REVISITING LECTURE CAPTURE: SIX YEARS ON

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http://www1.aston.ac.uk/clipp/learning-innovation/ltr-good-practice-guides/

Introduction

In recent years the virtual learning environment (VLE) has become a core component in the delivery of courses at Aston University. This development has been instrumental in augmenting a range of innovative educational technologies. This contribution to the Good Practice Guide revisits my experiences in 2007, introducing video and MP3 lectures to a final year, Business Ethics module. The final part of this contribution considers alternative lecture capture tools currently available at Aston University.

A Primer

I first encountered video lecturing whilst undertaking a PGCE in 2004. I was impressed with the potential application of the technology, but as a reasonably inexperienced lecturer I could think of few things more ill-advised than recording my inexperience for all to enjoy. Over the next few years the notion of recording lectures remained to my mind, something that only the supremely confident academic would ever consider. That was until 2007, when my final year Business Ethics module was scheduled to take place between 6pm and 8pm.

Having delivered this module twice previously, I had been able to identify a number of key themes, which together with the new unfortunate timing of the lecture, required both reflection and action.

1. A proportion of the substantive material for the module is dry and relatively technical. Students in previous presentations of the module appeared overly anxious about these technical subjects, particularly so during the lead up to the examination.
2. Office hours for this final year module were increasingly dedicated to international students, struggling with technical terminology.
3. Student absence from key sessions on coursework preparation and examination preparation annually reduced me to endless, repetitious, conversations and emails attempting to re- deliver core information.
4. A sense that the module and the student experience would be significantly enhanced if the module were less didactic and more participatory in nature. A point that likely has resonance across the disciplines, as Institutional squeeze, increasing lecture group sizes and limited resources challenge us to juggle the delivery of substantive material, with more effective pedagogical methods.

The Technology

Anticipating that the unfortunate timetabling of the module would have a negative impact on lecture attendance and mindful of the points outlined above. I set about recording a number of core lectures with the support of Steve Ellis in CLIPP[1] and Gillian Bishop in Information Systems Aston (ISA). This initial pilot of lecture capture used PowerPoint Producer™, a package that enabled PowerPoint presentations to run alongside digital video of the presenter. The software was free and we used a standard digital camera to record the lecture images.

The mode of delivery for Business Ethics differed from previous approaches adopted by colleagues in LHS, who had created MP3 recordings of lectures delivered during the course. The video lectures for Business Ethics were not available in addition to the 'real time' lecture. They were used as an alternative to 'real time' delivery. My objective primary objective was to weave the video lectures into the module in order to liberate the lecture slot. This would create a safety net in the event that attendance was poor. It would also in enable me to schedule more frequent interactive sessions for the group.

Positive Aspects

Anecdotally, I felt that I received fewer questions from students seeking clarification on what was presented in the video lectures. Certainly fewer than I would encounter had the lectures been delivered in 'real time'. Students were able to revisit the lectures as frequently as required and this may have enabled them to clarify their own understanding.

The blended approach adopted in this module enhanced student autonomy and encouraged the cohort to take greater ownership for their learning experience. Students were given a degree of independence to learn at their own speed. Their autonomy was not, however, unlimited, as there were a number of benchmarks within the course, which required students to have acquired knowledge for contact sessions. This was a deliberate attempt to mitigate the likelihood of students leaving it all to the last minute.

International students and students with more complex learning needs seemed to benefit from the ability to pause the lecture and repeat particular sections. In addition, attendance for the contact sessions, despite the unfortunate timing of the lecture, was very close to 100% for each contact session.

The lectures were uploaded in several formats: MP3 format to allow students to download the audio and learn/revise whilst on the move; pure video format with no accompanying PowerPoint presentation; and finally PowerPoint Producer format.

Students expressed a preference for the MP3 format due largely to its inherent portability, but most students felt that the lecture in the first instance should be viewed with the PP presentation.

A short comments section on the module feedback form highlighted the following positive responses:
* "You never know when you need to clarify something and could do with hearing the lecture again; the lectures were really helpful for revising from."
* "I don't always get things the first time, so this was particularly helpful for the complex stuff like law."
* "I had an interview one week, but because that week was delivered by video lecture I didn't miss anything and didn't have to rely on my friends' illegible notes!"
* "I was able to go at my own speed" "The video lectures made up for the timing of the lecture slot".

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[1] Centre for Learning Information and Professional Practice

Negative Aspects

As this mode of delivery did not involve recording a live lecture, rather the creation of a lecture for delivery by video, there was a good deal of additional and perhaps unexpected preparation needed to achieve this. In the first place, I felt that some of the material needed to be modified and I was conscious that I was frequently omitting more controversial material. I was mindful of the fact that my lecturing style was perhaps as a direct result, less engaging.

A very small group of students acknowledged that the option to view the lectures at their own leisure had resulted in their leaving this task to the end of the course. As a result their participation in group activities was limited.

This mode of delivery does not enable two way participation and students were not able to ask questions during video lectures however, the use of online forums allowed me to address common issues in contact sessions and to tailor those contact sessions accordingly.

This blended approach was founded on the premise that the students 'possessed the necessary IT skills to access and utilize the material'. A handful of comments from the students at the end of the module suggested that students attending this module would have benefited from more detailed information on how to make effective use of the technology.

