

Case study: the 24/7 study advice workshop

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Abstract

With a rise in demand for learning development services, coupled with an increasingly divergent cohort of students (part-time; international; distance learners and students with extra commitments), there is a clear need to look for creative ways to meet the challenges of this growing and changing need. To meet this challenge the Study Advice team at the University of Reading embarked on a project using screencasting to create a suite of video tutorials that focused on key aspects of study. This paper discusses the inspiration for the project, the development process undertaken and the impact and effectiveness of the resources created. The content was developed through a process of experimentation and extensive team reviewing and refinement, through which we (the Study Advice team) learnt how to effectively create, record and disseminate our resources. The benefits were far wider reaching than the initial project scope, with implications for capacity building; recognition; profile-raising and student engagement.

Keywords: screencasts; online tutorials; flipped learning; technology enhanced learning.

Introduction

Learning development teams are often small in relation to the cohort they are expected to support, short of hours and space, and in high demand (McKinney et al., 2009). While one-to-one sessions are recognised as the most effective way to provide support (Turner, 2011), workshop sessions are widely used to deliver teaching to small groups as a means

to ensuring that scarce staffing resources are used efficiently. However timetabling these teaching sessions can be a problem, especially as students are encouraged to undertake extra-curricular activities through initiatives such as the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) (Universities UK, 2012). Whilst attending extra-curricular training can be a problem for all students, it is especially difficult for part-time students; distance learners; students with family or work commitments and those living away from campus (Frith and Wilson, 2014).

At the University of Reading, learning development services are provided by a small team of three study advisers (one full-time and two part-time, a total of 2.4 FTE). We are based in the library and are a central service, with a focus on academic skills, who work with students at all levels (from Foundation to PhD) and across all subject disciplines. We interact with students through individual advice sessions; small and large group teaching sessions and also remotely through a comprehensive set of online self-help resources. Whilst the service has always been busy, a pro-active approach to liaison and collaboration with academic faculties over recent years has resulted in a steady rise in demand for individual advice sessions together with a sharp increase in demand (250% between 2011 and 2013) for study skills teaching delivered within modules.

A key part of our response to this increase in demand has been to use screencasting to produce new self-help resources which incorporate engaging, evaluated, expert teaching, remotely accessible at any time and in any place. Screencasts are short simple videos, created by compiling a succession of screencaptures (usually presentation slides) and accompanying them with a soundtrack, either spoken or musical. They are easily created with a minimum of technical expertise and employ verbal and visual communication to engage a wide range of students. Unlike a lecture they can be paused and rewound to help build understanding, which is especially helpful for non-native English speakers and students without easy access to a tutor to ask questions (HEA, 2014).

We initially envisaged the screencasts would offer an alternative option for those students who could not access face-to-face generic teaching through our workshops. However we soon realised that screencasts could also be used to supplement teaching, not only as part of our teaching sessions but also via subject tutors who could incorporate study skills instruction either within their subject teaching or as part of a 'flipped learning' model (where students receive instruction via electronic teaching before the class so that face-to-

face teaching can focus on putting it into practice for deeper learning, see for example Lage et al., 2000). In August 2012 we received funding from the university's annual fund for a one year project which we called 'the 24/7 study advice workshop'. The aim of the project was to develop a set of screencasts each focusing on an aspect of essay writing. It was envisaged this set of screencasts would act as the model for future sets on other topics. This case study describes the project from its initial inspiration through to its development, application and evaluation. It concludes with our thoughts about the benefits and possible difficulties involved in producing self-help resources in this format.

Inspiration: the ideas behind the project

We were first inspired by a library staff development session where library staff shared their experience of using Camtasia software to produce short videos. Videos seemed a good solution to the problems of demand we were facing and the session demonstrated accessible and easy to learn software and identified people who could share their expertise whilst we built our own capacity. The resources produced by the library were mostly introductory and used video sequences accompanied by a background music track. We wanted to incorporate a greater amount of text and narration but felt that 'talking head' videos might date too quickly.

We were introduced to screencasting as a tool for learning development in a post, circulated to the LDHEN mailing list, by Stuart Johnson (then at the University of Leicester) headed "Who wants to make some OERs?" (Johnson, 2010). Johnson, via a linked blog post (no longer available), went on to explain the processes that were used to produce a brief screencast titled 'What it means to be a critical student' (<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/study/critical-student>). These processes included employing animation functions on PowerPoint to make presentation slides more dynamic and presenting the slides sequentially and augmenting them with a spoken voicetrack to make a simple video. Given our familiarity with PowerPoint, the technique offered a no-risk, simple solution to our need to produce engaging learning resources.

The impetus to put our ideas into practice came in November 2011 when the 'LearnHigher Animation Challenge' was launched (<http://learnhigher.wordpress.com/animation-challenge/>). The initiative challenged learning developers to produce brief animated

learning development resources, using methods of their choice. Our interest in screencasts as a format for self-help resources, prompted two members of our team to produce entries for the challenge. We were delighted when a team member won second place for her screencast titled 'Structuring a report: a piece of cake?' (Reid, 2011): it was also pleasing to receive confirmation that screencasting had real potential for producing self-help resources that were accessible and easy to use.

