Breaking the Fourth Wall

George: Gracie, what day is it today?
Gracie: Well, I don't know.
George: You can find out if you look at that paper on your desk.
Gracie: Oh, George, that doesn't help. It's yesterday's paper.
George: (toward the audience) I lie a lot, but when I talk about Gracie, I don't have to lie. As you can see, the truth is unbelievable enough.

In the old Burns and Allen television show of the fifties, George Burns and Gracie Allen would routinely engage in some type of hilarious repartee. George, pushed to the brink of exasperation from the scatterbrained Gracie, would turn directly address the television audience in an appeal for sympathy or venting of frustration. During the golden age of television, George Burns was the first to break the electronic fourth wall: to actively engage the viewing audience and create the illusion of intimacy thus drawing them into the action. Online instructors can employ a similar technique by using creative video clips in order to transcend the limitations of the asynchronous communication environment.

This concept of the breaking the fourth wall is not relegated to popular media. William Shakespeare did this in what is known as an aside, while Bertolt Brecht was known for drawing his audience's attention to the fact that they are in a theatre watching a play. Explaining his theory of Epic Theater, Brecht says, "Epic theater turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action, forces him to take decisions...the spectator stands outside, studies." In fact, as noted in the article, "Bertolt Brecht: A theatrical Genius," Brecht referred to actors in nineteenth century plays as "sellers of drugs" who lead the audience to an emotional high that would inevitably crash as they returned to the real world outside the theater. This is, of course, extreme when we think of students taking an online course.

However, we could posit that it is possible that a student taking an online course can get an artificial sense of academic achievement, having gotten through a high tech course just because it's high tech (technology as drug) but may have not been totally engaged with the material. The student could simply have done the assignment in a cursory way with minimum contact with his/her professor or with other students. Current online teaching literature suggests that the most successful courses create learning communities through interaction. As stated in "Teaching at an Internet Distance: The pedagogy of Online Teaching and Learning, the Report of a 1998-1999 University of Illinois Faculty Seminar," "High quality online teaching is not just a matter of transferring class notes or a videotaped lecture to the internet; new paradigms of content deliver are needed. Particular features to look for in new courses are the strength of professor-student and student-student interactions, the depth at which students engage in the material...." And, of course, active learning--involving students as "observers," not "spectators"--is the new paradigm for teaching, whether online or on campus. Thus, using video is only an enhancement and cannot replace the necessary component of real, timely feedback.

Nevertheless, since video is one of an array of possible online teaching tools, by attempting to break the fourth wall of the computer screen, we can help to create more collaboration and engagement between students and teachers using the constrained video capacity of the Internet. However, one has to keep in mind that, technically, video streamed over the Internet is still in its infancy and is of lower quality than television. When the video comes up on the screen in Realplayer, the image is small, 1 ½ inches square. Also, depending on the age of your computer and speed of your modem (or more importantly of your students' computers), video can take extremely long to download and to view. It can look more like a series of still shots than a moving picture. Also, "net congestion" during prime-time hours can also slow down the streaming of the video. This can make the video experience frustrating for the students because the information is difficult to follow. Therefore, 10 minutes is the maximum practical length for a clip in your course. 2 - 3 minutes is best.

No doubt creating short video clips that attempt to break the fourth wall requires some extra effort in designing and building the course. And, perhaps it could be said we are suggesting a move to teacher-as-actor. We'd prefer to say that most professors would probably admit that to some extent we all
have teaching personas. Essentially, and most simply, what we are suggesting here it is a shift in approach in addressing the camera, to move to the second person snippets related directly to what students are doing, rather than delivering material in removed, professorial third-person imperative.

Much like George Burns, and those directors who attempt to actively engage their audiences, online instructors can employ techniques for breaking through the fourth wall--like whispers, asides, self-references, invitations to participate "behind the scene" and personalized, "one-on-one" direct addresses--to increase intimacy that may lead to improved motivation and understanding. By anticipating, say, the main points that students will make in a threaded discussion, professors can make video clips beforehand to simulate those personal moments of the "guide by the side." Through the medium of video, you can explain the relevance of material or what to do next in short, intimate takes. The perceived personal connection and use of video that relates directly to student learning helps create a friendly and fun learning environment. By breaking the fourth wall, instructors have the potential to make a video presentation more relevant to the student learning.

Sources:


*Teaching at and Internet Distance: The Pedagogy of Online Teaching and Learning: The Report of a 1998-199 University of Illinois Faculty Seminar.*

--Stephen Shugart, M.F.A.,
--Joe Hartwig, M.H.