

# HIGH TOUCH, HIGH FEEL IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER IN THE AFTERMATH OF COVID-19

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## INTRODUCTION

In March 2020 as Covid-19 continued to impact the world, universities quickly moved many courses from face to face to online. Faculty became online instructors overnight. One semester turned into two semesters and into three semesters. Educators needed to learn new technology quickly and to find ways to continue that high touch, high feel approach with students that they fostered in their face to face classes. How could they maintain that warm connection they established with students during the physical class-room? Chatting with students before the class began, exchanging social conversation during the break and providing instant feedback during the class, accompanied with visual cues, such as body language and facial expressions and tone of voice. This instructor did not want to lose the connections she made with students and sought ways to ensure the connections continued in her virtual classrooms. This action research study outlines the ways the educator fostered that high touch, high feel in her virtual world. From Saturday evening informal online gatherings, to the use of personalized videos on discussion boards, as well as detailed feedback on student assignments confirm that there are ways to keep that warm environment of connectivity even in a world of Covid-19 and uncertainty.

In this study, the researcher sought to answer the following question:

What factors contribute to a high touch, high feel online learning environment?

The researcher used information from eleven online courses between March and September 2020 in a South East Florida public university in the United States.

In online courses and with face to face courses, instructors often use discussion boards to engage students in interactive conversation. Instructors and students generally communicate their thoughts via a written piece within the text box of the discussion board. An alternative to a written post or response is a personalized video. The use of a personalized video can add student and instructor presence within the course. Even a personalized welcome video at the start of the course module may help a student feel connected to the instructor. Today and tomorrow, online classrooms will grow, and technology will continue to enhance online learning. Educators will continue to learn and incorporate technology into their classrooms to enhance student satisfaction and engagement. This educator will share her personal reflections and study findings during 2020.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Personalised videos*

Draus et al., (2014) emphasize that the teacher student relationships that are strong can be connected to student satisfaction in a classroom. The use of personalized videos, as well as informal ways to get together virtually create a warm environment and invite interaction and perhaps ease the sense of loneliness. The virtual classroom goes from being 'dead' to 'alive'

and the student experience is enhanced. Dennen (2011) found that instructors created places that invited increased interaction between students when they placed a personalized video into a discussion board. According to the student feedback and grades, there was an increase in satisfaction between students, as well as a higher level of learning. Students communicated with one another more often than they did without embedded personalized videos. Additionally, the quality of their communication was high. Draus et al., (2014) concur that incorporating personalized videos in the online classroom can help to form teacher-student relationships and when these relationships are developed, they may contribute to student success. Almusharraf and Khahro (2020) reviewed studies that confirmed when instructors used personalized videos, they were helpful to students and assisted in learning. The use of personalized videos in teaching is increasing within higher education (Chan 2010) and there are ways that instructors can enhance the personal connection with the use of personalized videos that allow instructors to connect to students (Underdown & Martin, 2016).

### **Feedback**

Feedback is an important part of learning. Students may benefit from constructive feedback on their assignments so that they can reflect on the feedback and apply it to future assignments and learn. According to Uribe and Vaughan (2017), providing feedback that is both timely and worthwhile to the student is constantly a challenge. It is even more challenging in an online class where there are no visual cues accompanying the feedback. The student attempts to understand the written communication and may not have the opportunity to ask questions. Leibold and Schwartz (2015) suggest that the feedback conversation can be a way for the instructor and the student to connect and interact. It is relatively simple and quick for instructors to respond to a student discussion board posting, or to provide personal feedback on an assignment. Even a warm video welcoming students to the course can create a feeling of belonging to the learning community. The welcome might include an informal bio of the instructor, together with the basics of attending an online course and what to expect regarding format. A video introduction to each module that incorporates a short story can help students relate the content to practical life. Closed captioning can be utilized when including a personalized video so that students have another option to review the video content.

### **Engagement**

There is very little research on the use of social virtual get togethers in online courses. However, Redmond et al., (2018) posit that social engagement between students and instructors was instrumental in online student engagement, as well as creating relationships and trust. They included this in their higher education online engagement framework. During face to face classes, there are many ways for student-interaction. Students engage with the instructor prior to the class meeting, during the break, during in-class activities and at the end of the class. However, in the virtual classroom, a considerable amount of effort needs to occur in order for engagement and interaction to happen. Dennett and Vasquez (2012) posit "When taking online classes, interaction between students, peers and instructor is virtual; the personal contact may be lost if suitable techniques and tools are not made available" (p. 48).