We were also motivated by articles describing the success of the flipped classroom in universities and schools in the US (for example Lage et al. (2000); Leckhart and Cheshire (2012) and Hamdan et al. (2013)). This made us consider the way we provided small group teaching and raised questions as to whether it would be more effective to concentrate on hands-on example-led teaching in our workshop sessions and ask students to view teaching resources on key principles in their own time. It was envisaged this could be particularly beneficial for non-native English speakers who might struggle to keep up with lecture-style presentations.

Getting started: technical and stylistic choices

Our initial project aimed to develop and evaluate a set of screencasts on essay writing to act as a model for future sets on other study topics. Given the relative novelty of the format as a tool for learning development, the development process was necessarily one of trial and error as we learned the capabilities of the software and developed a strong visual identity for the resources.

Our choice of software was determined by our purpose. We considered using Jing (<http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html>), which we had seen demonstrated by members of the Learning Development team at the University of Plymouth as a tool to respond to student email enquiries. Jing is a free screencasting program which allows the user to record their screen, complete with actions like moving the cursor, and to add a spoken narration. However Jing videos are limited to five minutes in length and there is no editing functionality or control over where the videos are hosted. We decided that while Jing was perfect for a one-off instructional video in answer to a student query, or a single, simple resource, it would not work for the more complex resources we envisaged. Instead we chose to use Camtasia (<http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.html>), the software we had

originally seen demonstrated by library staff. This had the same recording capacities as Jing but also enabled longer length videos and editing functions for a more professional result. There was a cost involved but our project funding covered this.

Another choice we soon realised we would have to make concerned the hosting software. We underestimated the popularity of our early video tutorials and soon reached the monthly bandwidth limits with TechSmith's free hosting site, preventing other students viewing the resources that month. The early success of the tutorials on the free site gave us the evidence to argue for a paid for hosting account. Sharing this with our library colleagues spread the (relatively small) cost and meant that we could host all our resources in one place avoiding multiple fragmented accounts.

We wanted our resources to have a strong visual identity and to look significantly different to the bullet-pointed lists typical of many PowerPoint slides. Our experience of creating successful learning resources during our involvement with the 'LearnHigher CETL' (2005-2010) (www.learnhigher.ac.uk) had taught us about good visual design, including easy navigation and signposting, and the importance of consistency. We developed a template for opening, closing and content slides to guarantee cohesion across tutorials produced by different authors. Working directly with students has shown us the effectiveness of strong visual metaphors such as a river for an essay structure or a rapidly growing plant for a dissertation. Using these simple metaphors made a striking visual impact and was achievable within the limitations of PowerPoint animations.

Methodology: developing the model

Our starting point for content was to consider the gap we thought the tutorials would fill, which was namely the face-to-face example-led teaching that we provide through workshops. So our first attempts replicated workshop teaching; we created slides to illustrate and reinforce the messages we wanted to convey and then recorded ourselves talking through them. This created a natural feel to the narration. However we soon realised that what we gained in style was lost in efficiency, with many of our first draft screencasts lasting longer than our ideal five-minute limit and missing key points. We adjusted the process, talking through our ideas to capture the key natural-sounding

messages first then using this as the basis for writing a tighter script. This had the added bonus of providing ready-made transcripts for accessibility purposes.

Creating the animated slides in PowerPoint often involved compromises between the ambitious visions in our heads and the reality of what we could achieve with the tools available. There were plenty of online 'how-to' guides and videos so, if we could not work out how to achieve an effect that we wanted, we were often able to find a video telling us how. Regular project team meetings enabled us to continually review work-in-progress and also to share knowledge and tips.

Media-savvy students might be discouraged by an amateurish production, so recording the narration to a high standard took some practice (Bowles-Terry et al., 2010). The occasional small stumble or pause in speech might be acceptable, however sound quality was important. We expected a headset microphone would provide high quality sound recording but instead found that it often picked up our breathing, which would be distracting for the audience. We found that a simple laptop microphone provided a clearer and less distracting recording.

Our creation process was honed by team review and evaluation. Each tutorial was reviewed in draft form by each member of the team who provided editorial feedback on content, delivery, layout, visual communication and technical issues. After revision it was reviewed again by all team members before publication and dissemination. This process meant we could all produce and comment on resources simultaneously, ensuring that the series was consistent and coherent despite being produced by a variety of authors. It also allowed us to identify any slides that seemed too 'PowerPointy' in appearance. Like all new practices this process was lengthy to begin with but we have been able to speed it up with experience. In the early stages a thorough approach was vital to identify underlying principles and common practices.

