

## **Embodying a Disembodied Space: Feedback Strategies to Create “Presence” in Online Classes**

**Project Summary:** My original conception of this project on learning how to embody the disembodied space of online, asynchronous education, focused on the use of digital tech. In particular, I was interested to learn the extent to which the use of different video applications affect teacher—and thus student—presence within a virtual class space. I began my research by attending different online offerings, both within the Academy and without, to experience how different approaches shaped my interest in and my ability to connect with the offering at hand. My intention was to use this experience to create a variety of different video options—from professional to informal, highly practiced to more fluid and expressive—to test with the help of faculty and students. The global pandemic shut down such possibilities, and so I had to step back and reconsider my approach. Given the difficulties that faculty and students endured during the widespread shutdowns, the confusion and lack of information about COVID, and the general uncertainties of life, I decided to explore the possibility of creating an online space that students wanted to—*looked forward to*—enter. So, I began thinking about how I could use digital tech to shape a space that would inspire creativity and encourage them to feel supported, not in their traditional role as “students” but rather as individuals doing the best that they could to get through their days. My focus thereby shifted to the use of feedback to cultivate such a space.

For my project, I chose to approach feedback in a different, more rhetorically considered way. Typically, the purpose of feedback is to inform students what they’re doing well and what they need to improve; the rhetorical situation, therefore, tends to center around performance, but such becomes problematic when students assess their own progress or feel as though they’re being assessed based on an ideal. By using digital tech and rhetorical strategies, I was able to show up more vividly to my students, and their participation in their progress through the course became more specific and intentional.

**How university assumptions challenge online education.** With the modification of my project, I am responding to a university-wide notion that online, asynchronous education, in comparison to traditional higher ed settings, is and always will be deficient. What strikes me about this persistent assumption is that much of our lives are mediated through digital technologies, and the refusal to recognize how this fact should shape our current approach to higher ed could further jeopardize the value of traditional settings. Yet, if we're willing to step into these spaces, to innovate, to push and pull at the boundaries of what's possible, we can create intentional moments that not only invite students to learn how to use these technologies with critical attention but also to do so, at least within the educational setting, with a sense of belonging and purpose. The creation of a type of embodied, energetic, and compassionate presence within binary code could be perceived as problematic. In response, I see that one way to approach this challenge is through mindfulness and an intention to be fully human inside of and through an LMS. Further, the use of digital tools to shift our feedback into a realm of encouragement and recognition has applications for traditional courses as well.

**What I hoped to learn.** I wanted to discover if a shift in the way that I offered feedback would push students not only become more willing to engage with the comments but, indeed, would make them *want* to read and to think about their progress through the course. My overarching questions were various. Is there a way to encourage students to look forward to commentary about their work? Can feedback become a conversation that removes the triggering aspect of the fear of judgment?

**The project.** Using my experiences in the online, asynchronous courses that I attended as part of my research, I reflected on what, as a student, I wanted to experience. Comments such as “Excellent!” “Great work!” or “This needs more development” did nothing to help me to understand how I was progressing, what I could improve, or whether I was making a valuable contribution with my work. While I looked forward to reading the feedback, I was consistently disappointed: I put forth a lot of effort, and it didn’t seem as though that mattered. Sitting with my student experience, I created two questions that I would have wanted answered and that I thought would help my students to feel supported in my courses: how can I improve and do you really care about what I’m creating? This latter question strikes me as especially significant because we might expect students simply to assume that we care, but such assumptions will not lead to their feeling supported or valued. The remedy, I found, lies in specific and explicit statements that connect directly to their work, their progress, and their ideas. My intention was to create a space where the commentary felt more like a conversation and through which I could communicate my appreciation for their effort.

I tested the different feedback options in Canvas (text, audio, and video) to see if there was a difference in student reception, and I opted for audio or video when I wanted to make sure that my words wouldn’t be misinterpreted. Because I wanted to use these tech options not only to foster more student engagement with the commentary but also to become more embodied within the asynchronous space, I made a point of using my voice to communicate whatever elements I needed to come through: enthusiasm for an idea, excitement about that idea’s development, etc.

**Lessons learned.** The necessity of shifting my approach from video engagement to the creation of presence through feedback became clear in fall 2020. In a project reflection, one of my students wrote, “I could have done better.” This was a persistent theme throughout their reflection, and it was clear that they were comparing their work to the previous academic year, which, in my estimation, was unfair. In my response, I noted the importance of assessing our creations not through the lens of the past as some kind of ideal but rather through the moment that we’re experiencing. This student was undergoing a lot of personal turmoil; the fact that they continued to show up and to try *was* the best that they could do. In my feedback, I highlighted the successes that they did uncover (and some that they didn’t), and I encouraged them to recognize and celebrate the fact that, given their personal struggles, they were doing their best. To be sure, this approach—the extension of compassion and encouragement of self-kindness—doesn’t mean everyone gets an “A for effort.” What it does allow, though, is the opportunity for individuals to come together to support one another in real and meaningful ways. At the end of the term, this student noted in their final reflection that they were proud that they didn’t give up. That level of self-acknowledgement removes the focus on the grade (at least to an extent) as the only marker of success through a course, and it shifts the role of the teacher away from that of

“grade giver” and towards an individual who can support a student through their individual journey.

Certainly, the use of digital tech to create more conversational feedback didn't create absolute improvement in the level of engagement in my courses, but the difference was marked. Of the three online courses that I taught in Fall Semester, I saw increases of between 18% and 23% in student response to my feedback. Further, there was a dramatic increase in student commentary that they felt supported through the course. During the Spring Semester, I continued to use these strategies with my online and main-campus classes. While the numbers remained relatively the same as far as student commentary (measured by the previous academic year), there was a new element that I hadn't anticipated: more students remarked that they felt supported by the class community as a whole, which suggests that the use of digital tech and rhetorical strategies in feedback has extensive benefits not only to individual students but to their sense of community within both the virtual and traditional spaces.

**Reflection.** My experience in the Faculty Fellows program was invaluable to the work that I did this past year. As the Program for Writing and Rhetoric's Liaison to Continuing Education, I am committed to figuring out how to create more interaction and engagement in our online classes, and I am convinced that all the work that we do to innovate in the virtual realm has significant applications for our main campus classes. The Faculty Fellows program afforded me the opportunity to think about the ways in which the use of digital tech can improve our pedagogy, and being a part of this community of like-minded tech enthusiasts encouraged a deeper pursuit of my ideas than I would have been able to achieve on my own. Further, the support of the community through our individual challenges this year created a rewarding experience that I can build upon as I move forward.