Mediated Performance to Enhance Online and Blended Arts-Related Learning

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The Problem: How to enhance online and blended arts-related courses using performance-based digital communication?

Methodologies:

Online: Award-winning course (AT&T Instructional Technology Michigan State University Best Online Course) will share the strategies involved in creating performance elements to virtually illuminate theatrical script analysis.

Creating a fully online course for dramatic literature that was written to be performed live offers unique challenges. In showcasing the performance aspect of the course, many taped or filmed versions of the plays were included to enhance the experience and assist the students in understanding the style of the piece. The highlight of the course was the innovation of "Karaoke Theatre." For each text covered in the course, an actor was videotaped speaking the lines for one part of the dialogue in a selected scene. Students were then asked to act in accordance with the recorded actor as their lines were shown on the screen. This process is akin to karaoke. The actor through the magic of green screen would read lines of Oedipus, Hamlet or Willy Loman with the appropriate digitally-enhanced environment. Students were then directed to enact their lines with certain character-driven caveats; avoiding the rhyme in Tartuffe or finding the rhythm of Topdog/Underdog. This experiment was more successful than imagined as students regularly looked forward to performing with their virtual partner. The students reading of their lines was facilitated by the use of Flash encoded video. Through the use of Flash ActionScript the display of the lines to be read was synchronized with the appropriate moment in the video. That worked much like a teleprompter, displaying
the lines immediately below the video so that the students could watch the actor and be prompted, typically one line at a time. This Karaoke Theatre exercise as part of an online course has at least two obvious benefits. In the classroom time does not permit this type of activity, and many students would be reluctant to participate.

Blended: At Michigan State University an integrated arts and humanities course is required for every student. A recently developed blended course is unique in its merging of research and performance. The performance aspect was constructed to create a series of research/performance original scripts. This successful course discovered unique strategies for creating a hybrid of research and performance.

Original historical “autobiographical” dramas were written, and produced for this blended course. Students (through a recorded online example) were shown how to research and create their own historical monologue. The online monologues for this course included “diary-entries” from a Greek Vestal Virgin and Norplant Birth Control Malpractice Witness. These fully-produced “documentaries” presented examples of how to create truthful historical recreations. Students were then asked to research, write, produce, costume and act in their own historical autobiographical drama from an entirely originally created character for presentation in class.

Conclusions:

The outcomes of both courses have proven successful by understanding and embracing the advantages and challenges of online learning. By recognizing those issues, the instructors were able to adjust and improve upon the mediated performance component of these courses to better comprehend the course composition.