Cheung et al., (2008) studied the reasons for student participation in the virtual classroom. They found that students who wanted to stay in the class and participate, were the students who thought they connected well to the instructor or students in the class. The student-teacher relationship was instrumental to the student and how they performed in the class. The students described how they missed the physical interaction they had in face to face classes. However, the way the instructor communicated with them and offered ways to collaborate helped to build a sense of community. Tolan et al., (2020) discussed that

students' engagement was inhibited when there was a lack of interaction in the online course. This interaction was important to student learning. There are various ways to offer interaction, these included Zoom, WebEx and various video platforms.

## METHODOLOGY

Action research was used to conduct this study. Creswell (2005) defines action researchers as “exploring a practical problem with an aim toward developing a solution to a problem” (p.549).

As lifelong learners, instructors constantly evaluate what is working and what is not working in the classroom. In early March 2020, a pandemic hit the world: Covid-19. Face to face classrooms were transformed to online classrooms overnight. This researcher did not want to lose that warm connection she had in face to face classes and she chose to evaluate ways that continued to make her learning environment warm and engaging. The warm rapport and connection that was established in the classroom needed to occur in the virtual classroom. This was especially important in a world filled with uncertainty, change and the constant need for adaption. Her goal was to share these best practices with other colleagues across the world.

The researcher concentrated on the following research question: What factors contribute to a high touch, high feel online learning environment? The research was conducted in three phases. Phase I included the design of the study. Phase II concentrated on collecting the data and phase III focused on analysis.

**Phase I.** The researcher was always curious in how to create a warm environment that fostered interaction. She tried to find ways to continue to encourage this in her online classes. However, when Covid-19 turned all face to face classes into immediate online classes, she wanted to ensure the high touch high feel continued in the online world and to explore what seemed to work for students. She created the design of the study and explored ways on how she would gather and analyse the data.

**Phase II.** Data were gathered in this phase. The data were collected from Spring, Summer and Fall semesters of 2020. Links to surveys for the Student perception of teaching (SPOT) are emailed to all university students at the end of each course requesting students to evaluate the instructor in each of their courses. The SPOTs include both quantitative data and qualitative data. For this study, the research examined the qualitative data. There are two questions: What did you like most about this course and how could this course be improved? There was an additional place to add comments and suggestions. Approximately four weeks after the course is finished and the final grades have been submitted, the university emails SPOT results to instructors. The results are anonymous to the instructors. For this study, the SPOT evaluations from the Spring and Summer semesters were analysed. The Fall semester SPOTs had not been distributed due to the timing of the research. As well as using the SPOT evaluations, the researcher emailed each student in each of her courses an email consisting of three open-ended questions mid-way through the semester asking for their feedback about the course. Students responded via email, therefore these comments were not anonymous. The purpose of these questions was to gather feedback from students, mid-way through the semester so that the instructor could continue what was working and make changes for improvement in the courses. The SPOT evaluation results are received after the course is complete and therefore there is no opportunity for the instructor to make current changes to those courses. There is only opportunity to make changes to future courses. Questions in the mid-semester pulse check included: What do you like best in this course so far? What do you like the least? What are your suggestions for improvement?

**Phase III.** Results from the SPOT evaluations were analysed by the researcher reading through the SPOT summaries in order to obtain a “general sense of the data” (Creswell, 2005 p. 231) and transcribing the results into an excel spreadsheet and reviewing for common words and themes. The researcher read through the transcripts several times in order to understand the context of the student comments. She highlighted descriptive words that were expressed more than once. She followed the same analysis for the mid-semester pulse check surveys.

### Sample

Eleven courses between March and December 2020 (spring, summer and fall semesters) were reviewed (see table 1). Ten courses were totally online and one course was face to face that transitioned to online due to the pandemic. Two courses were undergraduate courses and nine courses were graduate level courses. However, due to the timing of the research, only the spring and summer semesters SPOT evaluations were evaluated (seven courses). One hundred and seven students from seven courses in a public university in South East Florida had the opportunity to participate in SPOT evaluations. Sixty-seven students completed the SPOT evaluations. SPOTs for fall 2020 have not been completed at the time of this research study. However, the mid-semester surveys were distributed via email to students in eleven courses (including fall 2020 semester). One hundred and fifty-five students completed the mid-semester surveys out of a possible one hundred and ninety students.

