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Personalized Video Feedback in First-Year Writing: A Scalable Practice for Online Student Engagement. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report explores the use of personalized video feedback to enhance student engagement, motivation, and persistence in asynchronous first-year writing courses. Implemented across four sections of a fully online composition course, the initiative combined standard written comments with short, individualized video responses using easily accessible tools. While grade outcomes remained relatively stable, submission rates improved and student responses—collected informally via learning management systems (LMS) and email—suggested strong affective benefits, including increased clarity, confidence, and a sense of connection with the instructor. This report outlines the context and rationale for the practice, details its implementation, and highlights four emergent themes from student reflections. It also addresses practical constraints, including time investment and scalability, and offers recommendations for instructors seeking to humanize their feedback processes. Personalized video feedback is presented not as a comprehensive solution but as a replicable, human-centered strategy for supporting student success in digital learning environments.

Keywords*:* Personalized feedback; video feedback; student engagement; first year writing; humanizing pedagogy.

Introduction

Providing effective feedback in online learning environments is a persistent challenge—one that goes beyond clarity of comments or precision in rubrics. At its heart, feedback is relational. It's a way for instructors to connect with students, affirm their efforts, and nudge them toward growth. But when courses are asynchronous, interactions are text-based, and student-instructor relationships are mediated by a learning management system, those connections can feel thin. Students may disengage not because they lack ability or will, but because they feel unseen.

This challenge is particularly acute in first-year writing courses, where students are often still building confidence in their academic identities. These students benefit not only from detailed feedback but also from the sense that someone is paying attention—that their work matters. Written comments, no matter how thoughtful, sometimes fail to convey this. Tone is easily misread. Nuance is lost. And for students who are balancing coursework with jobs, family, and other responsibilities, it's easy for written feedback to become just another task to skim and move past.

Research suggests that audio and video feedback may help bridge this gap. Instructors who provide video commentary can enhance social presence—the sense that there is a real human being on the other end of the interaction (Borup et al., 2012; Lowenthal, 2022). The visual and vocal elements of video allow for empathy, encouragement, and even small moments of

humor or affirmation that are difficult to reproduce in text. When students feel this kind of connection, they may be more likely to persist, engage with feedback, and view themselves as capable learners.

In my own teaching, I began experimenting with personalized video feedback in a series of first-year writing courses. I wasn't trying to prove anything at first—just trying to help students feel more supported. This led me to ask a more focused question: *Could personalized video feedback support student engagement, motivation, and persistence in online writing instruction?* This report outlines the rationale for introducing personalized video feedback in a first-year writing course, describes how the practice was implemented, presents evidence of student response, and offers practical recommendations for instructors interested in applying this approach in their own contexts.

Description of the Initiative

The idea of using personalized video feedback came from a growing awareness that something was getting lost in translation. I've taught online writing courses for years and have developed a fairly robust system of written comments, including inline annotations, summary notes, rubric feedback, all designed to be detailed and actionable. And yet, students would misunderstand the tone or intent behind my feedback. Some would express confusion or even discouragement in later assignments or emails. Others wouldn't respond at all. It made me realize that even the most carefully crafted written feedback can miss the mark, especially when students are bringing their own histories, doubts, and interpretations to the table. Finn and Tauber (2015) describe how students' beliefs about fluency and feedback often distort their sense of progress, sometimes reinforcing miscalibrated confidence or self-doubt. And, as Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue, the effectiveness of feedback depends not just on what is said, but on how it is received—and that depends heavily on the learner's confidence, motivation, and context.

What Was Implemented

The intervention took place across four sections of an online, first-year English Composition I course at the University of Arizona Global Campus. These courses are fully asynchronous and serve a highly diverse population of students, many of whom are working adults, first-generation college students, or returning learners navigating school alongside work and family obligations.

