

Building a Teaching Persona

As we begin each term, there are key questions that can impact our success, and the success of our students: “What kind of teacher do I want to be?”, “How do I want my students to view me?”, “How is my written presence a reflection of the kind of teacher and person I want my students to see?”, and “What tools can I use to convey the fact that I am whole and caring person?”.

These may seem like small questions compared to course design and instructional materials, but researchers argue that an instructor’s online persona can have a significant impact on the student experience. In an interview quoted by Rob Kelly in Higher Ed., Ted Conway of Yavapai College explains that “personality can influence student achievement, retention or completion, and satisfaction with courses” (Kelly 2010).

Simply by stepping foot, virtually, into our classrooms, an online persona is created. We can create that persona thoughtfully and strategically. If we do not, our students will nevertheless perceive a persona based on the information available to them. Rather than leaving this up to chance, it is best to carefully cultivate an online persona that supports a constructive academic community. We can manage the development of our persona through text and a variety of technologies including pictures, audio recordings, and videos.

In a 2011 presentation delivered at the Online Learning Consortium, George Bradford and William Phillips shared practical tools for strategically creating your instructional persona. Their [Online Persona Worksheet](#) has been promoted by a number of online programs (Bradford 2011). The worksheet allows instructors to conduct a self-evaluation that examines their current teaching philosophy with respect to incorporating various characteristics from humor, to flexibility, to degree of authoritativeness.

There are also developmental tools within the worksheet that are designed to help instructors examine strategies for implementing best practices for online instruction, such as providing prompt feedback,

creating an atmosphere of reciprocity, and engaging students in active learning. Finally, the worksheet provides an activity to help instructors assess their current face-to-face persona and explore ways in which that persona can be translated into the online environment.

Just as you strategically design your online persona, there are practical techniques for implementing that persona and communicating it to your students. These techniques include:

1. Include some biographical information in your course. Conway suggests going beyond the basics of a profile picture, office hours, and email. He encourages instructors to include a few photographs as well as a description of hobbies and interests. Providing a brief background of your experience in the field can also be helpful.
2. Consider student expectations. For example, students will likely come to your course expecting a level of technological competence of their instructor. Today's students are typically web savvy and will expect their instructors to be so as well. To proactively prepare for an expectation like this, you could create a website to allow students to learn more about you, convey your personality, and place reusable resources for your course. When students can't find their instructors online, it may unintentionally convey that instructors are not very web savvy. An alternative to creating a website would be ensuring you have an accessible, and appropriate, professional LinkedIn profile available.
3. Explore new technologies. Conway argues that: "The Internet is not just scrolling text anymore. We need to use its capabilities to address learning styles and promote interaction." While basic course content and assignments are pre-populated for COCE courses, instructors have the opportunity to add enriching material to their course. Incorporating fresh technology can be a way to make content more engaging for students (Kelly 2010).

(Techniques adapted from Kelly, 2010).

Some technological tools instructors may consider exploring include:

- Tegrity—www.tegrity.com —lecture capturing software
- Camtasia Studio—www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp —screen-capture video software
- Ning—www.ning.com —an online platform that enables users to create social websites and social networks
- Jing—www.jingproject.com —screencasting software that takes a picture or video of the user’s computer screen and uploads it to the Web
- Skype—www.skype.com —software that enables users to make free telephone and video calls over the Internet
- Audacity—<http://audacity.sourceforge.net> —open software for recording and editing sound

Above all, it is important to remember that just as no two people are the same, and no two teachers are the same -- no two instructors will have the same online persona. Nor, should they! Our online personas are a reflection of all of the things that make us unique as individuals and as members of the academic community. What is key, is that instructors approach the development of their online persona with intention, and that they use the tools and strategies most appropriate for them.

Read further:

Bradford, George, and William Phillips. “The Online Teaching Persona, Philosophy and Strategies to Support Your Online Style.” 17th Annual Sloan C Conference. 17th Annual Sloan C Conference, 11 Oct. 2011, Orlando.

Bradford, George. “Online Teaching Persona Worksheet.” HeyBradfords.com, 2011, heybradfords.com/mo2/files/UniSA/Online_Persona_Worksheet-2-a.pdf .

Kelly, Rob. “Instructor's Personality: An Essential Online Course Component.” Faculty Focus | Higher Ed Teaching & Learning, Magna

Publications, 10 Dec. 2010, www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/instructors-personality-an-essential-online-course-component/.