Videos Not the Magic Bullet for Online Teaching

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More and more educators are required to design their courses to be delivered to fully on-line students. Many guidelines simply say online students love videos, so put everything into a video form. Catherine Strong has taught online journalism courses for six years and says it is a fallacy that students gravitate to video instructions. She explored what students actually used in their digital assignments, not what they SAID they preferred.

The number of online courses and online degrees is exploding across the country. There has been a steady increase over the past 15 years in courses, as well as the number of students enrolled, according to the most recent 2017 Allen & Seaman report. (Allen and Seamen, 2017; Online Learning Consortium, 2015)

This growth of online courses makes economic sense, since it saves money on classrooms, and attracts students who want to combine studies with other activities, such as raising children, holding a job, living out of state. As an example, the University of Massachusetts has just hired an executive to build up its online program at a starting salary of $403,000 with possible annual bonuses of $120,000. According to the Boston Globe, this salary will be funded from the online income, which was $100 million last year. (Fernandez, 2017)

These figures show the strong financial incentive for universities to encourage educators to design courses to be delivered online.

Designing online courses is challenging, and it is doubly challenging for those of us teaching multi-media journalism skills. On one hand, we have accreditation bodies and industry wanting students with more practical digital skills, while on the other hand it is difficult to teach this to students scattered throughout the world with questionable access to equipment.

One style of resource that is consistently lauded for online teaching is video instructions. A plethora of online websites and blogs tell teachers to use videos, and Google.com lists thousands of websites and blogs on "making videos for online courses." But robust empirical research shows a different story, pointing out that they are not as helpful as many of the blogs assert, and that they do not always capture students' attention.

Studies show that many students do not open the videos at all (Kim, et al., 2014). A study in *TJMC* by Gil and Williams (2017) found that students watch only three minutes of a video on average, no matter what the length of the video.

It appears the young generation love entertaining videos for their spare time, but it's a different story for course instructional videos.

I set out to discover what my fully online students actually used. A good case study is Massey's *Introduction to Journalism,* a second-year basic skills online course. Besides using computer hardware and software, it includes using digital audio recording devices, microphones, smartphones, editing software,

and website file management. The average pass rate is 83%. The online course is identical to the same course taught on the university's campuses. Massey is ACEJMC accredited, which means online students require the same learning outcomes as those taking the on-campus courses.

I decided to explore which resources were actually used by the 223 students who took the course online over the past four years, about 40 to 60 students each first semester. The students are located throughout New Zealand as well as countries around the world, such as Australia, Norway, Vietnam, Cayman Islands, South Sudan, Britain, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, and Malaysia.

I focused on the learning resources for an assignment to produce a digital audio news podcast, a module where most students have to learn totally new technical skills. For the campus courses we have traditionally relied on the BBC-developed coaching style, where the student tries the skills while the teacher is on hand to correct, encourage, and trouble shoot.

But online students could decide which learning mode they preferred — each instructional resource was duplicated, one version video and a second version text. The videos were short, but used a variety of styles such as screen capture, piece to camera, or an edited demonstration.

We all know what students say and what they actually do can be very different. So to avoid such research methods as surveys where students self-report what they think they prefer, my study relied on analytics of the course website, Moodle. This captured which students opened which resource.

The results were clearly that students went to text resources more than video resources. For some, students were twice as likely to select text instruction than video instructions. Of course some students ignored all the resources, and some opened both.

Most of the video instructions were opened by less than half the class, compared to similar instructions prepared in text files opened by more than half the class. The instructions on how to use smartphones to conduct news interviews, "Smartphone Instructions," was the clearest demonstration of this preference. Only 23 percent of the students chose video instruction, compared to more than double that, 53 percent, who chose a text-based instructions.

These statistics gave a picture of *what* was occurring with online students, but not *why*. To help interpret the statistical results, I asked 13 third-year

Table 1:
Students opened course material – text vs video

Course Resource n=223	% who opened Text	% who opened Video
Assignment explanation	94	83
Audio file instructions	45	25.5
Smartphone instructions	53	23
Interview Instructions	68	36
Software instructions	64	49
Overall course help	57	51

students their views on using video and text resources. Most had completed at least two online courses previously, and, in line with university research ethics, these students were not among my students analyzed above. All interviews were face-to-face. The sample was too small to statistically calculate, however the consensus opinions were:

- **They preferred accessing information from written text, rather than videos, because it was quicker.** They said they can skim quickly down a text to see the most important part within seconds, whereas they felt that in a video they were captured to watch the entire 5+ minutes in order to gain one specific piece of information. With written text, they can note where other significant information passages are located in the file and quickly return to them later. However, one student, with English as a second language, said she preferred videos because she captured the meaning easier because of the audio emphasis on words and the visual cues. But generally students shunned videos. *"Why waste the extra time if I don't have to,"* said one.

- **They preferred written text when accessing course work on their digital devices while doing other activities**. They explained that it was more discrete to use hyperlinks or text when trying to study in public, such as while at work, on public transport, or public cafes. However, when they were at home or on wifi access, they were happier to access audio or video podcasts. When using mobile devices on cellular access they avoided podcasts and opened only text or hyperlinks. Several gave comments such as this one, *"I don't have the luxury to sit in an office with good broadband all the time."*

A limitation to this study is the inability to de-

termine other possible factors, such as the students' engagement with the topic, or their prior experience, age, or broadband capabilities. There is no way to measure which instructional form was most effective, as there was no correlation between final mark and resource usage. It was also impossible to know how long each student spent viewing the resource at any given time. The percentages are only indications of student opening each resource.

My conclusion is that contrary to many guidelines, students do not universally appreciate videos as part of their online learning. Both the interviews and the analytics indicated that a majority favored text over video, and that many students actively avoided opening educational videos. Experienced students eschewed videos because they can scan a text document and pick out the salient parts quicker than they can watch a video. Students can also multitask on digital devices easier with text, rather than videos or even audio podcasts. Overall students favored having the choice of resources, either text or video, but usually opted for the text version.

Time management seemed to be a major factor in their selection of online educational resources. It is important to note that these were second-year students, so they are already experienced in managing study time and are knowledgeable about how much effort is needed to pass a course.

The complexity of online courses is that the teacher lacks the ability to get to know the students and their individual learning style, and is unable to see if a student looks confused about the information.

What seemed clear from this study is that online courses, particularly digital media courses, need to provide both text-based and video-based instructions to satisfy the spectrum of learning styles of the students. The conclusion is to take with a grain of salt advice that online students want to learn via videos. Mass communication educators should recognize that setting up online courses needs a lot of creativity and that simply turning out lots of videos is not the easy answer.

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