussion board available for students who are having technical issues, and each module is linked back

to the syllabus, the News Tool and the Calendar so students are always aware of due dates and expectations. The syllabus is clear and students know what is expected of them each week of the semester. For example, students upload their Certificates of Completion and take weekly quizzes at the end of each chapter in their Adobe Premiere Pro textbook that count towards their overall grade.

The image shows two screenshots from a course management system. The left screenshot displays a course overview for 'Week 3 Jan. 28-Feb. 1'. It includes a sidebar with navigation options like Overview, Bookmarks, Course Schedule, and Table of Contents. The main content area lists assignments such as 'Read Chapter Two and Chapter Three in Adobe Premiere Pro CC 2018 Classroom in A Book' and 'Watch Introduction To Video Editing on LinkedIn Learning'. The right screenshot shows a calendar view of assignments from March to April, including 'Test One Midterm Exam - Availability Ends', 'Week Nine File upload - Due', 'Week Ten File Upload - Due', 'Week Eleven File Upload - Due', 'Guns/Smoke/Documentary /Music Video Rough Cuts - Due', and 'Rough Cuts Self Assessment For Extra Credit - Due'.

Two Aspects of the Course Design That Do Not Work Well

The two aspects of the course that did not work well in comparison to the “Best Practices for Developing and Delivering Online Instruction at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville” were the categories Learner Support and Learner Engagement. In terms of Learner Support, the UTK guidelines suggest a statement explaining the technical skills required in the course. 1080 online assumes that the student knows that they are taking a highly technical course based on their participation in the major. However, it would be beneficial to have a statement describing the technical aspects of the LMS to the students so that they are aware of the technical requirements of the online course shell and not only the editing platform they will be learning. Also, in the UTK guidelines, it is suggested to provide knowledge on dealing with computer viruses which the course also does not contain. This is important in the aspect of file sharing that happens in my course and should be included in the course design. My course does include the rest of what is suggested in this unit in terms of the best practices so it was nice to see the alignment between MTSU and UTK in this realm.

Another unit that showed aspects of my course that did not work well as compared to the UTK guidelines was Library and Commons Resources. Because we are a professional and applied major, we use specialized equipment and resources that we can store on our own servers and in our own college library for student use. We rarely use the campus library as a resource because our lab is updated on a more regular basis than the campus library. For example, in using Premiere Pro CC on campus, our students are encouraged to use our Media Arts Lab to work on projects if they do not have their own Adobe account for accessing Premiere Pro. This is because our lab undergoes the latest cloud updates of Premiere Pro (PP) as soon as they happen. This is not the case for the campus library at MTSU. The library only updates based on what version they need in terms of support for the entire campus at that time which is often behind what our students in our specialized major. For example, Premiere Pro is now on CC 2019 in our Media Arts lab but the MTSU campus library is still on 2018. This is because the library serves a student base that is not doing advanced video editing. However, this needs to be addressed in the online 1080 course in case there are students that need access to PP during hours that our lab isn't open. In PP, you can go forward with files to the next version, but you can't go back. So, I need to add a section on PP at the campus library and explain the differences in using the Media Arts lab and the campus library.

The last unit that needs work in terms of comparison to the Best Practices as outlined in the UTK document is Learner Engagement. After having learned about how students feel more comfortable in an online setting when they are emotionally engaged with their social presence, I can see where the importance of having students introduce themselves to their peers and to me is important in establishing student engagement. Cui, Lockee, and Meng assert that “... an important variable in the online learning environment, social presence, should receive sufficient consideration and be adequately embedded in online settings in education” (2013). Furthermore, in linkage to this concept, I do not have embedded in my course prompts for myself to be engaged with my students in either chats or discussion posts. This was excluded as part of my Teaching Assistant's (TA's) duties who oversee the chat and discussion boards. However, because of my recent experience in learning more about online teaching environments, I should craft an introduction to serve as to my involvement in the chat and discussion boards

because I believe the students will feel more engaged with me in the course. I believe this would help the students know that I am aware of their social presence as their instructor which is really important.

