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Is There Evidence To Warrant Using Subject Introduction Videos?

| By Shelley Kinash |

Most schools and universities now have online counterparts to face-to-face units/subjects through Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard or Moodle. These sites usually provide information about the unit and its assessment, serve as a gateway to content and interaction tools, and are a portal to submit assessment and receive educator feedback and grades. As the sites become increasingly complex and multi-layered, an emerging practice is to provide a brief (for example, less than five minutes) video, often created by the educator. Some of the functions of the subject introduction video are to: self-introduce and create a teaching presence for the educator (particularly if made available prior to the first day of class); orient the student to the structure of the LMS and navigation to the overall unit; explain how the unit fits with other units and in the overall program; introduce the context, including how this unit contributes to skill development and graduate employability; and (perhaps most significant to learners) create transparency about how the student will be assessed and graded, how to access learning resources and when and where to submit assessment. The creation and inclusion of subject introduction videos is an emerging educational approach and the impact is, therefore, largely unknown. Students appear to like them. Recently, when these videos were discussed at a faculty-based Learning and Teaching Committee meeting, the student representatives were asked if they had any questions or comments. One student responded, "Can you please hurry and make them available for every unit?!" This paper describes and briefly reviews research that investigated the use of videos in universities.

A team of educators, instructional designers and an academic program coordinator worked together at an American university to produce a series of skill-based orientation videos in an attempt to engage and support first-year students (Taylor, Dunn & Winn, 2015). Each video was a maximum of four minutes long. For ease of navigation, interactive menus were provided. Videos addressed the following topics – how to get started in the course; module navigation; posting to discussions; submitting assignments; and locating grades, instructor feedback and grading rubrics. Three criteria were used to determine priority for development of orientation videos – high enrolment, often one of the first courses taken by new students, and higher than average withdrawals. Orientation videos were added to five units. The researchers administered a short survey to students (n=810 responses) who had completed a unit with an orientation video and compared the withdrawal rates and grade distributions one year before and after the video orientation was added. Across Likert scale survey response items, students responded affirmatively to the inclusion of the videos (average score of 88/100 in response to items such as ‘Yes, the videos were informative’). On average, the withdrawal rate went down by 4.2 percent across the five units from the previous year. Across the five units, 6.1 percent more students were awarded a passing grade (A-C) as compared to the previous year when the videos were not used. The authors acknowledged that the research was limited by the small number of units and the non-random selection of these units (at a single university). Furthermore, the orientation video is not an isolated variable and it, therefore, cannot be established that the video was the factor explaining improvements in student success. Nevertheless, this research seems to indicate that orientation videos may have a positive impact on student retention, grades and satisfaction.

Teaching scholars at Deakin

University (Australia) used a variety of methods such as formative assessment, interactive resources and what they called ‘lecturer video selfies’ in an attempt to further engage social work students (Goldingay & Land, 2014). The selfies addressed unit content, administration and encouragement for students. In this study, new videos were uploaded online weekly and the student cohorts were approximately split between online and blended delivery modes. LMS data was analysed, in addition to six student interviews, and survey administration to 52 students in the 2012 cohort (when these new methods were not used) and to 56 students in 2013 (using the new methods). The authors interpreted the results as indicating that the use of video selfies increased the educators’ ‘tangible social presence’. Furthermore, students’ comments indicated a feeling that “the lecturer was talking directly to them, and felt that they were not on their own”. Students appeared to particularly like the videos when the educators were friendly and smiling.

Using published reports from students and educators and his own experience as a teacher and a student, a researcher extrapolated the lessons that can be learned from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and applied to other types of learning modes such as blended learning (Johnston, 2005). He identified

as picture-in-picture) with presentation slide graphics and text”. The author reflected that the prevalent use of video lectures in MOOCs has raised the expectation for video in other types of units. “It stands to reason that students who experience MOOC-benchmark-quality video for free would expect no less from paid online instruction from a university. MOOC video lecture quality may set student expectations for an acceptable or benchmark quality of video lecture quality in paid online university courses. More fundamentally, the MOOC reliance on video lectures may set expectations that paid online courses also rely on or at least include video lectures, and not rely on a student reading a textbook to deliver content”. Notably, this exploration of the use of video in MOOCs considered only content videos and not those of an introductory or orienting nature.

A team of teaching scholars from a university in Germany compared three different approaches to teaching 53 education students (Stürmer, Könings & Seidel, 2013). Pre- and post-tests indicated that students who had been taught through a video-based unit showed the largest gains in student learning (declarative knowledge and knowledge transfer). The video-based unit showed multiple “videotaped excerpts of classroom instruction and answer(ed) questions”. The other two

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two pedagogical approaches that appear to enhance learning: a) peer assessment and b) video lectures to deliver content. MOOC lecture videos are defined as “featuring a video recording of the professor (a ‘talking head’), interspersed or overlaid (such

approaches were primarily a) reflective and b) problem-based. The researchers concluded, “The video-based approach seems to bring students closer to classroom practice.” Critically, when divided between three research groups, the sample size was small and

This research seems to indicate that orientation videos may have a positive impact on student retention, grades and satisfaction.

both the unit content and approach varied (resulting in minimal research controls). In regard to the application of subject introduction videos, while this research provides some evidence of the efficacy of using videos as pedagogy, these videos were content-based rather than of an introductory or orienting nature.


Similarly, researchers at another university in Sri Lanka used content video presentation with first-year medical students (Kommalage & Senadheera, 2012). The videos were used to present patients' and their relatives' descriptions of symptoms and were followed by lecture and discussion. Survey (n=165) and focus group (n=36) analysis revealed that students "appreciated the video(s), had 'better' knowledge acquisition and a 'better' understanding of problems encountered by patients". In addition, students said that they had "increased interest, enhanced understanding, (saw the) relevance of basic knowledge to clinical practice, (felt) orient(ed) to (the) profession, and (were able to) personal(ise) theories". Critically, there was no control group (students who did not watch the videos) and comparative words such as 'better' indicate students' perceptions in relation to their other learning experiences. In regard to subject introduction videos, these videos were content based.

In an attempt to engage a cohort of first-year students in Honours Education, a team of educators at The University

of Wales worked collaboratively with their internal Institute of Digital Learning to support 44 students to create non-assessed video guides (Williams, 2011). After the students watched one another's videos, they completed questionnaires.

The published literature provides some emerging evidence, particularly from the perspective of students, that providing subject introduction videos are an efficacious pedagogical approach. The primary benefits appear to be feelings of increased engagement and connection between students, educators and units, as well as increased ability to navigate learning.

Analysis of the questionnaires revealed that the activity "develops reciprocity and co-operation between students, encourages active learning, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning". While the researchers did not formally compare this cohort group with other years (as experimental control groups), their informal assessment was that the pedagogical approach had a positive impact on grades and study optimism. Notably, this research addressed the students (rather than the educators) as authors of the videos.

In conclusion, the published literature provides some emerging evidence, particularly from the perspective of students, that providing subject introduction videos is an efficacious pedagogical approach. The primary benefits appear to be feelings of increased engagement and connection between students, educators and units, as well as increased ability to navigate learning. Notably, throughout the published studies, educator-produced videos were used in combination with other pedagogies for a combined positive effect on learning and engagement. While this combination of factors means that it is not clearly established that it is the videos that are responsible for (causal factors of) educational gains, the salient design-based approach of improving multiple pedagogies is in itself a notable research finding. None of the reviewed studies bounded their research specifically to initial subject introduction videos (as described in the introduction), thus limiting the application of the research findings to this specific context and suggesting that investigation of this particular approach and its outcomes/impact might be a worthwhile subject for further research. 

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