



ARTICLE

Welcome to My One-Woman Show!: My Unexpected New Career as a Skills Video Producer

Beatrice Tice

Professor of Lawyering Skills

University of California, Irvine School of Law

Published: August 2021

Lawyering skills professor, law librarian, licensed attorney . . . and video producer? The COVID-19 pandemic caused most of us to take on unexpected roles, both inside and outside of the classroom. Even so, I never would have predicted that one of my new roles would be a combination of screenwriter, actor, director, editor, and producer of a series of video lectures that I used in my newly-flipped lawyering skills classroom.

I also did not expect that this new role would offer me such a compelling opportunity for pedagogical growth and change. Before the pandemic, I never would have considered lecturing to my students via pre-recorded video. Now, I wouldn't consider lecturing any other way! How did I arrive at such a major shift in approach? I incorporated best practices from online learning theory—including consistency, presence, and interactivity—which helped me create video lectures that deliver information more effectively and efficiently than I could consistently do in person.¹

¹ To view one of my videos, see <https://youtu.be/A50rJYKRwn4>.

1. Flipping the Virtual Skills Classroom in a Global Pandemic

My law school's transition to online instruction for the 2020-21 academic year left me reeling at first. I quickly realized that, if I were to make this pivot successful at all, I would need to rethink the teaching methods I had been using in my in-person first-year lawyering skills course. After evaluating best practices for online learning, I decided to restructure my class entirely using the flipped classroom model.

Under the flipped classroom approach, students prepare for class by viewing asynchronous video lectures that provide substantive content. During the synchronous class session, students work with the instructor in applying their pre-class learning through interactive exercises or other hands-on learning activities.² Legal research instructors have used flipped classrooms successfully in teaching these skills to their students.³ I believed that the combination of flexibility offered by pre-recorded content and active learning provided by in-class activities would best serve my students amid a global pandemic.

As someone who had never even shot a video on her smartphone, I'll admit the idea of creating a library of instructive and engaging video lectures was daunting. To prepare for my new role as a video producer, I set about reviewing the literature on asynchronous videos. (There had to be more to it than simply talking at a camera!) Although I found plenty of research outlining the value of asynchronous instruction,⁴ I found little guidance about how to make an excellent video. I learned general best practices and advice from education-based internet guides:⁵ Videos should be no more than eight to ten minutes long to retain viewer attention. Lighting, sound, and camera angle should be optimal for best effect. Eyes should always be on the camera to create audience contact. A written script should be prepared in advance to avoid lengthy rambling but should not

² LUTZ-CHRISTIAN WOLFF & JENNY CHAN, *FLIPPED CLASSROOMS FOR LEGAL EDUCATION* 9-10 (2016).

³ See Judith Lihosit & Jane Larrington, *Flipping the Legal Research Classroom*, 22 *PERSPS.: TEACHING LEGAL RSCH. & WRITING* 1 (2013); Laurel E. Davis et al., *Teaching Advanced Legal Research in a Flipped Classroom*, 22 *PERSPS.: TEACHING LEGAL RSCH. & WRITING* 14 (2013).

⁴ See, e.g., Michael Noetel et al., *Video Improves Learning in Higher Education: A Systematic Review*, 91 *REV. EDUC. RSCH.* 204 (2021); Jamie L. Jensen et al., *Investigating Strategies for Pre-Class Content Learning in a Flipped Classroom*, 27 *J. SCI. EDUC. & TECH.* 523 (2018).

⁵ See, e.g., Michael Smedshammer, *10 Tips for Creating Effective Instructional Videos*, *FACULTY FOCUS* (Mar. 31, 2017), <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-with-technology-articles/10-tips-creating-effective-instructional-videos/>; *The Fundamentals of Video and Audio for Teaching Online*, HARVARD UNIV., https://teachremotely.harvard.edu/video-and-audio#anchor2_2 (last visited May 7, 2021).

be read on camera. Videos of a single “talking head” can be boring. Videos of slides with voiceover and no talking head are definitely boring.

