Online Learning Goes Hollywood

Using video storytelling to motivate learning

by MICHAEL B. HORN

HOLLYWOOD IS COMING to a university near you—as nearby as the closest computer screen. Educators are attempting to harness the power of the industry that commands our attention at the movies (and on our tablets, televisions, and phones) for students in online college classes.

Demand for online learning has exploded in recent years, with roughly one third of all students enrolled in accredited colleges and universities in the United States now taking at least one online course, and more than one quarter of all master's students learning *exclusively* online. But keeping students engaged with those courses—so they not only enroll, but also persist and learn—has proved a tricky nut to crack.

Enter Hollywood. Hollywood artists are storytelling masters. And there is ample evidence to suggest that human brains are wired to learn through stories.

"Five thousand years ago, story-lines and learning were totally tied together. They were inseparable," said Bror Saxberg, the vice president of learning science at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. "Myths are all about learning. They are full of rich, evocative material that happens to carry with it a lot of information at the same time."

So universities that include USC, American, Georgetown, and Tulane are turning to entertainment experts to craft story-lines that can hold learners' attention throughout an online class. Although such offerings might be more entertaining than usual, will that translate into gains in student learning?

Cracking the engagement nut through stories

Statistics speak to the difficulty of engagement and persistence for students in online learning environments. Research by HarvardX and MITx, which offer online courses, found that just 30 percent of the 498,000 participants who said they intended to "complete enough course activities to earn a certificate" did so. And some studies that attempt to control for student characteristics show students in face-to-face classes have better persistence rates than those studying online. In addition, accredited online programs often serve students whose circumstances may make completion difficult, such as poor academic preparedness, financial challenges, and having to balance demands of work and family while attending part-time.

Those were the problems at Strayer University, which enrolls roughly 40,000 students in its online programs and at 70 campus locations.

"We were losing many adult students as they moved from our campus network to online courses," said President Brian Jones. "[Especially] early in the second or third term."

The university's online offerings were clearly missing something. So Jones and Karl McDonnell, Strayer's chief executive officer, viewed the content and realized a major problem: it was boring.

"We were in the wrong business," Jones said. "We ought to [have been] competing with Ambien."

As movie buffs, McDonnell and Jones wondered what would happen if each course had a compelling narrative arc through which students would learn the content. So they conducted an experiment by redesigning one course, Business 100, bringing in a documentary producer and director, who assembled a team of filmmakers paired with learning designers.

The birth of "Strayer Studios"

The filmmakers and learning designers started by determining what students needed and wanted to learn, and then identified the emotions they wanted the course to evoke as students progressed through it. They created a storyline designed to hook students' interest, and then found compelling, real-life characters to animate the narrative.

One major question: which characters, exactly, would illustrate the lessons at hand and engage students the most? "There was a big debate," said Andrea Backman, Strayer's chief academic officer and provost. "Should we tell stories about Google and Tesla, or stories like an African American woman starting a hair product now sold in Target stores?"

Strayer ultimately chose the latter path and profiled five lesser-known businesses such as Alikay Naturals, a hair care and cosmetics company. According to Jones, entrepreneurs like Rochelle Alikay Graham-Campbell, the company's African American founder, would be more relatable to Strayer's students, 74 percent of whom are people of color, 65 percent of whom are first-generation students, 62 percent of whom are women, and nearly all of whom are working adults studying part-time.

"People actually engage with learning content and are more likely to retain it if it is relatable," Backman said. Studying the leaders of major corporations like Google could feel foreign and less immediately applicable to students' lives.

When they put it all together—with deep dives into content underneath the arc of a compelling story for the course—the impact on students' persistence in the class was remarkable and immediate. So Strayer doubled down on the experiment, and today, 50 percent of all students experience "Strayer Studios" content.

According to its 2017 self-published "Strayer Outcomes Report," the restructured, story-driven courses have had notable, positive effects on retention and engagement: 10 percent fewer students drop out, 5.5 percent more students persist to the next quarter, and the amount of submitted coursework increased by 6.3 percent. And whereas student engagement with video in Strayer's old content declined from week 1 to week 11, the opposite is true with Strayer Studios content: students are more likely to view a video from start to finish at the end of a course than at the beginning. In all, roughly 85 percent of students watch videos from beginning to end for the duration of a course.

The narrative-driven reboot hasn't just benefited engagement but academics as well. Having a narrative arc forces Strayer's instructional designers to focus and streamline the online classroom, which otherwise can be quite cluttered, Backman said. The courses are more challenging academically as well, she added.

Not surprisingly, Strayer is now focused on improving and expanding the Strayer Studios model and impact.

Not just video

It's simple to take the Strayer story and conclude that the answer to engagement is just to use more video; after all, today's students love watching and learning through video. According to a recent study by the Harris Poll (on behalf of textbook publisher Pearson), 59 percent of respondents from Generation Z named YouTube as a preferred way of learning, whereas only 47 percent ranked books. That's a big change, even compared to tech-savvy millennials, 60 percent of whom prefer printed books compared to 55 percent citing YouTube.

However, that conclusion would be mistaken, despite the huge number of online learning resources that are in video form (see *what next,* Winter 2019). Not all learning videos are created equal.

Online video is perfect to demonstrate how to do something because videos show instead of tell. Video can also motivate learners by introducing real-life characters and storylines that students find compelling, relate to, internalize to believe they can accomplish something, and overcome negative associations.

> **Video can motivate learners by introducing real-life characters and storylines that students find compelling.**

But video can also overwhelm and undermine learning. As Ruth Clark and Richard Mayer noted in *eLearning and the Science of Instruction,* online courses must take care not to overload students' working memory with excessive audio and visual elements. Too many production elements can distract a learner. In some cases, simple text, a recording with no visuals, a simple simulation, or even a stick-figure animation might do the job better than a complicated video.

Video also can take far more time to consume than other media—students might be able to read a passage more quickly than watch a video, for example—to say nothing of the fact that it's expensive and complicated to keep current as facts and trends change. And as cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham showed in *Why Don't Students Like School,* making something relevant could cause students to miss the actual point of a lesson by focusing their attention on items related to what they know.

"When things are simple cognitively, then rich media is great," Saxberg said. "But when they are complicated cognitively, then you need to simplify [the learning] to the essentials so you don't tax working memory."

Design for motivation and learning

The more significant takeaway is likely the power of stories to keep students motivated. According to Saxberg, stories can help tackle at least three of the reasons that prevent a student from starting, persisting, and putting in the mental effort required to learn.

First, a student may not value learning on its own. But being entertained or enjoying learning—wanting to see what happens to the characters in a story, for example—can boost whether the student values her studies.

Second, a student may have low self-efficacy. Characters like Graham-Campbell, who come from similar circumstances as Strayer's student population and succeeded, could help counter that.

Third, negative emotions can block students from engaging. Hollywood writers make their living by inspiring emotions in their audiences. And as Willingham wrote, emotion can also help with the other side of the learning equation—cognitive change—by helping people remember things.

And that's the opportunity. If Hollywood is going to help transform online learning, it will have to bring its proven power to enhance student motivation. But it also must work alongside instructional designers to ensure that its academic offerings are designed with learning in mind, not just entertainment.

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