Each student received multimodal feedback on a major early writing assignment. This included standard written feedback (inline comments, rubric scoring, and a short narrative summary) as well as a personalized video, 3–5 minutes in length, responding to their work holistically. These videos were recorded using the native Photo Booth app on a MacBook. The videos typically featured my face (a "talking head" style), and occasionally included a screen share of the student's paper. The goal was to speak directly to the student, not just to their assignment, highlighting strengths, clarify areas for revision, and close with encouragement or a personal touch.

Video feedback was uploaded to the learning management system (LMS) and shared through the grading portal or, in some cases, directly via email. Accessibility was a priority, and all videos were kept under five minutes to minimize bandwidth concerns and cognitive load (Zhu et al., 2022).

Student Population and Course Context

The total number of participants was 78 students across the four sections. The courses followed a standard five-week structure common in accelerated online programs. The targeted assignment was the first major written piece, submitted in Week 2. This early point in the course was chosen intentionally so as to allow video feedback to function not just as correction, but as connection, setting the tone for the rest of the term.

Students represented a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. While formal demographic data were not collected, instructor observations noted diversity in age, educational preparation, and digital literacy. This diversity underscored the need for feedback that could meet students not only where they were academically, but also emotionally and interpersonally.

Constraints and Realities

This was not a grant-funded project. There was no institutional directive or research team involved. The initiative emerged organically from practice and was implemented by a single instructor working within the normal rhythms of a teaching load. That said, certain conditions made this possible such as a reasonable section sizes (20–25 students per section), familiarity with video tools, and a course structure that allowed flexibility in how feedback was delivered.

Still, this was a labor-intensive practice. Each video took time to record, to think through, personalize, and share. But the early signals from students, their engagement, their tone in replies, the increase in final assignment submissions, suggested that the time investment was paying off. The following section describes what those outcomes looked like, and how they shaped an understanding of this feedback approach.

Evidence of Impact

Quantitative data collected during the term suggest that personalized video feedback may support student persistence and engagement—even if it doesn't directly impact assignment grades. When comparing submission patterns between students who received video feedback and those in a previous cohort who received only written comments, a noticeable difference emerged.

In the video feedback group (n = 78), 96.2% of students submitted the final writing assignment. By contrast, in the historical control group, previous course sections taught by the same instructor with identical assignments and only written feedback 87.2% submitted the final assignment. That 9% increase is noteworthy, especially considering this was a first-year writing course, where drop-off and disengagement are common. Grade comparisons were less conclusive. Both groups experienced a dip in scores between the early and final assignments: -1.41% in the video group and -1.88% in the control. While these declines were minimal and not statistically analyzed in depth, the patterns suggest that while video feedback didn't result in measurable academic gains, it may have helped mitigate performance declines.

What was more compelling were the unsolicited messages students shared throughout the course. These comments offered insight into how the feedback felt, how it shaped students' perceptions of themselves and their work, and how it may have influenced their decision to stay engaged.

Student Reflections: Four Key Themes

Sixteen students (roughly 20% of the cohort) submitted unsolicited comments about the feedback they received. They came via learning management system (LMS) messages or email. While anecdotal, the volume and warmth of these comments stood out. These reflections were collected informally but documented consistently during the term, typically through LMS messaging or direct email responses to video feedback. Four recurring themes emerged: appreciation for clarity, motivation and encouragement, personalized connection, and perceived growth.

1. Appreciation for Clarity and Depth: Several students expressed gratitude for the detail and tone of the video feedback, noting that it helped them better understand both what they had done well and what needed improvement. As one student put it: "Thank you for not only providing written feedback but for the extra time invested in the video as well! Hearing you explain your thoughts made things click in a way the comments alone didn't." This echoes findings by Dawson et al. (2019), who highlight that students perceive feedback as most valuable when it is both actionable and supportive. The combination of seeing and hearing an instructor articulate points in real time seemed to add nuance and context to the feedback process.

2. Motivation and Encouragement: Video feedback also seemed to carry emotional weight—particularly for students facing academic or personal hurdles. One student wrote: "This course and your presence have inspired me to learn and grow in essential areas. I am now experiencing firsthand why this class is a solid foundation for building my communication." These kinds of responses reinforce the affective role of feedback. As Shukla and Singh (2024) note, students' feeling of confidence is often a stronger predictor of engagement than performance metrics alone.

