Northumbria Research Link

Recording in progress – don't forget to unplug the phone

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Setting the scene

An effective resource, it can be argued, is one by which there is consideration for usability, flexibility, quality of content and accessibility. As educators we have at our disposal many new and innovative resourcing initiatives that we can introduce into the blended learning environment when delivering a technically rich subject along with strong theoretical underpinnings. These resourcing initiatives are specifically relevant in graphic and digital design degrees across the world.

One option that I shall focus on is the educator-generated instructional movie that demonstrates both technical and theory processes. The creation of such a resource allows an audio and video element to be added to the myriad of resource types and an opportunity to revisit and reinforce content. So what are the benefits and pitfalls of these instructional videos that support a resource? Are there lessons that we can learn and do they make us more effective academic practitioners?

Seeing the good

Graphic design (and graphic design education) has entered a significant change in its paradigm. This is not surprising;, graphic design has always shifted and navigated into new areas of opportunity and creativity. From recognising and adopting new art movements in the early 20th century, to the aesthetic construction of our virtual environments in the 21st century, graphic design is as much about reflecting change in our society as it is about communicating information visually.

Perhaps it is not unusual that we find ourselves at this interesting academic juncture with regards to how we implement technology and more specifically video based instruction. Screen capture applications are relatively inexpensive software utilities that allow an individual to record their mouse interactions on screen while using an application, and at the same time record audio to aid instruction. The files can then be saved using many different formats and additional graphic notation added afterwards to enhance and complete the learning experience. I began using video technology and screen capture software in 2006, when I realised that it was a better use of my time and resources to create screen captured tutorials than to

produce detailed illustrated guides that needed designing, printing, collating and distributing. For me initially the decision was mainly efficiency driven. I could create and develop a video overview focusing on a specific area of design software, complete with my own audio annotation in about a third of the time compared to a traditional handout.

There are additional benefits too, for example – as the movies are more efficient to create, they can be updated more regularly when new software versions are introduced. They can exist and be distributed on many different communication channels from email to social media, and be accessed and reviewed by the student at another time.

I was adding to the student experience using this approach; the traditional lecture and studio structure remained but was supported by a different resource. It is important to recognise that we should be in the business of locating the new technologies within the proven models and practices of teaching (Helen Beetham and Rhona Sharpe, 2007). 'Pedagogy before technology' is a phrase that many will recognise; some may accept this statement and others will rally against it. However, If we step back and consider the history of learning, practitioners have had 'new technologies' at their disposal constantly: from chalk and blackboards to touch sensitive electronic boards; from 35mm slides to online presentations with filmic based transitions and audio. Academia has always embraced and integrated these into programmes of study.

A short but important historical interlude When I began creating screen captured tutorials there was not a great deal in existence; 'YouTube' had only recently launched in December 2005 and at this time only had a small user footprint (8 million videos a day were watched, compared to 2 billion views today!) and streaming video was both slow and problematic. One of the first consolidated attempts at online training was 'Lynda.com', here was a site that in 2005 was organised and offered many software focused tutorials aimed, for the very first time, at the graphics community. They had good production values and really set the standard for similarly run enterprises. A few years on in 2007, many websites began to emerge using screen captured video to describe specific software techniques. It was at this time broadband became widely available, and the student began to have access to this information to support their studies. Websites also became more sophisticated, with greater production values;the UK Open University website, for example, contains amazing broadcast quality videos to support learning. The creative industry and the software that supports it is a complicated entity; no two projects are the same. Designers need to always push software into new creative areas, so subsequently many tutorials are available; 'Lynda.com' currently has over 40,000 software based tutorials, or 143 days of continuous recorded information (the Lynda.com story). But this creative collection only touches the surface; the contemporary designer needs to be a conceptual problem solver and thinker, able to conceptually understand problems and build strategies to formulate creative solutions. This is where I made my mistake creating my first set of software-based tutorials.

My mistake

Pedagogy is a term that we are familiar with, but I personally have a problem pronouncing it, so in my attempts to understand the origin of the word I was surprised to find out that it is based on the Greek word for a slave, Paidagogos. They were used to ensure that wealthy boys attended school and would lead them to their classes. Perhaps a modern day Paidagogos would guide and not lead; he perhaps would have told the young children how to read a map and allowed them to put that into practice. This is the opportunity that video instruction should have within the creative academic sector; the ability to not reveal all but gently guide the user into the world of problem solving and conceptual understanding. This is what is missing from many otherwise great tutorials: the ability for students to be conceptual problem solvers. We as educators have a duty to allow opportunity for discovery to take place.

OK, when I think back to 2006 it's a simple difference I should have noticed, but I had not made the clear distinction between academia and subscription funded training organisations. I followed their lead by creating presentations that delivered knowledge like that of other non-academic examples such as 'Lynda.com'; they ultimately offer a service to deliver knowledge, we as academics in the creative sector offer the opportunity to discover knowledge. So whatever you create as an online resource for a synchronous delivery model, resist the temptation to tell them how, but design a tutorial that allows them to find out how, perhaps from other information channels. In my recordings I intentionally leave out specific aspects of technical or theory process. I inform the students of this and expect them to research this area. In this multi-faceted world, knowledge should be gathered from many different sources. Knowledge gathering is a creative process in itself.

The future is actually here now…be warned

Don't many of us fantasize on being a rock star? I know I do, or should I say used too! Picture this scene – 10,000 eager, excited fans waiting for you to enter the packed auditorium and take your place on stage…but this is no ordinary gathering; the electricity, the expectancy, the autograph hopefuls are there, yes, but these are no stereotypical music fans, they are students embracing the world of 'hagwon' or cramming schools in Korea. 'Megastudy.net' is one such example in Korea's academic landscape; it offers over 2500 subscription-only online tutorials covering subjects from English to Algebra. It's beginning to shape the academic landscape and is Korea's fastest growing technology based company. Top teachers are signed up as they can return a 23% royalty on all sales. Last year the highest paid English language teacher earned $2 million USD (source NYT). Other sites are now establishing themselves in various parts of the

world: Kahn Academy and Brightstorm in the US and i2k in India. These sites are all about giving you an advantage in your studies by delivering what you need to know to pass specific exams. We in the creative academic sector need to be aware of the differences between these practices and those of our own.

The final word

Today's academics need to understand that a more varied, demanding and complex challenge awaits them. By allowing discovery to still exist and develop in new forms of resourcing strategies and in particular video captured based instruction, we make our students dependent learners and intellectual problem solvers.

The challenge for us as educators is how we weave all these areas into our programmes of study, how we consider flexible learning initiatives to deliver these skills alongside traditional modes of study and how we make them part of our everyday graphic design vernacular.

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