

Online educators learn about virtual personalities

CU conference delves into technology in the classroom

By Brittany Anas

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Beth Davies' students are invited to take a quick virtual tour of her freezer door -- which is decorated with philosophical comics and magnets that give a glimpse into the personality of their online professor, who they'll likely never meet face-to-face.

Davies -- an adjunct faculty member at Front Range Community College, who teaches philosophy and religion courses -- gave a presentation Wednesday on how to project a positive personality onto a computer screen, as online courses at colleges and universities boom in popularity. The topic was among several covered at a two-day technology conference on the University of Colorado campus.

The Colorado Learning and Teaching with Technology conference, which was held in the ATLAS technology hub on Tuesday and Wednesday, drew nearly 300 faculty members, instructors and staff members who were eager to learn about emerging technologies that they could use in their classrooms, according to CU officials.

Davies, who won a teaching award that her students nominated her for, said the tone of online messages is commonly misconstrued -- positive messages are misinterpreted as neutral, for example. She solves that by weaving emoticons into online discussions. If a student says something brilliant, she said she will respond with a message like "(standing ovation)" or a smiley face. Or, she might respond to a student's sloppy message by typing: "Check your spelling before you post (wink)."

She also tries to make herself come alive online to her students by posting videos on YouTube of her freezer door and of her highlighting the course syllabus.

"You have to overcome that gap that they can't see you," Davies said.

Stephen Butler, a PhD student and teaching assistant in the ATLAS Institute, said he favors hybrid courses, where there is a blend of face-to-face meetings and online courses.

"It allows for a personal connection," he said.

Butler said that in a short time, people can gauge personality -- which will help give context to the tone of future online messages.

Several technological topics were covered at the conference -- including the downside of allowing laptops and iPods into classrooms, which can distract students; podcasting lectures and how to use "clickers" to get students engaged during lectures.

Nobel laureate Carl Wieman, a CU physicist and JILA fellow, gave a keynote presentation to open the conference Tuesday.

Wieman is an innovator of the "clicker" program, which provides students with handheld remotes to facilitate interactive learning. He noted, however, that when technological tools are used incorrectly in education, they can distract a student's memory.

Wieman touched on how the use of clickers in classrooms can influence motivation and another critical element of learning -- building on a student's prior knowledge. He said, for example, that he could use clickers to poll students in a large lecture hall about issues such as whether they took physics classes in high school -- or to quantify his students' existing levels of competence on certain topics.

"In 10 minutes, I have enormously more information about these students, and I can connect up with them much better," Wieman said.

Colorado Daily Staff Writer Richard Valenty contributed to this report.

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