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Kolowich, Steve

The Human Element

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Verfügbar unter/Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11970/109098>

Vorgeschlagene Zitierweise/Suggested citation:

Kolowich, Steve (2010): The Human Element. In: HydroLink 2010/5. Madrid: International Association for Hydro-Environment Engineering and Research (IAHR). S. 78-79. https://iahr.oss-accelerate.aliyuncs.com/library/HydroLink/HydroLink2010_05_Pakistan_Floods.pdf.

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The Human Element

Douglas E. Hersh's close crop of auburn hair and neatly trimmed goatee are clearly visible in an expandable window on my desktop. So are his light tweed blazer and matching tie. On a table behind his desk sits a purple orchid, lending color to his office -- 2,600 miles away from mine.

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Written by:

Steve Kolowich
Inside Higher Ed

www.insidehighered.com

**INSIDE
HIGHER ED**

The technology that allows me to see Hersh's face as he speaks to me is not new. But Hersh, dean of educational programs and technology at Santa Barbara City College, believes it may hold the key to solving an old problem that has plagued distance education since its beginnings: the retention gap.

A growing body of research has all but obliterated the notion that distance education is inherently less effective than classroom education. But even the most ardent distance-ed evangelists cannot deny persistent evidence suggesting that students are more likely to drop out of online programs than traditional ones. The phenomenon has many explanations, not least the fact that what often makes students choose the flexibility of online learning -- being too busy to enroll in a classroom course -- can also make it harder for them to keep up with their studies. But Hersh believes there is another major factor

driving the gap between retention rates in face-to-face programs and those in the rapidly growing world of distance education: the lack of a human touch.

And unlike the reality of adult students' busy lives, Hersh says the human-touch problem can be solved. In fact, he thinks he knows how. Hersh's solution is to incorporate more video and audio components into the course-delivery mechanism. Most professors who teach online already incorporate short video and audio clips into their courses, according to a 2009 survey by the Campus Computing Project. But it is rarer, Hersh says, for professors to use video of themselves to teach or interact with their online students -- largely because the purveyors of major learning management systems do not orient their platforms to feature that method of delivery.

That is why Hersh convinced Santa Barbara in 2008 to abandon Blackboard, the LMS industry leader, in favor of Moodle's open-source platform, which he used to build the straightforwardly named "Human Presence Learning Environment." The interface is designed so that professors can deliver lessons and messages using videos recorded with a Webcam. It also shows students who among their instructors or classmates are logged into Skype, the video-chat service, in case they want to have a live, face-to-face conversation. As an alternative to text, students using computers that have built-in recording equipment can post audio responses to discussion threads.

Hersh says he is in discussions with other California community colleges to adopt the platform and will gladly give it away to any other institutions that want to adopt it.

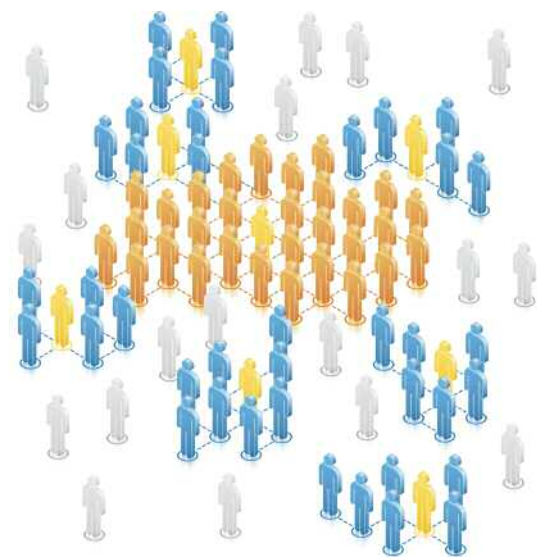
Blackboard has recently incorporated a text-chatting feature into its system, and allows its professors who also teach classroom courses to post videos of their lectures on their course

pages. But according to a spokesman, the company is less focused on audio- and video-based interactivity than on promoting "engagement in general," in accordance with numerous studies that link high engagement to low dropout rates.

