

Investigating the feasibility of co-production of digital media with students

Abstract

The Learning Development (LD) team has a suite of online videos which aim to provide students with support and guidance in a range of academic skills. The usage statistics show that they are more widely used than other content, for example PDF guides or Xerte activities. Many of these videos are created by academic and professional staff and are 'talking heads' which may encourage the students to become passive learners.

Two LD tutors and a Media and Journalism lecturer collaborated on a project to co-produce academic skills videos with students. Students were given a brief to create videos based on their own experience of study skills. They also took part in focus groups and a survey to find out more about their perception of educational videos and the experience of creating their own. As well as creating original content for use by students, the project explored the benefits and challenges of such an approach. The aim is to create a model of co-production which could be used by other subject areas and student cohorts.

Keywords

Video co-production, active blended learning, educational videos, student created videos

Introduction

This project aimed to develop greater knowledge and understanding of students' preferences in educational videos, and as a result be able to provide resources in line with these findings. An additional consideration was that we could provide a real-life professional brief for students to work to, which would provide an authentic assessment opportunity (Frey, 2012) and contribute to their portfolio of work.

Research has already established the growing importance of video as an educational tool. Student feedback on their preferences has been analysed and put into practice; for example, videos must provide “something extra” to other resources, and the presentation of visual examples is an important element (Rice and Farmer, 2016). Other researchers have explored the variety of tools used to produce videos (Baker, 2016) and developed guidelines for effective videos based on pedagogical models and research (Brame, 2015). These studies provide a solid foundation for us to develop questions and focus on specific aspects of the production process with our student cohort.

We built on this research by gathering qualitative feedback from students via focus groups on what, for them, makes an effective educational video. Using this research as a starting point, new video content was created with the students as co-producers. Finally, a core set of principles and guidance for developing video content in line with student recommendations and preferences would be developed, which could be used by any subject area.

The University has an open access online skills portal where students can find guidance about a variety of academic skills. Institutional research showed that students access the video content on this site more than any other resource, including the print pdf documents; the 12 most popular academic skills resources were videos. However, a review of this online video content established that most of the video content was not fit for purpose. The technical quality of the video and audio was poor, many of the videos were too long and the audio narration on the videos was not engaging. Mayer’s multimedia voice principle (2017) states that a human voice, not a machine voice, should be used on presentations. Although the voice-overs were not machine-generated they sounded monotone and machine-like. Staff members that recorded the voice-overs were not acting or presenter professionals; unless training has been given it can be difficult to speak in an engaging manner.

Hampe established that videos with a ‘talking head’ presenter can turn the viewer into a ‘zombie’, in other words a passive learner (1999, cited in Majekodunmi and Murnaghan, 2012, p3). As a team we aim to create more active online learning for students, and to include more student feedback and participation in the creation of

resources. As a result, we decided that video content should be remade and updated, using it as an opportunity to involve students as co-creators of the new video content.

The Project Process

The project had six stages:

1. Researchers met with students to introduce the project and gain consent for participation.
2. Student focus groups were conducted to explore what makes educational videos effective.
3. Students were given project brief to create the videos within given timescale.
4. Students pitched initial ideas for their videos to the researchers – feedback was given, and videos commissioned.
5. Students created their academic skills videos and presented these to the project researchers/clients.
6. A follow-up survey was sent to all student participants to explore their experiences of taking part.

A first-year cohort of 26 media students who were completing the module 'Digital and Social Media Production' were chosen for the project. Focus group participants self-selected from the cohort; two small groups of students viewed a selection of academic skills videos, then took part in discussions assessing the effectiveness of these resources, before they went on to produce videos of their own.

As part of the module assessment students had to produce several videos for their portfolio; creating an academic skills video could successfully be embedded into this structure. Reflecting professional media practices, and in line with the module criteria and learning outcomes, the LD tutors acted as 'clients' and presented a professional 'client brief' to the students. Students were encouraged to look at the video content on the University skills portal and to research other academic skills videos to choose a theme or skill, and then pitch their ideas to the researcher 'clients'. Feedback from

the 'clients' enabled students to refine and focus their plans, which were then produced as draft videos.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups took place, with four and five students respectively. Each group watched five academic skill videos that are produced by and hosted on the skills support websites of five different HE institutions, each of which demonstrated a different style or approach. Student comments about the videos made during the focus groups are summarised in Table 1.