In Conclusion

Based on reading the 'Best Practices' document from UTK, I assert that this course would benefit from a blended model in its execution or offered synchronously. I think offering it as purely asynchronous is beneficial to some students, but not all. I think the course critique pointed out flaws that can be corrected with a blend or hybrid of both synchronous and asynchronous techniques. Learning more about synchronous offerings and tools has helped me see that the deficiencies I have found in this course that could be remedied by simply moving to a blended model. I am eager to present this to my peers at MTSU as they also want the best for our students. However, I am skeptical that they will move to incorporate synchronous capacities in general on the MTSU campus as they seem to be very committed to asynchronous offerings at this time. Maybe now that Covid moved everyone to teaching "remotely" this past year things may change. Still, I am eager to show them the research and navigate the waters of a blended environment simply because I believe it will benefit my students in the Video and Film Production major which really means I think it can benefit all students on campus. In Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijsselaers, "CMC research has suggested that the actual use of both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools and the resulting interactions in an online learning situation are related to individual differences between learners, and specifically strong relations have been found with motivation or self-determination." Based on my initial quantitative findings in my surveys at the end of my F2F 1080 classes spring of 2017, and then paired with my qualitative observance of how students reacted to learning basic editing in the F2F courses, I think that certain modes work better for certain learners and my colleagues and my administration should be aware of this. I think that independent students who have less trouble with time management benefit more from a completely asynchronous class whereas other students need more support in terms of their learning, especially in an online environment, as also pointed out by Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijsselaers whose findings showed:

...that in an early stage of the course...autonomy-oriented learners (i.e., learners with an intrinsic drive who can effectively steer their own learning) engaged significantly more in both task-related (TR) and non-task-related (NTR) discourse than control oriented learners (i.e., learners with an external drive, who are less efficient in steering their learning process). Over time (2-3 weeks), the autonomy-oriented learners." It is my goal to make the classes I have developed better and focused their discussion away from NTR to TR discourse, while the control-oriented learners did not. Interestingly, at an early stage in the course, autonomy oriented learners already developed a preference to connect to other autonomous learners (2012).

I have been intrigued and involved by online teaching since my introduction to it at VSU but I am now really understanding its value. I think that the push for asynchronous teaching has generally come to meet demands in offerings and gaining tuition numbers and that online classes have been sold as something that are attractive to entice non-traditional learners and other college students. These options, beyond the traditional classroom, are great but often the university administration does not acknowledge the intense preparation that goes into designing the courses. Like Yamagata-Lynch points out "social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence affect participants' level of engagement" (2014)...and that "faculty had made a curricular decision that the course I will discuss in this article was to be delivered 100% online" (2014). Yes, we should get excited about offering courses online, as illustrated by the push from faculty in that article, but no matter where the conversation starts or how we get the course shell built, we have to take care that students are still meeting the same outcomes as their F2F peers and they have a good experience in the online environment and are not just "stuck" in online classes because of matriculation efforts. Yamagata-Lynch also states, and I will end this article on this excerpt, "In order to provide meaningful learning spaces in synchronous learning environments, the instructor/designer needs to balance the tension between embracing the flexibility that the online space affords to users and designing deliberate structures that will help them take advantage of the flexible space" (2014).

Work Citations

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Biographical Sketch

Marie Barnas has earned two M.F.A. degrees, first in Film Production from Ohio University and then in Creative Writing from Georgia College and State University. She teaches courses in scriptwriting and film and video production. Her professional interests include online education, study abroad, and documentary production. Her short films have won numerous domestic and international awards including Telly, Cindy, and Worldfest Houston among others.

In 2014-15 she was awarded fellowships by The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, The International Radio and Television Society, and The National Association of Television Producers and Executives. She was awarded a second IRTS fellowship in 2018. She has taught both on ground and online classes in Ohio, Georgia, Tennessee and abroad in Lithuania and Bulgaria for over two decades.

In her spare time she enjoys spoiling her two fur babies Heidi Roo and Roxy Roo, traveling to distant lands, and producing the award winning podcast Voca Vacay with her husband and colleague Frank Barnas. She worked in the film industry in Atlanta, GA from 2004-2011 and is a native of South Charleston, West Virginia.