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Elena Andrei

Cleveland State University, e.andrei@csuohio.edu

Mary Frances Buckley-Marudas

Cleveland State University, m.buckley67@csuohio.edu

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It Does Not Need to be Perfect! Two Teacher Educators’ Quest to Enhance Online Instruction with Videos

Elena Andrei ~ *Cleveland State University*

Mary Frances Buckley-Marudas ~ *Cleveland State University*

Abstract

Two early career literacy and language teacher educators who have digital literacies at the core of their professional and scholarly pursuits share their quest to enhance their online instruction. The authors wanted to identify one new improvement for their online courses in an effort to engage the students and support a more connected learning community. The improvement was instructor-made videos. Once the first video was shared and posted, weekly peer support, the premises of “keeping it simple” and “it does not need to be perfect” seemed to be critical in the implementation of videos for the online instruction. The authors continue to use instructor-created videos in their courses as part of their routine online teaching.

Keywords: online teaching, videos, teacher educators

Online courses are increasingly popular at universities in the United States (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). Reasons for their popularity include flexibility, relative affordability, and accessibility to credentials (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015). Student engagement in online instruction can take a variety of forms and instructors of web-based courses, like all instructors, need to identify what works for their students (Meyer, 2014). Without the regular, in-person interactions that come with face-to-face instruction, it can often seem more challenging to build connections with students in an online class setting. As teacher educators who teach exclusively web-based courses, we felt a pressing need to enhance the sense of connectivity and personal relationships in our class with the intent to increase our students’ engagement with us and the content of the course. The purpose of this practitioner reflection is to share with fellow teacher educators how our collaboration and peer support led us to enhance our online instruction

with instructor-created videos which we offer as a simple, yet useful way to engage students in online classes.

Two Language & Literacy Teacher Educators

As two early career literacy and language teacher educators in a program that was transitioning several courses to online formats, we were grappling with how to engage and connect with online students in a more personalized way than we were in our current course designs. We both teach graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy. Specifically, Elena Andrei teaches courses focused on second language literacy and teaching second language learners, while Mary Frances (Molly) Buckley-Marudas teaches content area literacy and young adult literature. Besides being colleagues and peers in the same department and program, we have a lot in common, both on the professional and personal levels. We are both junior faculty at the same institution, passionate about teacher education and digital literacy, with K-12 public school experience. We are also parents of young children and avid runners. Over time, we have developed a routine to share family stories, running goals, the academic reading and writing we do, and what we learn at professional conferences we attend. We connect in-person on campus, but we also interact extensively via text messaging.

As literacy and language teacher educators who see digital literacies as a core component of our professional and scholarly pursuits, we knew we could improve our practice and, importantly, we were eager to do so. We both see digital literacies as part of the current context of teaching and learning and believe that we have a responsibility, ongoing, to develop our digital literacies as well as our students'. We understand digital literacies as skills and knowledge needed to navigate, make meaning, use, communicate, and produce content using new digital technologies such internet and mobile-based technologies. We aim to leverage digital literacies

in our instruction for our students' learning and their future P-12 students' learning but we are also committed to researching digital literacies. In our regular, friendly discussions about our online teaching, we talked about how online teaching, while qualitatively different from face-to-face, required us to engage our students in a personalized and connected way that is conducive to learning. In many ways, we both felt that the online teaching context demanded an even more deliberate effort to connect with students than a face-to-face course because of the natural interactions that come with an in-person course. We both believe that teaching and learning benefit from strong relationships in the classroom, and that it is critical for teachers to know their students.

In our experiences to date, classroom community building in online courses has been more challenging than in our face-to-face courses. Some steps we had already taken were to interact with students on discussion forums and engage via emails to the class and to individual students. We both worked to come to "life" via an introduction email and an introduction discussion board and we both had profile pictures in our learning management system. We used a variety of different participation patterns and group formations to try to encourage students to interact with one another and to stage regular opportunities for them to get to know their peers. Yet, in January of 2018, we both felt that we could strengthen our online courses to better engage our students and after feeling some uncertainty or, perhaps, simply overwhelmed by the multitude of possible ways we could improve our online teaching, we committed to adding instructor-made videos for our upcoming spring courses.

Enhancing Online Instruction

Together, we agreed that we wanted to identify just one new improvement for our online courses that might help to engage our students and support a more connected learning

community. Molly had recently read Ko and Rossen (2017)'s book that identifies regular teacher-created videos as an essential component for online instruction. Molly shared this book with Elena and, upon reflection, we selected incorporating instructor-created videos as our one improvement. We envisioned the videos as short, weekly videos for our students. Although the videos might vary each week, we agreed that it would often be a space to wrap up the previous week and/or preview the upcoming week. We built our approach on an idea shared by both Ko and Rossen's (2017) and Clinefelter and Aslanian (2015) that there is instructional value in casually narrated, less formal videos. Thus, we approached this work with the hope that our course design and sense of connection with students could be improved by creating and posting less than perfect videos which show the instructor in-the-moment with an idea, similar to being live with students in face-to-face classrooms.