For Hersh, engagement goes hand-in-hand with audio-visual communication. The more that exchanges occurring within an online learning environment resemble those that occur in classrooms, he says, the more that students will feel connected to their professors and classmates, and the more likely they will be to stay in a program.

John Bourne, executive director of the Sloan Consortium, an online-education research and advocacy group, says "social presence" does stem dropout rates in online programs. "There is no question in my mind, based on work on social presence over 15 years, that if you increase interaction between humans, you can increase and enhance engagement, comfort and, eventually, retention," Bourne says, adding that he has spoken to institutions that have been displeased with the limited degree of social presence in the major commercial learning management systems.

"I think as we go forward with more and more workforce education and pulling students up to higher levels of productivity, there are often people at lower levels of the education chain who have trouble keeping on task and working through," he says. "So the more we can do to retain them through online methods," the better. Hersh says he has proof that his system, in particular, works toward this goal. As part of his 2009 dissertation for Argosy University, Hersh studied the satisfaction and completion rates of a sample of 145 students in his "presence"-oriented learning environment compared to a similar sample taking their courses through a "traditional" LMS. That research



“demonstrate[d] that students feel more satisfied in their online courses when they feel engaged through human presence design,” Hersh wrote in a summary provided to Inside Higher Ed. “Further... students who find intrinsic satisfaction in the human presence courses tend to complete them at higher rates and with higher levels of academic success.” He credits these improvements to the “illusion of non-mediation,” a term he borrowed from virtual-presence scholars Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton. When students are able to see the face of the instructor who is guiding them through a course, they are more likely to trust that professor, and they feel more invested in the course, Hersh says. The same applies to classmates in an online program, to the extent that future learning environments enable visual contact among them.

Hersh admits that this return to the emotional dynamics of face-to-face learning may come at a cost: The text-based medium that currently dominates online learning environments may eliminate the prejudices and distractions inherent to visual communication, making conversations in text-based learning environments more focused.

But communicating solely via text is also alienating, says Hersh. Weighing the theoretical advantages of purely textual discourse against the demonstrated engagement benefits of presence-oriented teaching, the latter wins, he says.

Reggie Smith, president of the United States Distance Learning Association, says that based on his experience, “The learner-instructor interaction is the most critical one to the success of the learning experience,” for not only instructional but also emotional reasons. But while he said that Hersh’s customized learning environment “looks great,” he warned that the overall design of online courses — not just the tools involved in delivery — still have the greatest bearing on whether a course is effective.

“We are seeing more and more [instructors] make use of video and audio within their environments, but using it to just add some flash does not make it award-winning content or instructionally sound by design,” says Smith. “While student-instructor and student-student dialog is important and can support learning outcomes, it is not a required... ingredient for success in an online course.”

Report on 17th APD Congress

Auckland, New Zealand, 21-24 February 2010

In 2010 the Asia Pacific Division Congress was held in the Pacific. It was jointly organised by the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand and The University of Auckland, and was held at the School of Engineering, the University of Auckland. The 7th International Urban Watershed Management Conference (7th IUWMC) was incorporated in the APD.

Written by:
Dr. Guinevere Nalder
Organising Secretary 17th APD



Assisting the LOC were a group of external members who advertised the APD throughout Asia. Altogether 147 papers were received. Two hundred and forty seven delegates registered for the Congress from across Asia as well as Europe, Americas and Australia.

Technical Visits

Technical Visit 1: Waitakere City Council’s low impact design stormwater control measures and one of Auckland City’s water supply dams in the Waitakere ranges.

Technical Visit 2: Mangere Wastewater

Treatment Plant Auckland’s main wastewater treatment plant which has recently undergone major upgrading.

Technical Visit 3: Museum of Transport and Technology, sited at one of Auckland’s early water sources, the Western Springs to view the restored Victorian pump house and beam engine.

Welcome Reception

IAHR’s 75th Anniversary was recognised at the Welcome reception on Monday evening.

The 75th anniversary logo was displayed and delegates were invited by IAHR President, Prof. Tamai to a toast.

To read the full report visit www.iahr.org under Regional Divisions - Asia and Pacific