The 2008 presentation of this module included a computer lab session demonstrating how to access recorded lectures, how to download lectures onto MP3 players, and how to burn the files onto CDs. This enabled students in later presentations of the module, to utilize the material more effectively. In more recent years the demand for an introductory session on using these materials has diminished significantly.

Negative responses included:

- "The download time was awful...it took ages"
- "On one of the lectures I couldn't navigate through the slides properly.
- "I am awful with IT"

The technology utilized in this pilot in 2007 was by current standards limited, as was our ability to stream large video files through Blackboard™. The consequences of these limitations were that students often experienced significant delays downloading the lectures, (particularly in the case of the video format). These issues have since been addressed and students are able to review recorded lectures almost instantaneously through Blackboard™.

Bonus Material

During the first two years of this module's presentation, a significant proportion of contact time with students was 'high-jacked' by individuals wishing to address and re-address foundational knowledge, for example how to research coursework; how to reference coursework, writing from a committed standpoint and so forth. In anticipation of this in future presentations of the module, I pre-recorded several short MP3 lectures, which addressed these issues, entitled:

- Research and preparation for ethics coursework
- Essay writing for ethics
- Exam revision and preparation
- How to debate.

The core lectures were recorded and edited by Aston Media and as a consequence I experienced no difficulties producing the video lectures. I did, however, record the foundational knowledge lectures myself in MP3 format. Some of these lectures did require editing, which I found to be a time consuming and laborious task. Ultimately, I relented and allowed imperfections in delivery to remain.

Feedback

A short anonymous survey was distributed at the end of the module to gather feedback. When asked whether they felt that the video lectures had complemented the module: 29% strongly agreed; 57% agreed and only 14% were neutral. No students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

When asked whether they felt that the video lectures and MP3 lectures were useful for revision purposes: 50% of the cohort surveyed agreed strongly and 47% agreed. Only 3% of the students surveyed, disagreed with this statement.

Finally, at the end of the module: 45% of the cohort had watched each lecture at least once; 36% of those surveyed had watched the lectures twice and 19% of the students had watched the lectures three or more times. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the average number of downloads by the cohort further increased during the revision period. Similarly, the lengthy download times experienced by students using this early technology, may have acted as a disincentive for repeat viewings.

2007 and Beyond:

As time has passed since my original contribution to the Good Practice Guide, the array of technologies available to record lectures has increased significantly, as too has our students desire for the availability of some form of lecture capture on each module.

The University now supports two primary methods for lecture capture: Adobe Presenter™ and Aston Replay (Panopto) (see earlier paper).

Adobe Presenter ™

Adobe Presenter is best described as personal capture software. It allows staff to record video and/or audio narration for individual PowerPoint presentations. Once published, these presentations can be uploaded onto the VLE where students can access the content. Adobe Presenter outputs to Flash™ format, allowing PC and Mac users to access the recorded lectures through the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment).

The software itself is easy to use, as it imports directly into PowerPoint. Initially, much like my original pilot, this medium requires an investment of time. Adobe Presenter recordings generally take place 'outside' of the lecture environment. This for many staff will mean some duplication of work. Once the presentation has been recorded, it is a straightforward process to edit individual slides in order to update the content. Thus this tool is particularly well suited to disciplines susceptible to frequent change. The ability to easily edit individual slides, affords Adobe Presenter lectures an excellent lifespan.

Users are able to navigate around the presentation easily, by jumping to individual slides, searching for particular terms, reading attachments and notes embedded within the presentation itself.

CLIPP offer one-to-one training for staff interested in using this technology. There are also a number of informative online tutorials at: http://tlc.aston.ac.uk/tool/adobe-presenter. A copy of the user guide for Adobe Presenter™ can be found at: http://www.adobe.com/support/documentation/en/presenter/quick_start/ Staff who do not currently have a copy of Adobe Presenter installed on their university computer should contact ISA.

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Aston Replay:

Aston Replay (once known as Panopto) is the second supported lecture capture technology at Aston University. As with Adobe Presenter, staff can arrange training directly with CLIPP. A range of supporting material and online tutorials can be found at the following location: http://tlc.aston.ac.uk/aston-replay/guides-and-tutorials

Aston Replay is well suited to capturing live teaching sessions. It is however, important to ensure that students are aware that a session is being recorded. A copy of the slide to display to students at the start of a recording session can be found at: http://tlc.aston.ac.uk/aston-replay/inform-your-students-lecture-being-recorded

Registered students can search and replay sections of a lecture to enhance understanding and review recorded sessions for revision purposes. Aston Replay also allows students to make time-stamped notes while a recording is in progress, or while viewing a presentation on-demand.

The key benefits of this technology are its ability to capture the lecture theatre environment and subject matter, without distilling the content. As the medium captures live lectures there is a limited time investment required by staff. The technology is also straightforward to use and the presentations can be managed and edited by the author/creator. Adobe Presenter ™ is perhaps more suited to large group teaching sessions, where students can retain a degree of anonymity. It is possible that the recording of live lectures/sessions may impact on group dynamics and staff may wish to consider this when determining the most appropriate form of lecture capture.

References

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