

Transforming Your Lectures into Online Videos

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When I was asked to create an online course 20 years ago, I simply transcribed my face-to-face lectures into 10–15 page Word documents that I posted in our LMS. Don't ask me how my students managed to get through them.

I was making the mistake that is made with nearly all new technologies—looking at them through the lens of the old way of doing things. It usually takes many years of experience before people learn about the unique principles that govern the new technology and how to use it effectively. For online courses, this usually means creating videos to replace the traditional face-to-face lecture.

While this is an improvement over text, most faculty create an online video by just adding narration to the PowerPoint they use in their lectures. Once again, they are thinking in the old paradigm by reading pages of mind-numbing bullet points as if their students were illiterate. Visuals are not for projecting your detailed notes—they are for amplifying the message with images that provide an emotional emphasis and visual analogue to the concept. The imagery makes the abstract concepts easier to understand and remember.

Why do we love TED Talks? Partly because they do not allow bullet points. Similarly, the movie *March of the Penguins* was not two hours of Morgan Freeman reading bullet points to viewers. When the subject was how penguins transfer eggs from father to mother, the viewer saw a video of penguins transferring eggs. It's as simple as that. The imagery

strengthens the message, unlike bullet points that only obscure the message because the viewer does not know whether to read the bullet points or listen to the narration. Good imagery also adds emotion to the message. Everyone who saw *March of the Penguins* remembers the image of the frozen egg that took too long to transfer. As a result, people remembered the process. In other words, they learned, which is the whole point of teaching.

Faculty who are asked to teach online need to be guided through the process of reconceptualizing their face-to-face lecture to an effective video-based format. Here are a few simple rules to help:

Find a theme

Too often faculty go into the course development process with the “content coverage” mentality where the focus is on touching all the necessary topics. This leads to passing information to students without context, as if they are transferring information between databases. But while computers can record reams of information with accuracy, the human mind cannot. The human mind is built to remember significance, and so the first rule of teaching is that “only significance matters.” That is, any information needs to be conveyed in terms of its significance.

Thus, the first job of a faculty member is to identify the significance in the information. That should lead to a single theme in each video. *March of the Penguins* was built around the theme of the hardships that penguins face in living and reproducing. Similarly, my own video on the history of medical ethics was developed around the theme of the profession transforming itself from a “doctor’s orders” view to one that respects patient autonomy. The theme connected all the various examples I used. Only covering the various seminal cases would not have helped students learn the concept nearly as well. But running a thread through the cases allows students to more easily draw up the information.

Videos can include statistics and factual information, just as *March of the Penguins* mentioned the number of penguins that gather for the mating season. But nobody remembers that number. People only remember its significance—that it was large—which was of course amplified by images of seas of penguins. That significance is what the viewer will take away, and so all information should be presented in terms of its significance.

A good example of this transformation process is the video “Jefferson and the Constitution: NOT Love at First Sight” by Tom Richey (<https://youtu.be/p4uOPBFHRMA>). While many history professors might teach about the U.S. Constitution by simply going through the various components (i.e. covering content), Richey crafts the lesson as a love story between Thomas Jefferson and the Constitution. He tells the story of how Jefferson’s good friend James Madison sent a draft of the Constitution to Jefferson in Paris. Madison expected Jefferson to be just as enamored with the document as he was. But Jefferson had a mixed

reaction to it, and the narrative draws the viewer into the story of why Jefferson was lukewarm and what he thought was missing. By the end of the seven-minute video, viewers have a far deeper understanding of the various elements of the Constitution and why they are there than they would have received from just a description of the elements alone.

Start by motivating the lesson

Whether delivered through an in-person presentation or a video, if the content does not grab the viewer's attention within the first 90 seconds the speaker has lost the audience. A common mistake people make is to begin with an overview of topics to be covered, which will be forgotten as soon as it leaves the speaker's mouth. Again, TED Talks are a good model. Instead of an overview, they always begin with an attention grabber, such as "We are on the cusp of the greatest technological advance in history" or "Education is broken." These openings pique the viewer's interest and make them want to hear more.

While faculty might at first wonder how they can capture a student's curiosity with their material, they should ask why they themselves find the material interesting. A civil engineering instructor teaching bridge design might see that the significance of the material is that poor design can lead to disaster, and so might start with a video of the famous Tacoma Narrows bridge collapse. In a video I created for my medical ethics course on the legal definition of death, I started with a real story of doctors using the wrong standard of death and declaring patients dead who were not legally dead. A psychology instructor might open by asking students a question about human behavior that has a counterintuitive answer. Only after grabbing the students' attention should the instructor begin the lesson.

Find the images that will resonate with students

Once an instructor has a theme and the significance of each part of the lesson in terms of that theme, he or she can record the narration and add images to it. This is the part I enjoy the most. I like looking for striking images that will capture students' attention. Too often people default to bland stock photos of good-looking business people smiling at the camera. Those are not meaningful and only recede into the background like wallpaper. The eye is attracted to novelty, and images should be something that pop out at the viewer. When I create slides, I might illustrate the concept of isolation by showing the image of an astronaut floating in space. When I go over my bio and mention I am from Wisconsin, I include a cow as the image.

Faculty should not try to create something that looks like slick marketing because marketing only turns us off. The whole point is to create memorable material that the student will retain, and so anything that does that is perfectly acceptable no matter how goofy or strange.

There are a number of good places to find images licensed for educational use. These, along with the technical process for combining images and narration to create an educational video can be found in "[Digital Storytelling for Enhanced Learning](#)" from the May 2016 issue of *Online Classroom*. But it all begins with understanding how to rethink face-to-face teaching visuals and transform them into content that makes best use of the online medium as its own unique communication forum.

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