

## ***Computers and Composition Online***

### **Emerging New Genres in Distance Education: The Video Syllabus**

#### **Introduction**

##### The Wide-Spread Use of Multimedia in Online Courses

The integration of multimedia content into online courses has become a well-established pedagogical practice in recent years. Audio and video files are created to reproduce the instructor's classroom roles in the virtual environment. Lectures and presentations are taped to distribute course content; instructions are recorded to help with projects, assignments, and activities; procedures are explained and discussions introduced using multimedia; even feedback and evaluation of student projects are provided via movie clips. This article will discuss the benefits of using video files in distance education in general and the positive impact of the "video syllabus" in particular.

##### The Positive Impact of Video

The scholarly support for the incorporation of video files into distributed learning environments usually includes an often-cited pedagogical-psychological principle that calls for the accommodation of multiple learning styles (Rief and Heimburge 1996). Students retain a higher percentage of the course material if it is accessible through multiple sensory channels, such as reading, seeing, and hearing ([VideoPerception.com](http://VideoPerception.com)). As the results of Hee Jun Choi and Scott D. Johnson's study indicate, "videos in online courses have the potential to enhance learners' retention and motivation" (215). Learners report that "video-based instruction [is] more memorable than [...] traditional text-based instruction" (215). Delivering information in multiple forms is promoted by NCTE's guidelines, which assert that "integration of multiple modes of communication and expression can enhance or transform the meaning of the work beyond illustration or decoration" (<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/media/123213.htm>).

#### **Context and Beginnings**

##### The Issue of Syllabus Length

Although the information posted under Introduction menu item, along with other sources not included in this article, provide convincing evidence for the beneficial effect of video files in distance education, more explanation is needed to understand the rationale behind the video syllabus. Traditionally, the syllabus is a text-based educational genre, so what necessitates the conversion from text to movie? The idea of the video syllabus occurred to me as a reaction to the feedback I received on my annual activity report a couple of years ago, which indicated that my syllabi were too long and I needed to make them shorter. Indeed, it was not uncommon that my online syllabi were approximately 20 pages long and my face-to-face syllabi were around 14. These documents did not include the Course Calendar, which was an individual document in my courses, providing a weekly schedule of assignments and activities. Since my syllabi contained detailed and

thorough information about various aspects of the course, I did not like to call them syllabi. I proudly referred to them as “course manuals.”

### Students Don't Read

When reflecting on the reasons why my syllabi were considered problematic, I realized that it was not the actual length of the syllabus that caused the problem, but students' reaction, which may have been based on imagined or anticipated hardships about the course. In their eyes, a long syllabus equaled a hard course combined with unrealistic expectations. They felt overwhelmed and intimidated by the sheer volume of text they were supposed to read, so they chose not to read it or read it selectively. Needless to say, this lack of information is bound to lead to confusion about how to function in an online course. My suspicion that some online students did not read certain posted information at all was evident from the questions they asked me about course policies and assignments. Unfortunately, students who do not read often fall behind on assignments, earn lower grades, or ultimately drop out. This can result in student complaints about the course in the end-of-term evaluations. However, our goal as educators is to help students succeed; therefore, I was trying to find a medium for information delivery that was easier to access and process than reading. This is how I came up with the idea of what I call the “video syllabus.”

### **The Process**

Creating the video syllabus involved the following stages:

1. Defining the term “video syllabus”
2. Locating examples of video syllabi
3. Researching syllabus design
  - a. Researching the ideal length of syllabi
  - b. Identifying criteria for an effective syllabus
  - c. Identifying criteria for an effective online syllabus
4. Production
  - a. Creating the website
  - b. Producing and editing the video clips
  - c. Streaming the video on the web

### Background

Although the idea was mine, the video syllabus project started out as an E-Train Express team undertaking at Western Kentucky University. E-Train is a university-based organization made up of technology advocates from Kentucky area teachers and WKU faculty and staff. Our group consisted of six members: an instructional designer from TSONline, a technology specialist from TSONline, and four faculty members from various departments, including myself as the leader of the group. During the 2005/06 academic year, the group met on a regular basis, planning and developing the project and contributing with ideas. Our goal was to create a video syllabus for one of our online courses, which in my case happened to be an Advanced Composition course.

In the following section, I will describe the individual stages of constructing the video syllabus, the theoretical and practical decisions we had to make, the problems and challenges we faced, and students' comments about instructor-produced multimedia projects.

### 1. Defining the term "video syllabus"

In general dictionaries, the syllabus is typically defined as "course outline" or "program of study." Its primary purpose is to communicate to students "what the course is about, why the course is taught, where it is going, and what will be required of the students for them to complete the course with a passing grade" (Altman and Cashin). Given the information of the text-based syllabus, our task was to convey the same information in a new medium. As a first step, we needed to define what exactly constituted the concept of the "video syllabus." Should it be similar to a motion picture to be played on the web with captions at the bottom of the screen to make it ADA compliant? Would a TK3 format, a multimedia electronic document assembly tool, be more appropriate since it allows for additional notes and images? Or should it remain all text to be published on the web with certain ideas or concepts hyperlinked and explained in video clips? After weeks of looking for a solution, we decided to create a website with the navigation buttons representing section titles in the text-based syllabus. When clicking a navigation button, students would be able to watch a video clip of three to five minutes and easily access information about a certain aspect of the course.