But I didn’t simply want to make short, non-boring video lectures with good studio effects. I wanted to make videos that were also motivating, supportive, and effective. The relevant literature supported this approach,⁶ but again offered little practical guidance. I turned to watching various teaching and training videos, everything from episodes of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood to TED talks. I realized the best videos—the ones I wanted to emulate—had certain things in common: The lecturers seemed to be speaking to me, personally, right through the screen. Their informational messages were succinct and reinforced throughout the presentation. The videos themselves were entertaining, intriguing, amusing, anything but a chore to watch. Yet viewing these videos remained an essentially passive activity. Could I produce video lectures that were also interactive? (Yes, as it happens!)

Eventually, I pulled all this information together into a series of twenty-eight video lectures for my year-long lawyering skills class, including such titles as “Decoding Appellate Opinions,” “Recipe for Rule Synthesis,” “The Fine Art of Point Headings,” and the two-part “Anatomy of an Oral Argument.”⁷ To make the videos, I recorded a PowerPoint slide presentation on my screen, together with a small webcam recording of me delivering the lecture.⁸ Each video was between eight and twelve minutes long.

Unquestionably, this was a challenging, time-consuming project to plan and implement, and the process involved a good deal of trial and error. But as I forged onward, I became increasingly adept at writing, editing, and performing in my videos. However, my most successful work came as the result of incorporating three best practices from asynchronous learning theory: consistency in course design, interpersonal connection through instructor presence, and active participation in learning.

2. Building a Consistent Virtual Classroom

Consistency in course design is one of the hallmarks of successful virtual instruction. When students can rely on a consistent format and structure in their

⁶ See, e.g., ROSEMARY M. LEHMAN & SIMONE C. O. CONCEIÇÃO, CREATING A SENSE OF PRESENCE IN ONLINE TEACHING 1-12 (2010).

⁷ I also produced a series of twenty-three video lectures for my single-semester Remedies class, which I taught using the flipped classroom model. This gave me additional video production experience that I draw on here.

⁸ I used Screencast-O-Matic as my video recording and editing tool, but many other user-friendly tools are available as well. See *The Fundamentals of Video*, HARVARD UNIV., *supra* note 5.

asynchronous learning experience, they feel more at ease in the online environment and thus are able to engage more fully with the new information being taught.⁹ For this reason, I decided to create a template for a comfortable asynchronous learning space in which the students and I could interact effectively, albeit virtually. I also hoped that a consistent presentation would lead students to engage with the video lecture material as an integrated, cumulative whole, rather than as discrete units of information.

I set about building a consistent asynchronous learning space by creating my videos in the context of a themed serial production. I gave the series a title—“*Skills Seminar! . . . with Professor Tice*”—and a cheerful, catchy theme song. I prepared a “title” slide that I used at the beginning of every video and a “credits” slide that I used at the end. In this way, every time a student starts a video and hears the theme song, they are cued to enter the asynchronous classroom. I added to the consistent look and feel of the videos by using the same slide design for each one; I chose a design that was colorful and visually interesting, but not distracting. I also brought consistency to the substance of the videos by creating three simple legal scenarios (larceny, accountant liability, and liability for cutting a neighbor’s tree) with recurring characters, which I used as the basis for most of my examples throughout the series.

But I didn’t want the asynchronous learning space to be so consistent that it was entirely predictable and therefore dull. When students come to expect the unexpected, their interest and motivation in watching and learning from video lectures is piqued.¹⁰ I looked for ways to incorporate unanticipated twists into the consistency of the learning space without compromising it altogether. Among other things, I occasionally caused my talking head to change position suddenly on screen, so that I was speaking next to an important bullet point on the slide. Sometimes I added sound effects to highlight a point—a drum roll, for instance. Sometimes I did nothing at all. I also occasionally added footage at the very end of the video, after the credits screen, including bloopers from the video or a few seconds of me introducing my cat. Including unpredictability in my virtual classroom made the video experience enjoyable for me, as well.