3. Personalized Connection: Many students referenced the relational impact of the videos, describing them as surprising, personal, and affirming. One message read: "Online school sometimes feels lonely, but this was not the case during your course. I appreciate the mentorship." This kind of language, in this context, suggests that video feedback can serve a dual role: academic and relational. As Borup et al. (2012) argue, asynchronous video enhances social presence by helping students feel they are interacting with a real person, not just a grader. Finn and Tauber (2015) further support this view, noting that metacognitive growth is often shaped by the interpersonal context in which feedback is delivered.

4. Perceived Growth: Finally, several students reflected on their own development in the course, linking it explicitly to the personalized feedback they received. One student wrote: "Your recognition of my strength in this area is a huge accomplishment for me." These comments suggest not only increased confidence but also a shift in how students perceived themselves as learners, an outcome that's harder to quantify but no less significant.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the findings from this initiative are encouraging, they should be understood within the limits of the context and methodology. Not every student responded to video feedback, and in a few cases, technical issues (e.g., poor audio quality or difficulty accessing the file) slightly disrupted the intended experience. The qualitative data came from unsolicited student comments, emails and LMS messages sent without prompting. While these reflections were rich and heartfelt, they likely reflect a self-selected group of more engaged or motivated students. The absence of structured survey instruments or interviews means the feedback isn't representative of the full cohort, and the lack of anonymity may have shaped how freely students shared their experiences. Additionally, the comparison group was drawn from prior course terms, introducing potential variables—such as changing student demographics or external stressors—that limit the strength of causal claims.

Another key limitation is the time investment. Recording personalized video feedback requires more time than writing marginal comments, particularly when balancing tone, clarity, and personalization. For instructors managing high-enrollment courses or multiple sections, this may not always be feasible without institutional support.

Future implementations could gather structured student feedback through surveys or reflective prompts to better understand how students engage with video feedback and whether it impacts their confidence, sense of connection, or writing habits. Comparing video versus audio-only feedback might also reveal whether the visual presence of the instructor is a critical factor, or whether voice alone can achieve similar affective outcomes. And finally, longitudinal tracking could help clarify whether these early gains in engagement translate into lasting academic development.

Transferability and Practical Recommendations

One of the most encouraging aspects of this practice is its accessibility. The tools used readily already available. The videos were uploaded directly to the LMS or shared via secure email links. There was no elaborate production process. This demonstrates that the practice is highly replicable. Instructors in nearly any course, at nearly any institution, can try it whether it's for one key assignment, for struggling students, or simply to vary the tone of their feedback in ways that foster connection. Instructors who are concerned about time investment might start small: one video per student per term.

Based on this, here are some practical recommendations:

- **Keep it short.** A 3–5 minute video is often more impactful than a longer monologue. Clarity and warmth travel quickly.
- **Use the student's name.** This simple gesture reinforces that the message is personal, not generic.
- **Balance tone and specificity.** Frame the feedback as a conversation: acknowledge what's working, explain where and how to improve, and close with encouragement.
- **Tie comments to the student's specific work.** Refer to phrases, choices, or efforts directly, so the feedback feels grounded in their process—not just the product.
- **Use non-verbal cues intentionally.** A nod, a smile, even a pause can communicate support and clarity in ways text can't.

Any course with a written or creative component regardless of discipline can benefit from humanized feedback. It may be especially effective in asynchronous online settings, where student isolation is a known challenge, and in first-year courses, where confidence and self-efficacy are still taking shape.

Conclusion

In an era where online education continues to expand, finding ways to make students feel seen, supported, and motivated isn't a luxury. Feedback is more than correction—it's connection. Personalized video feedback offers one low-tech, high-impact way to do that. What this initiative suggests is simple: when instructors speak to students as whole people, not just as names on a gradebook, students listen. They respond. They keep going. And that may be the most important metric of all.

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