### 2. Locating examples of video syllabi

When googling examples of video syllabi, we found links to video clips in which an instructor would sit in his/her office and give the viewer an informal overview of the course. Although these clips usually covered more than one aspect or component of the course, they did not indicate a systematic, premeditated plan to create a complete video syllabus. Naturally, this does not mean that these projects do not exist; it only means that the term "video syllabus" is not widespread enough to use with search engines. More time should have been spent on looking for a model, and perhaps different key words or different search strategies would have given different results.

### 3. Researching syllabus design

- a. Researching the ideal length of syllabi
- b. Identifying criteria for an effective syllabus
- c. Identifying criteria for an effective online syllabus

### Rethinking the Rationale

Our research on syllabus design included both scholarly sources and practical guides/templates compiled by Teaching and Learning Centers of various higher education institutions. When making both theoretical-pedagogical and practical-technological decisions regarding the content and form of the syllabus, we had many opportunities to rethink the rationale for the inclusion of certain information and to revisit our assumptions and expectations about teaching and learning. Based on the consulted sources, the information to be included in the syllabus could be viewed as (1) essential or required and (2) recommended or additional. Although there was considerable overlap

among sources regarding the essential information, there was a great deal of variation about the non-essential or recommended components. Evaluating and categorizing information according to importance had repercussions concerning the length of the syllabus, which remained a non-negligible aspect of my research and investigation.

### Evaluating Information

All consulted sources agreed that including the following core information in the syllabus was essential: instructor information, contact information, course description, prerequisites, course goals and objectives, learning outcomes, course materials, course requirements, grading policies, participation and late work policies, academic dishonesty policy, disability services information, etc. I discovered that despite the length and thoroughness of my syllabi, there was important information missing from them. For example, I did not include a content map, methods of instruction, why a student should take a particular course, or how that course would fit in with the degree requirements. As for non-essential information, I was surprised to find in the syllabus guidelines that old quizzes, self-study tips, sample assignments and activities, and even handouts were recommended to be included among numerous other items (Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching; Pedagoggles).

### Genre Changes

Attaching quizzes, sample assignments, handouts, etc. to the core information of the syllabus seemed to change not only the length, but also the terminology used to refer to the compilation of these texts. The authors talked about a “syllabus package” or “syllabus packet,” which came very close to my own expression, “manual,” even though the additional information I included referred to procedures, such as workshop cycles, rather than assignments or quizzes. At this point, several questions arose. How would all this information, both essential and recommended, fit in a traditionally three-to-five-page-long syllabus? Would the information above this page limit be considered redundant and be discarded? How long would a text document be that includes all the essential and most of the recommended information about a course? If it reaches 20 plus pages and becomes a book-length document, could or should it still be called a syllabus or would it qualify as a new or different educational genre? If so, what would it be called? Course booklet? Course package—even though this term is used to denote something else? Information manual? Course guidelines? Moreover, how would it be delivered to students? As print or electronic material? Could students be expected to familiarize themselves with the content of the document in its entirety? Would students indeed “appreciate the effort [we] make in creating a truly useful syllabus” (UNC CTL)? Ultimately, isn’t the syllabus as a concept and educational genre outdated?

### Arguments For and Against the Long Syllabus

Those who promoted a long syllabus claimed that students in an online course needed more details and more redundancy of information, since they did not have face-to-face contact with the instructor to remind them of policies and procedures (NEU EdTech). It was also pointed out that a long, detailed syllabus meant fewer questions and fewer emails from students during the course (UNC CTL). Others, however, warned that an

attempt “to include every single item of importance in [the] syllabus is to insure that students will not read much of it” (Altman and Cashin).

### Technology Misunderstood

After reading the pros and cons, I made an important discovery about my syllabi: Although they were electronic syllabi, posted on Blackboard in both my face-to-face and online courses, I did not utilize the possibilities embedded in the electronic environment. My syllabi remained MS Word documents, and, consequently, linear and text based. Making a file similar to a piece of paper available online is not only anachronistic, but an obvious sign of misusing and misunderstanding technology. The electronic environment provides a logical avenue to integrate multimedia applications into traditionally text-based documents. Instead of linearity, I had to think in layers of information and utilize the chunking of text. Converting the linear text into a non-linear, chunked website with multimedia applications made the document user-friendly and easily accessible.

#### 4. The Production: From Text to Movie

The production of the video syllabus can be broken down into following three stages:

- a. Creating the website
- b. Producing and editing the video clips
- c. Streaming the video on the web

### Creating the Website

After consulting the instructional designer, I revised the text-based document and added new sections to the syllabus, such as the content map, methods of instruction, etc. I deleted others, such as my assumptions about teaching, learning, and writing; because the information was not focused enough. Once the paper syllabus was revised, deciding on the structure of the website was easy. The navigation buttons roughly corresponded to the subtitles of the text segments. The web template was created by Macromedia Dreamweaver 8, and it included 24 navigation buttons. Most of these were intended to serve as links to video clips or to a combination of video and text.