It is important to note that making videos was something both of us, individually, had regularly considered and even desired for our online pedagogy. We were well aware of videos as a common tool for online instruction and our university offers a comprehensive video recording studio. Yet, despite our commitments to digital literacies and the potential of digital media for learning, neither of us had applied this strategy in a consistent, routine way. This shocked us. We both include learning segments in our classes that explore digital literacies in young people's lives and consider ways to integrate digital literacies into our university students' current and future classrooms. Although we both recognized ways we incorporated digital literacies into our teaching practice, we both felt that our online classrooms could leverage digital media and new technologies in a much more robust way. When we started discussing our online teaching, we quickly found a number of places of resistance and hesitation to commit to redesigning our online instruction. Much of the resistance and hesitation stemmed from technical logistics (e.g.,

which tool to use to create videos, what platform we should use to share the videos) and “acceptability” expectations (e.g., how professional should we make the videos, what content was most worthy for a video). After we identified these specific aspects that “held us back” from having instructor-made videos, we started to informally brainstorm the tools to make and share the videos. We decided to use the tools that were readily available, user friendly and we felt comfort with. Elena used iMovie on her laptop, relying on the laptop’s built in camera and microphone. Molly initially relied on the Photo Booth application and then transitioned to iMovie. We both uploaded our videos to YouTube. Both of us uploaded the videos as “unlisted” which means that the videos are not searchable. We would share the link with our students via course announcements, inside a learning module page, and/or emails. We thus found tremendous support and solutions by inquiring into our places of resistance together.

Support and Accountability

After we made the decision to create videos for our courses, we also committed to offer informal peer support and encouragement via texts and informal discussions. We promised to “keep it simple” and not to be too hard on ourselves. We agreed that we would be comfortable with “it does not have to be perfect” videos. We also agreed that we would touch base weekly on our progress. Although we did not specify precisely what this communication would look like, the communication ultimately took place via text messaging, a communication channel that we already used regularly for other professional and friendly communication. We believe that drawing on an easy and already existing communication platform was pivotal in our following through with the actual making of the videos. The “keep it simple” and “it does not have to be perfect” seemed to be critical in taking the pressure off and freeing us and create informal videos.

The starting point was critical, but the constant peer support was equally important. Upon reflection, the flexible, unscripted peer support was critical because it fell into some of our existing communication patterns as colleagues and friends. At the beginning of the project we did specify three specific times, at the beginning, middle and end of the semester to talk about our experiences implementing the videos, but other than the three scheduled meeting times, our support took place via regular communication channels: text messages, e-mails, and brief walks on campus to refill a water bottle or get a cup of coffee.

We both found that bringing the first video to fruition was the most difficult. After we each created our first video, we shared them with each other through a link in a text message. Although we had not talked about sharing with family, we later found that both of us also asked our family to view our first video before sharing it with students. Once we had this “go ahead,” characterized by peer and family confirmation that the videos were professional and acceptable for sharing, the videos were out there. Our second videos were also shared with each other, but we found that both of us posted them before we heard a response. We kept this rhythm and routine for almost the whole semester, sending a quick link via text when another video was made or posted, sharing a related response from a student, commenting on the video, or inquiring about the plans for the next video. For example, one text Elena sent to Molly read: “Just watched your video. Love it! I like that it is an overview of the class...Nice job!”. Molly replied: “Oh thanks for watching! Yes - a little overview and a little intro”. The check-ins led to successful implementation of instructor-made videos by creating accountability, peer support, and celebration of our small steps.

Looking back, we found that the peer support served two important purposes. First, it acted as a simple nudge to be sure we were continuously making our videos. Relatedly, it

became part of our accountability to this instructional practice, even though we slowly stopped responding or commenting on each other's videos, we continued to share them. It is important to note that we both came to anticipate and look forward to the texts. This ongoing communication offered easy, yet critical, support for our endeavor. However, by the end of the semester, we noticed the peer nudge was less frequent: we had become more comfortable and making videos had become a part of our weekly routine for our online courses. It was almost like a gradual release of responsibility (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

Closing Thoughts

Now, we are both in our second semester of teaching online using weekly videos. With our level of confidence and comfort with using videos much higher than six months ago, we will identify another collaborative digital challenge. We have anecdotally heard from students the benefit of instructor-made videos for their course engagement. Our next steps are to collect their responses in a more systematic way. We also plan to identify “our next thing” in terms of online teaching so that we can continue to expand engagement in our online teaching.

We wrote this brief reflection with the hopes that other online teacher educators who may face resistance to making videos or another instructional tool may be motivated to: 1) Ask a colleague to collaborate with around this challenge and 2) Try to “keep it simple”. We wanted to enhance our online instruction with instructor-made videos and have videos become part of our routine online instruction. We found success through ongoing peer support and in accepting the idea that it was okay for the videos not to be ‘perfect.’

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