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Home   News   Technology

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Short and Sweet: Technology Shrinks the Lecture

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Dalton A. Kehoe, an associate professor of communication studies at York University, in Toronto, has for decades won teaching awards and praise for his lectures. So when he was asked to do his first online course, a couple of years ago, he was excited to head into a studio to capture his 50-minute talks on video.

When the recordings went online, however, they were anything but hits. The main complaint: They were much too long.

"It was the most extremely boring thing my students had ever seen," Mr. Kehoe acknowledges. His course evaluations, usually glowing, grew dismal.

"I had to sit to down and look at these lectures and realize that when you're looking at someone online as a talking head and shoulders in video, you just want to kill yourself after about 20 minutes," he says with a laugh.

So, for the first time in his 40 years of teaching, he decided to overhaul his lectures. He broke them up into 20-minute segments, each focusing on a narrow topic.

Other professors who have ventured into online education have made the same discovery: Just because 50-minute classroom sessions are the norm on a college schedule does not make that the ideal duration for students outside the lecture hall.

"Best practices are suggesting that shorter, modular clips ... are more successful than 50-minute sections," says John G. Flores, chief executive of the United States Distance Learning Association. "The days of having someone lecture for 50 minutes via video pretty much are — or are least should be — a thing of the past," he says.

And professors who have experimented with the short form online have learned something else: Shorter may work better in the classroom, too.

Rise of 'Minilectures'

When talks are recorded, it's easy to experiment with different formats. Al Ducharme, assistant dean of distance and distributed learning at the University of Central Florida, records his online lectures in his office, using a Webcam and software by Tegrity Inc., a learning-technology company, that can grab the PowerPoint slides he shows during his talk. He points out that the standard length for video on the Internet is short — just a few minutes — and that such brevity is what students are used to. He divides his lectures into topic-based segments and makes each one only as long as the material warrants.

"Some traditional lectures are 50 minutes just because lectures always tended to be 50 minutes — but there's not 50 minutes worth of material in there," he says. "When I'm done, I'm done. I'm not just going to keep talking just fill up the time."

Diane Zorn, an instructor at York University, calls her videos for online courses "minilectures." She records them using a system from Sonic Foundry called Mediasite, designed to capture lectures and stream them online.

"I think even with a dynamic speaker, students after 30 minutes or 40 minutes are not going to be taking much in," she says.

Ms. Zorn mixes the short lectures with hands-on activities. In one recorded lecture for a course on reasoning, for instance, she asks students to pause the video, open up a worksheet from the course Web site, and watch a short clip from the film Bowling for Columbine while answering a series of questions about the arguments made in the clip.

"Students want to go discover things on the Internet themselves," she says, calling straight lecturing too passive. "Passive learning is even worse online than in the classroom. At least in the lecture hall, there are people around you that if you fall asleep, someone can give you a nudge."

Altering Tradition

Ms. Zorn says she has applied some lessons learned from teaching online to her classroom teaching.

She now delivers minilectures in person, and in between them she divides the students into teams to perform exercises on classroom computers. "I think this would have been effective all along," she says of her new lecture style.

Mr. Kehoe, the communication-studies professor at York, says his experience online has also changed his performance in person.

When he teaches an hourlong class, he now breaks his material up into sections so he can stop every 15 minutes or so for a three-minute break, during which he'll show a comedy video clip from YouTube or another Web site.

"I turned it into a kind of contest," he says. "They get to submit to me what they think are the funniest videos," and he picks from those, rejecting any that are too racy. (The biggest hit with students so far has been a Web video called "Do Not Fart"; the Canadian comic Russell Peters is also popular.)

Those short breaks pay off, he says. "When they move back to listening to me, they're concentrating in a way they weren't before."

His students agree. "It made classes feel shorter," says Adelaida Ortega, a student who graduated from York this month. "By having the lecture divided up into smaller sections, the course content seemed less overwhelming. I didn't feel like the material was zooming by me."

Another of Mr. Kehoe's recent students, Jessica McCrossan, says the class always looked forward to the "laugh break," as students called it. "I found it not only helped break the tension and relax us, it helped to bring us closer to the professor as a person."

Oversimplifying?

Not everyone thinks that breaking up lectures is a good idea, though.

Marian C. Diamond, a professor of anatomy and neuroscience at the University of California at Berkeley who has taught for more than 40 years, says her students often ask for her lectures to be longer, not shorter. "We're following systems, and you want to give as complete a lecture at a time as possible," she says. "That's what worries me about education today. Everybody's trying to simplify it."

But some longtime classroom professors say they have been organizing their lectures in smaller units all along.

"My lectures are already broken up into shorter sections," says Walter H.G. Lewin, a professor of physics at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology, who has taught for more than 40 years. "It varies from five minutes to 25 minutes."

His unusual lectures are full of playful demonstrations, almost a series of educational shorts.

The lectures are popular on the campus. And when MIT recently put recordings of them on YouTube, they quickly drew thousands of

hits.

Mr. Kehoe, of York, says the irony is that in his communication courses, he has long taught that people's attention tends to drift after about 20 minutes of listening to information on any one topic. But he had never taken the advice to heart.

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