Semester	Course	Total Students	SPOTs Completed	Surveys Completed
Spring 2020	ADE 6381	19	7	18
Spring 2020	EDA 6103	20	14	17
Spring 2020	ADE 6184	20	13	15
Spring 2020	LDR 2020	11	9	6
Summer 2020	EDA 6103	7	6	7
Summer 2020	ADE 5185	19	12	13
Summer 2020	ADE 6930	11	6	10
Fall 2020	ADE 6381	21		18
Fall 2020	EDA 6103	22		18
Fall 2020	ADE 6387	23		21
Fall 2020	LDR 4104	17		12

*Table 1 - Courses Analysed and Total Responses*

## RESULTS

Three themes emerged: Thorough feedback, personalized videos and virtual get togethers.

**Thorough Feedback.** The participants shared that they valued the feedback and the quality of the feedback. They believed that the feedback helped them to learn from past assignments and to improve on future assignments. According to one participant “The video feedback on assignments and engagement was truly appreciated. I felt connected to the instructor.” Another participant agreed “Her feedback! She makes each assignment clear through her rubric, but even after she completes grading our assignments, she provides the most thorough feedback that helps me understand how to better complete later assignments.”

**Personalized Videos.** There was general consensus that participants thought the instructor's personalized videos helped to create a connection between her and the participants. One participant confirmed this "I really enjoyed the personal feedback and videos about our assignments. Even though this was online, I felt that she actually tried to make it feel like it was face to face." Another participant wrote "I liked seeing video announcements by the professor because it felt even more personable than reading posts, although there was nothing wrong with written posts."

**Virtual Collaboration.** The third theme of virtual collaboration and getting together emerged. Participants seemed to want to have ways that they could connect with one another and the instructor. A participant commented "She really tries hard to encourage us students to get to know each other. My favourite virtual party was the afternoon tea she organized. It was a lot of fun seeing each other and learn about the food they made." Another quote from a different participant stated "I like the use of WebEx online sessions to provide a stronger more personalized connection to other members of the class. This is a fantastic class."

## DISCUSSION

Based on early feedback through the mid-semester surveys, the instructor implemented changes in her courses. She continued to provide detailed and thorough feedback on all assignments coupled with personalized videos. She concurred with Draus et al., (2014) in that students' levels of engagement and satisfaction were high when in classes with instructors who incorporate personalized videos. A personalized welcome video is a warm way to introduce the student to the course. The instructor can set the stage of what to expect, as well as create that nurturing climate for learning. An introduction to each module of the course can highlight important areas of the material or re-emphasize important points. This instructor continued to make personalized videos for discussion boards, announcements and assignment feedback. A personalized video can be a nice way to provide feedback to the student. The student can play the video and replay the video as needed. As well as a written response, the video makes the connection more personal and individualized. She added additional ways to connect virtually via Zoom and coordinated an afternoon virtual tea, a virtual celebration for graduates, a virtual welcome get-together, as well as a virtual pot-luck gathering. In 2015 Korkut et al., shared that university administrators were worried about engagement among students being missing, as well as instructors not engaging students fully.

The instructor shared her findings with colleagues in a global conference. There are opportunities for future research to continue to learn what is working and what needs to be improved. This research forms a foundation to support conversations sharing best practices with other educational institutions and communities of practice.

## CONCLUSION

Educational institutions had to transition from face to face classrooms to online classrooms virtually overnight as a result of Covid-19. As universities continue to offer ways for students to learn online, instructors need to find ways to engage students and to find ways to form a connection. This research study reinforced the researcher's beliefs that there are ways to interact with students in online classes using personalized videos, by giving thorough feedback and by offering ways to collaborate. The high-touch high feel can be fostered in the virtual world. The researcher sought to answer the following question: What factors contribute to a high touch, high feel online learning environment? The researcher used her

eleven courses between March and September 2020 as the sample at a South East Florida public university.

Today and tomorrow online classrooms will grow, and technology will continue to enhance online learning. While the virtual world will still bring challenges both to students and instructors, there are methods that the instructor can utilize to enhance the student's engagement and learning experience. Educators will continue to learn and incorporate technology into their classrooms to enhance student satisfaction and engagement. They will continue to find ways to interact with their online students and establish a personal connection.

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