Video content	Producer	Duration (mins.secs')	Focus group 1 comments	Focus group 2 comments
Students giving tips about reading strategically	Learning Services in-house	2.42'	Student interviews meant 'you feel more comfortable, rather than hearing from an older voice'; range of students therefore something for all; 'the audio was really bad'.	Good layout; quick, short points – 'it definitely keeps your interest'; 'having different opinions is good'; noise quality changed a lot
Light-hearted animation about evaluating information	Commissioned – professional production	1.23'	Pacing 'perfect'; high-quality, professional animation; humorous with visual gags; easy to follow; too general in content	'Grabbed my attention right from the start'; 'at points it seemed a little bit patronising'; animation 'completely unrelated to what's actually being said'
Videoscribe about critical writing	Learning Services in-house	7.47'	'It was really Interesting, but it just felt too long'; too many pauses, too slow; '[it] felt like a lecture and that's not the kind of thing I want to hear'.	'You couldn't stay engaged after three minutes'; 'way too much information'; 'bad audio levelling'; 'needs a bit more emotion with the voice'
Video with student presenters about group work	Student produced	4.01'	'...felt like advice to me from students who were also doing the same thing...so it felt nicer to listen to'; narrator's voice had no motivation...it was really boring'	'I like how they related it to themselves...learn from our mistakes...but it just wasn't engaging'
Montage with images and text about choosing sources	University in-house	1.27'	Felt rushed; video quality not great; seemed old-fashioned; music too loud	'the whole thing was just flashy animations'; 'the upbeat music helps you engage a lot more'

Table 1: Focus group comments on educational videos

Analysis of Focus groups

We were surprised how much opinions varied on the strengths and weaknesses of the videos, and this is perhaps due to the mix of personalities and impact of group dynamics, which have been identified as a limitation of using focus groups (Stewart, 2007). Overall, students responded positively to student participation in the videos and thought they were more engaging to watch. Main negative findings were that the participants did not like long videos, or those where they felt they were being 'lectured'. There was no consensus on styles, pace, use of music or animation.