### Recording the Video Clips

Recording the video clips was no less challenging than creating the website template. The “studio” was set up in my living-room, and a professional videographer (my husband) was shooting the video with lower-end professional equipment. The university’s Distance Learning division could have helped me with the video production if the recording had been done during the day. However, I chose to record the clips at one sitting, which took several hours and was only completed in the early hours of the following day. As to the set-up, a tripod was used for the camera. Two soft lights lit my face from the front evenly and one hair light was used in the back to give my head some dimension. I was sitting in the middle of the room, away from the back wall, to make sure that the carefully arranged background with drapery and plants would remain out of focus and somewhat blurry. I was wearing a clip-on microphone hidden in my shirt to ensure good sound quality.

### In the Role of the Anchorperson

Assuming the role of an anchorperson or reporter presented me with several challenges. My goal was to look professional, but friendly and somewhat informal. I put on make-up and wore a simple blue shirt with no patterns or stripes, to help the viewing quality of the final movie. Since I did not have a teleprompter, I had to learn the text by heart and recite it for the camera, preferably without looking down at my notes. Stage fright had a negative impact on my memory, and the long hours of recording resulting in fatigue that interfered with clear speech and articulation. Several segments had to be re-recorded.

### Editing and Streaming the Video

After recording the clips, the videographer who recorded the clips also edited the tapes using Avid Xpress Pro software. My role was secondary in this process and involved only intuitive theoretical comments about what should be cut or kept. In most cases, it was the long pauses between my sentences and the occasional stumbling on my words that needed to be eliminated from the tape.

The final stage of the process was to stream the clips on the web, using Macromedia Flash 8 Video Encoder. The final product can be viewed [here](#).

<http://www.wku.edu/~judith.szerdahelyi/VideoSyllabus/index.htm>

When using images or video clips for online teaching, instructors must have a plan for making their teaching objects ADA compliant, so that the information is accessible for students with disabilities. In my case, this problem was solved by the availability of the text-based syllabus side-by-side with the video syllabus. However, using a spontaneous recording without captions or readable text attached would violate the law. Fortunately, the issue of ADA compliance was resolved by WKU's Distance Learning Division. Based on an XML code written by Leyla Zhuhadar, The DL office now offers a service which provides captions for all video recordings produced by faculty.

### **Reflection**

Although the final product is far from being perfect and can be expected to remain a work-in-progress for quite some time, students' responses to this and other multimedia content are encouraging. In addition to the video syllabus, I regularly use video clips for other classroom functions, e.g. to explain assignments, procedures, or to give feedback on student papers. Survey data collected from end-of-term course evaluations during the past two years corroborate the positive impact of these video files in distance education. They appreciate the sense of immediacy that multimodal communication provides.

Students' positive comments about teacher-produced videos fall under the following broad categories:

- Effective communication (fewer opportunities for misunderstanding, obvious body language); E.g.: "Sometimes conveying your thoughts through actual spoken words is much more effective than writing. It can be quicker and there is less room for confusion and misunderstanding."

- Personal connection with instructor; E.g.: “I think the video files are very important, not only for learning but also to better get to know you and it creates a better, more personalized instruction.” “It helped put a face with the name.”
- Increased comfort level with course; E.g.: “I was completely lost until I watched the video. I printed out the paper syllabus as a check-off list for doing my assignments. The video syllabus also gave me a bit of a feel for you, and made me feel better about the course.” “[I]t makes me feel like there are teachers who care which helps out a lot when it comes to feeling comfortable asking questions in a class.”
- Higher motivation to learn; E.g.: “I really liked being able to see my instructor and hearing her instructions on various assignments. It made the things much easier at times.” “I loved having the online teacher right in front of me.”
- Personalized instruction (learning styles taken into consideration); E.g.: “The audio and visual files were a necessity for me this semester. I am both an auditory and visual learner but mostly visual. I feel that the audio and video files are necessary to accommodate the diverse learning styles of your students. Internet classes are very challenging and restricted to the self-motivated and independent learner, but the students ‘learning styles’ have to be taken in consideration to promote an equal opportunity for learning.”
- Enhanced active learning (interactivity, ability to go back and view material again, benefits of repetition); E.g.: “Anything that I didn’t understand I could have gone back to play again, and she made captions next to every video which was also helpful.”

## **Conclusion**

Despite the technological and pedagogical challenges, the video syllabus was a worthwhile project. Not only did it teach me several new skills that I can use for a variety of teaching-related and other professional activities, it has also raised the quality of my teaching. As a final note, I can’t help mentioning that creating a syllabus which is based on moving images and not on text--something that is measurable by page or word number--eliminated the “length issue,” since nobody could tell how long the document/file is.