Can the right technology help to increase retention rates and improve the quality of distance education?

BYU-Hawaii’s online education director, Michael Griffiths, firmly believes technology can increase retention with new innovations that can help to enhance social presence, communication, and community. He also thinks educational quality will be enhanced when instructors have flexible tools adaptable to their teaching style and method. Now Griffiths has the right tool to help him prove it—Canvas by Instructure.

When Griffiths was given the mandate to deliver distance courses to international students preparing to attend BYU-Hawaii, he began to implement a new model of online education that he had been developing since 2007. This model is a pedagogical system that employs asynchronous video (“video mail”) for student presentations, teacher feedback, and student discussions.

“It’s pretty cutting edge to be doing video mail in education,” Griffiths said. “We find that if the technology isn’t right, the barriers become more powerful than the benefits. For the educational model to work right, the technology has to work almost perfectly.”

BYU-Hawaii boasts an online program that seemingly touches nearly every continent of the world with students from 27 different countries. But program enrollment is only half of the equation. Anyone familiar with distance education knows that retention can be a challenge, especially when students feel disconnected from peers and instructors.

“It seems that there is something missing from the educational experience when you don’t see people and interact with them,” Griffiths said.

He discovered an answer to the distance dilemma through personal experience. A native of the United Kingdom, Griffiths found it difficult to stay connected with his family across the Atlantic. Rather than schedule live video calls, he began taking video of his children in short snippets and posting the clips to YouTube where grandparents in England could watch and respond at their leisure, sometimes with their own videos.
Recording and submitting video where another could later watch and respond asynchronously seemed to meet flexibility requirements for an online course. So Griffiths tried it. After sending students a video introduction, Griffiths instructed students to reply with their own video introduction. He held video discussion forums where students watched and responded—via video—to the ideas of other students. Students also presented answers to essay question in video clips rather than in writing. Griffiths responded to each student video with an individualized feedback video. Though the technology didn't always work and was often challenging for some to grasp, student feedback for the course was enthusiastic.

“Everywhere in the LMS—wherever there is the ability to submit something—it can be done in traditional ways but also in video,” Griffiths said. “It’s fully integrated into the course management system, which means I can do whatever I want with it.”

Griffiths said one of his favorite Canvas features, Speed Grader, simplifies the way instructors can respond to and grade assignments. Within one screen, an instructor can review a student’s video submission, add a grade and provide text comments or even send video response to the student who also can see the grade and video feedback on a single screen. The integrated solution brought a new level of simplicity to using video mail the other systems didn’t have.

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BYU-HAWAII ONLINE
Instructor David Bybee, says he's been able to enjoy the benefits of using asynchronous video without the hassle of jumping between browsers. “[The video component] allows students who wouldn't participate in the class discussion to express themselves in a less intimidating environment. They can think about what they want to say and even practice before hand. In the end, I think they learn and retain more of the material and concepts by actually talking about them on video.”

Other faculty and staff at BYU-Hawaii are busy developing English as a Second Language (ESL) courses using Canvas. Course designer Gael Weberg said she loves Canvas' ease of use—from a preview function that allows you to view presentation slides or spreadsheets within the system—to a drag-and-drop feature to easily upload or move content. “We are excited about the teaching and learning possibilities that are now available to us through the Instructure LMS,” she said. “We have greater latitude in making pedagogical choices and more tools in the system to effectively adapt content for online delivery.”

Instructure, Inc. is an educational software company based in Utah. Their primary product is Canvas, an on-demand Software as a Service (SaaS) Learning Management System created for post-secondary, and secondary learning institutions. Instructure believes that education extends beyond the classroom, communication is essential, and that ease of use is paramount. For more information visit www.instructure.com.