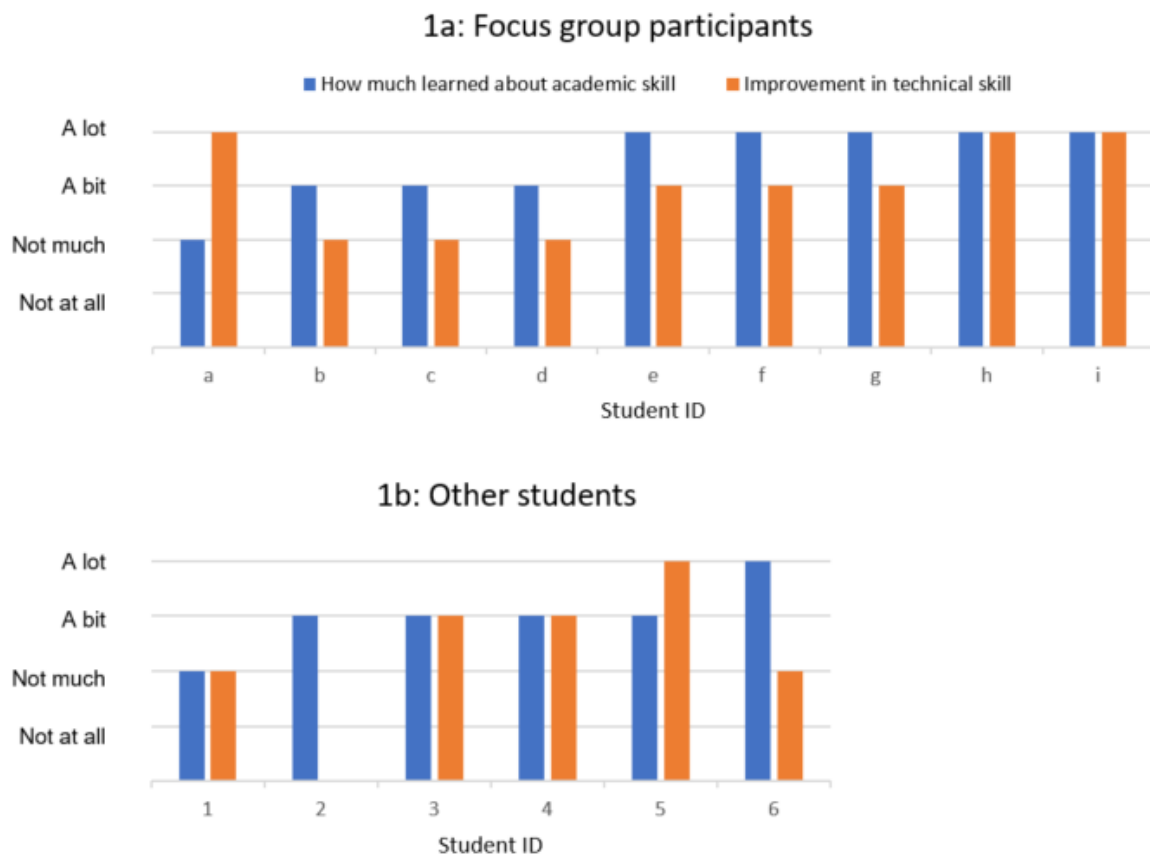
Project briefs and video production

Students had three weeks between the initial brief and the meetings for them to present their pitches, and then 12 weeks to produce their first drafts of the video (which included the Christmas break). Of the eight groups that presented pitches, four videos reached the final draft stage and are now resources hosted on our skills website. The final videos focus on the skills of time management, assignment planning and taking notes, and present refreshing, dynamic and engaging student views of these topics. They all focus on the student experience by using student actors who address the viewer directly to give advice or guidance. They all included humorous aspects, for example by using music, props, editing techniques and storylines to highlight common mistakes or to make a point. The finished videos ranged in length from 3.23' to 6.22', which will be interesting to test with viewers as shorter videos were preferred by the students in the focus groups.

Student feedback

15 students completed a survey at the end of the project to gather their views and explore if there had been any additional benefits to taking part. All students that took part in the focus groups responded to the survey, and all agreed that taking part in the group had an impact on their approach to developing their video. The reasons for choosing the topic of the video varied, but most based the decision on what they thought would be useful. They were also asked to rate their perception of the improvement in their knowledge of the skills explored in the video and their technical

skills in video production (Figures 1a and 1b). Most students thought that their skills had improved in both areas, interestingly more in skills development than their technical skills. A greater number (and larger proportion) of those that took part in the focus groups reported an increase in their knowledge of the academic skill on which they worked. As the student videos covered topics that differed from those discussed in the focus groups it could be argued that discussing sample videos in detail before production encourages students to focus on, and therefore learn more about, the skills they are exploring.



Figures 1a and 1b: Student self-evaluation of skill improvement after taking part in the project, grouped by participation in focus group.

Discussion and reflection

There were many benefits to this project. It was clear that this process gave students autonomy in the creation of their own academic skills videos, which gave them a voice and meant that they could see themselves represented in University resources. An additional benefit was that they actively learned about both video production and the skills they were producing videos about. The project was

collaborative between academic staff, students and learning development tutors, which could potentially break down the barriers for students wanting to use LD services in the future. The project embedded academic skills into the module in a creative way: students learned about specific academic skills in the process of making videos for clients.

Although the video outcomes were successful there were some project challenges. Producing videos and digital content for learning is time-consuming; as well as the technical aspects of production, it was important to ensure that students had the correct sources of information to produce accurate skills videos. One example is a video about referencing that reached the draft stage with incorrect references. A level of oversight by staff was therefore required at each stage of production. Another issue is the subject specialism of the students; we chose this cohort because making videos is a core component and this project could be classified as authentic assessment in this context. However, to facilitate this in other subject areas would require a different approach and possibly additional training on video production. Despite their specialist knowledge students still had issues in sourcing actors and gaining permission for filming, meaning that the process was not as straightforward as we anticipated. However, we are thrilled with the resulting videos which add significantly to the diversity of approach and overall appeal of our existing resources.

Next steps

We are using this experience to develop a set of guidance and principles for creating videos with students for our own use and potentially across the whole University. We also intend to evaluate the impact and reception of the videos in comparison with our existing resources. In future we would like to repeat a similar project with non-media students and academics.

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