⁹ See Karen Swan et al., *Building Knowledge Building Communities: Consistency, Contact, and Communication in the Virtual Classroom*, 23 J. EDUC. COMPUTING RSCH. 359, 377-78, 380 (2000).

¹⁰ See Lisa K. Forbes, *Fostering Fun: Engaging Students with Online Learning*, FACULTY FOCUS (June 17, 2020), <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/online-student-engagement/fostering-fun-engaging-students-with-asynchronous-online-learning/>.

3. Establishing Connection Through Creating Presence

One of the most critical issues I grappled with was how to connect personally with my students via a pre-recorded format. A sense of instructor presence during online instruction is crucial to address the essentially social nature of human learning.¹¹ I wanted to break through the computer screen and reduce the virtual barrier between us as much as possible, so that students would feel I was sitting next to them during the lecture, at least in spirit. I hoped this would lead to students coming away from the videos with a satisfying feeling of having been taught and having learned. I tackled this challenge by focusing on two aspects of online instructor presence: physical presence onscreen and emotional presence in the delivery of the lecture.

The instructor's onscreen presence is important for maintaining student engagement with a video. Even when the video involves a slide show presentation, students tend to experience a greater sense of inclusion, involvement, and accountability when they can see their instructor at all times, rather than merely hearing the instructor's voice.¹² I decided to be physically present in the videos by enclosing the webcam footage of my talking head in a graphic circle that was small enough to be discreet, but large enough for students to be able easily to see my facial expressions. My talking head circle typically occupied the upper-right hand corner of the slides during the lecture. For variety's sake, at the beginning, middle, and end of the video I cut away to full-screen images of myself. In those spots, I provided a roadmap for the lecture, a mid-point summary, and a final summing up.

Being emotionally present in the videos was a trickier proposition. The instructor's authentic and supportive presence—defined as the dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior—in asynchronous content is crucial to effective online learning. Presence is what bridges the physical separation gap between student and instructor in the virtual learning space and satisfies the human craving for social interaction during the teaching-learning process.¹³

Communicating presence is, by its nature, a highly personal and largely unconscious act; human spontaneity is reduced by too much self-conscious effort. Yet creating online presence in a pre-recorded video calls for deliberate

¹¹ See LEHMAN & CONCEIÇÃO, *supra* note 6, at viii (“The importance of creating a sense of presence in online teaching and learning environments cannot be overestimated.”).

¹² See, e.g., Jiahui Wang et al., *Does Visual Attention to the Instructor in Online Video Affect Learning and Learner Perceptions? An Eye Tracking Analysis*, 146 *COMPUTERS & EDUC.* 103779 (2020).

¹³ See LEHMAN & CONCEIÇÃO, *supra* note 6, at 2-6. I and my students felt this craving for social interaction even more strongly in the context of a global pandemic.

planning and design.¹⁴ My own response to this conundrum was to plan everything carefully ahead of time, and then, when filming a video, to let it all go and simply be myself. During recording, I imagined that I was speaking to one single student.¹⁵ I conceived of my lecture as a one-on-one chat with this student taking place in the asynchronous learning space we created together. To help myself make this connection, I attached a small student photo to my laptop next to the camera, so that I literally spoke to one student while recording. As I delivered the substantive content of the lecture, I frequently checked in with my single student audience—“Do you understand this rule?” “Do you see how this works?”—to provide an opportunity for my real students to take a moment and process what they’d learned so far; I then invited them to pose questions to me via email or on the class discussion board. I paused occasionally and offered encouraging words: “I know this is new and it might feel difficult at first, but we’ll have plenty of time to practice in class.” I followed my script, but I also ad-libbed whenever I felt like it, throwing in a joke or personal anecdote. In essence, I psyched myself into believing and behaving as though I were teaching one student in person, rather than lecturing at the glowing camera dot on my laptop. The more I practiced communicating my authentic presence in the videos, the easier and more natural it became. Shooting the videos became less of a chore, as I simply tapped into my normal professor persona during the recording.

