How to Add the Human Element to Online Learning

By: Rob Kelly

The online classroom can sometimes feel like a lonely place due to a lack of presence of the instructor and other students. This lack of presence can negatively affect learning and lead to student attrition. Fortunately, some relatively simple measures can significantly add the essential human element to online courses.

In an interview with Online Classroom, Jennifer Merrill, instructional designer at Salisbury University, offered some design and facilitation recommendations for ensuring a sense of presence in online courses.

Design considerations

When working with instructors to design an online course, Merrill often begins by asking, "How would you design this course for face-to-face delivery" and "What kinds of things might be missing if the course is to be taught online?"

Asking questions like these can help keep presence in mind during design. For example, if group work is an essential part of a face-to-face course, it should also be part of the design of the online course. And perhaps this could be supported by the use of synchronous tools or audio tools to provide opportunities for interaction that offers the nuances and presence of the face-to-face classroom.

When designing an online course, it's also important to be aware of students' expectations based on their other media experiences.

Merrill worked with a nursing instructor to create an activity that used VoiceThread (voicethread.com), a cloud-based application that enables users to record and embed audio comments to facilitate a conversation similar to one that would take place face-to-face. In this instance, a student began by posting a VoiceThread message that offered a