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Student perceptions of virtual guest speakers

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teaching:

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF VIRTUAL GUEST SPEAKERS

This research focuses on fashion student experiences of virtual industry guest speakers. Analysis of data from 130 participants enrolled in the researchers' fashion classes at two United States universities suggested that, although there are disadvantages to the use of virtual industry guest visits, many students still find them valuable. While students overall preferred in-person visits, their concern with technological issues seems to have lessened during the forced move to remote coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have come to realize that the online medium, especially through the "chat" functionality found in videoconferencing platforms, can be an effective tool.

DESCRIPTION OF SCHOLARLY INQUIRY

This paper focuses on college student perceptions of virtual guest speakers. Virtual visits of industry professionals to university classes were not unheard of before the to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the resulting use of Zoom, WebEx, and other videoconferencing platforms during the pandemic has brought greater attention to their potentials and pitfalls. Even as universities return to more "normal" operations, virtual guest speaker visits will likely continue. As such, the phenomenon of virtual guest speaker visits to college classrooms deserves greater investigation. Moreover, the researchers believe that the input of those who are intended to reap the most benefit from pedagogical techniques deserves to be examined.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore virtual industry speaker visits from the viewpoint of college students, with the overarching question framing this research being, "What are student perceptions of virtual guest speakers?" The ultimate objective is to provide results that will help instructors in college classrooms to optimally make use of guest speakers in their own courses.

OUTCOME

A total of 130 participants had experience with virtual guest speakers, with 47 from a mid-sized private Northeastern university and 83 from a large public Midwestern university. Demographic characteristics can be found in the table below.

Students preferred in-person guest speakers primarily because of the difficulty they found in paying attention when watching a guest speaker on a screen and because they felt a lack of personal connection to a virtual speaker.

The samples further agreed on the importance of asking questions, with most who discussed this factor believing it was easier to ask questions in person but others liked virtual speaker visits better because of the "chat" function.

SIGNIFICANCE OF OUTCOME

Based on this study's findings, even in face-to-face settings, educators should not limit themselves only to speakers who are available to visit in person. Speakers in any modality should be briefed on student desire for connection, which could be facilitated with speakers using student names when answering questions, offering their contact information for students to ask questions later, or staying after class to have conversations directly with interested students. A guest speaker might also converse with the class asynchronously, perhaps taking part in an online discussion board.

In terms of questions, given the number of students who pointed to the chat feature as a strength of the virtual experience, educators could create a similar method of asking questions (e.g., Google Doc or Blackboard Discussion) when speakers appear in person. Whether the speaker is in-person or virtual, students could be told to type questions into the "chat," along with whether they would prefer to read their question aloud. This way, students who want an individual moment with the speaker could have it. These techniques could support both virtual and in-person speakers and could be applied to any course in which a guest speaker visits.

	MW University n (%)	NE University n (%)	Combined data n (%)
Total participants	83 (63.8%)	47 (36.2%)	130 (100%)
Female	77 (92.8%)	44 (93.6%)	121 (93.1%)
Male	6 (7.2%)	3 (6.4%)	9 (6.9%)
First-Years	14 (16.9%)	0 (0%)	14 (10.8%)
Sophomores	20 (24.1%)	1 (2.1%)	21 (16.2%)
Juniors	27 (32.5%)	13 (27.7%)	40 (30.8%)
Seniors	22 (26.5%)	33 (70.2%)	55 (42.3%)
Pre-COVID	32 (38.6%)	1 (2.1%)	33 (25.4%)
Mid-COVID	51 (61.4%)	46 (97.9%)	97 (74.6%)