4. Creating Active Participation in the Learning Process

The final issue I wrestled with was how to break through the essentially passive pursuit of watching a pre-recorded lecture by inserting active learning moments into the videos. Even though the flipped classroom model generally calls for the active learning portion of the course to take place during synchronous class time, I remained acutely aware that learning—especially skills training—is a matter of doing, not sitting back and listening.¹⁶ When students actively participate in their own learning process, even during asynchronous sessions, learning is enhanced.¹⁷ In particular, I wanted to be sure that students engaged sufficiently with the information I presented in the videos so that they retained that knowledge for use during the active learning exercises in class. I was not convinced this would happen through a lecture alone.

The answer turned out to be so very simple: Include active learning exercises in the video itself! At one or two strategic points in each video, I stopped at

¹⁴ *Id.* at 4.

¹⁵ This visualization was, of course, entirely realistic because students would view the videos individually.

¹⁶ See Gerald F. Hess, *Principle Three: Good Practice Encourages Active Learning*, 49 J. LEGAL EDUC. 401, 402-03 (1999).

¹⁷ See Lorraine Sherry, *Issues in Distance Learning*, 1 INT’L J. EDUC. TELECOMMS. 337, 344-45 (1995).

a screen on which I put up a short exercise that explored the material I had just introduced. I asked the student to pause the video at that point and try their hand at doing the exercise. Then, when the video resumed, I explained the exercise. Not only did this process require students to actively engage with the asynchronous content, but it also provided me with a handy opportunity to reinforce the material. In addition, asking students to pause the video offered a much-needed break from staring at the screen.¹⁸

5. Reflections

Overall, I feel the video lectures I produced for my flipped lawyering skills classroom were surprisingly successful. By using the asynchronous learning concepts of consistency in course design, interpersonal connection through instructor presence, and collaboration in active learning, the videos appeared to create an effective learning experience for the students. Certainly, my students in this year's online class ended up with a grasp of essential skills that was as good or better than previous year's classes in which I lectured in person.¹⁹ On a day-to-day basis, the students demonstrated during the synchronous portion of the class that they were generally understanding and retaining the information presented in the asynchronous lectures. As a result, they were able to handle somewhat more comprehensive and complex hands-on exercises than I typically used in the past. Anecdotally, I heard many positive comments from students about the usefulness of the videos. In fact, at the beginning of the second semester, students requested (without my prompting) that I make the first-semester videos available for their use during the remainder of the year. That felt like a ringing endorsement!

As for me, this experience taught me so much. I learned to use new (to me) technologies to shoot and edit videos. I engaged deeply with the theories and best practices supporting successful asynchronous learning. But most of all, I opened my mind to accept and embrace different ways and means of instruction.

As I look ahead to returning to in-person instruction in the fall, I will certainly be taking with me the flipped classroom format of last year's online course. I will spend the summer revisiting the videos—especially the earlier ones—to make sure they incorporate all the lessons I learned by the end. I will

¹⁸ To ensure that the students complied with pre-class learning, I provided an online “quick quiz” to be taken after the video. Students who failed to take the quiz without an approved excuse were not permitted to attend class (but this never happened).

¹⁹ Other factors likely influenced this as well, including the overall greater number of exercises I assigned in the flipped classroom setting and the increased student attendance at (virtual) office hours during the pandemic.

think about ways to improve their effectiveness—for example, providing downloadable copies of the video exercises in advance may make it easier for students to work remotely with the problems. After that, I'll cue up those videos with confidence.

In the final analysis—with or without the COVID pandemic—I have now permanently added one role to my list. Professor, librarian, attorney, and video producer? Yes, that's me!