Student feedback was sought through a trial workshop, which utilised a 'flipped learning' approach as previously described. 24 students were recruited from across the university via an email sent out by the department's administrative staff. The email stated that we were seeking 'volunteers to take part in a new essay writing workshop followed by a brief focus group' and explained that we would be asking volunteers to watch the videos before putting their knowledge into practice in the workshop. Students were not offered payment

to undertake the workshop although we did provide that great student reward – free cake. The purpose of the session and the overall project were explained to the volunteer participants. They were asked for consent to record the discussions and to have photographs taken in the session. They also gave permission for anonymised quotes to be used in our report and any subsequent papers. The session was taught by one member of the team, while a different member ran the focus group to try to avoid any barriers to honest responses.

Feedback on the tutorials was positive; some of the quotations were as follows:

Helpful and concise. The use of colours, simple visual sentences and images, and moving images, along with the auditory commentary made them easy to follow and useful.

I was happy to discover the tutorials were short and concise and covered everything I was worried about!

Our concern before the workshop was that students might not watch the videos beforehand. Within our research and our institution, we found that practitioners of flipped learning were teaching subject courses where there is a greater motivation to complete set work outside of class (for example Lage et al., 2000). In the event all except one watched the videos, suggesting that the flipped learning model could work in stand-alone sessions. We are conscious, however, that the workshop attendees were self-selecting and probably self-motivated to improve their study practices.

Dissemination: sharing our experiences

As one of the first teams at the university to use screencasting for learning resources, we decided to share our experiences through a launch event in June 2013. Feedback comments from the event showed how colleagues planned to adopt our ideas to create more engaging resources for students:

I am from the Careers Centre so will prove v.useful to refer students to these who come to see us. Also looking at doing something similar for CV writing, application letters etc...

I thought this looked like a very student-friendly resource. I'm thinking about whether we could create a screencast to de-mystify peer support and maybe also about homesickness.

We were fortunate to have had project time to use a trial and error approach and it was reassuring to colleagues hoping to try the techniques to know that they could draw on our developed expertise. Since our project, colleagues in academic departments have produced their own successful sets of screencasts, consulting with us on our experience, and the university has initiated a university-wide project on using video for teaching and learning.

We have also shared our approach with the wider learning development community, via the LDHEN mailing list (which was established by ALDinHE: the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education) and gained valuable feedback from a poster presentation at the ALDinHE annual conference in 2013. Possible future ideas gained from discussions at the ALDinHE 2014 conference include the use of other animation software such as Powtoon; collaborating with students to create resources and launching a student screencasting competition.

We alert academics in our teaching and learning communities when we publish new sets of tutorials and have been delighted with their excellent reception. The tutorials have been publicised directly to students through social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, and have been included on the school portals on our VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). While they were first sited within our own section of the VLE, we have now removed any barriers to accessing the video tutorials by siting them more openly on our public website. Since then, their popularity has grown exponentially. In August 2014 we had received over 11,700 hits across 27 tutorials and by the end of October 2014 this had increased to 21,724 hits across 32 tutorials. 'Structuring your essay' proved to be the most popular topic. This increase illustrates the success of the format with both students and academic staff.

Conclusion: what's next?

As learning development resources that can be viewed by students whenever and wherever they choose, the video tutorials have clearly fulfilled our original purpose of offering '24/7 study advice workshops'. However we are now also using them in seminars and workshops to introduce a topic and start discussion, or for a change of pace and mode of delivery to re-engage students and break up longer teaching sessions.

Feedback from academic staff on the video tutorials has been enthusiastic and we know that many tutors have recommended them to their students, both individually as part of feedback and to whole teaching groups to inform their study practices. However we also believe that they offer a potential solution to the increasing demands on our service to provide study skills teaching embedded in subject modules by supporting academic staff and postgraduate teaching assistants to deliver such teaching themselves. To promote this use, we are currently producing brief teaching notes and activities to accompany the videos.

Since the initial suite of essay writing screencasts were produced, we have gone on to create further suites on referencing; exams; dissertations; one-off introductory resources on marking criteria and academic reading; with a suite of screencasts on research currently in the pipeline. The success of the project has provided us with recognition as experts in this e-learning technology in our institution, thus raising our profile and adding to the ways we provide consultancy on learning and teaching across the university. The contribution we have made to the university has been formally recognised with the team winning a collaborative award for excellence in teaching and learning.

There have been challenges in being able to sustain the momentum since the project funding ended. Although we are more efficient at creating the resources, it still takes blocks of time and quiet space to think creatively and to record the screencasts, which can be difficult to find during the course of a typical working week. It can also be frustrating when the ideas in our heads are not possible with the tools we have. Being one of the early adopters at our institution meant we did not have a local peer network to support us when we wanted to try new things with the medium (JISC InfoNet, 2014). Our strong contacts with the wider learning development community have proved invaluable here.

Often learning developers are concerned that their technical skills and expertise are not sufficiently advanced to try out new processes and produce their own digital resources. However we hope that sharing our experiences of starting from scratch will have shown that producing your own video resources is both achievable and, as they are more institution-specific and personal than commercial packages, can improve student engagement (Rice et al., 2014; Bowles-Terry et al., 2010). From our initial small experimentation with screencasting, the benefits for the team and our students in terms of capacity-building, recognition, profile-raising and student engagement have gone far beyond the original scope of the project.

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