"In Our Own Words": Creating Videos as Teaching and Learning Tools

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Abstract

Online videos, particularly those on YouTube, have proliferated on the internet; watching them has become part of our everyday activity. While libraries have often harnessed the power of videos to create their own promotional and informational videos, few have created their own teaching and learning tools beyond screencasting videos. In the summer of 2010, the authors, two librarians at York University, decided to work on a video project which culminated in a series of instructional videos entitled "Learning: In Our Own Words." The purpose of the video project was twofold: to trace the "real" experience of incoming students and their development of academic literacies skills (research, writing and learning) throughout their first year, and to create videos that librarians and other instructors could use as instructional tools to engage students in critical thinking and discussion. This paper outlines the authors’ experience filming the videos, creating a teaching guide, and screening the videos in the classroom. Lessons learned during this initiative are discussed in the hope that more libraries will develop videos as teaching and learning tools.

Keywords

online videos; information literacy; student engagement; library instruction

Introduction

Online videos, particularly those on YouTube, have proliferated in recent years; watching them has become part of our everyday activity. Both digital natives — those who grew up always knowing the Internet existed — and digital immigrants — those who remember life before the Internet — regularly watch, download and share digital videos online. While such videos are primarily consumed for entertainment purposes, they are increasingly used to educate and promote learning. Technology has enabled prospective filmmakers to easily create 'in-house' videos and post them online for mass
consumption. While academic libraries have often harnessed the power of video to create promotional and informational media, few have created their own teaching and learning tools beyond screen-casting tutorial videos. A survey of online video repositories found that there is a lack of library-produced educational videos aimed at information literacy and critical thinking skills.

In the summer of 2010, the authors decided to work on a video project which culminated in a series of instructional videos entitled "Learning: In Our Own Words." The purpose of the project was twofold: to trace the "real" experience of incoming students and their development of academic literacies skills (research, writing and learning) throughout their first year and to create a video series that librarians and other educators could use as a tool to engage students in critical thinking and discussion. This paper outlines the experience of planning and filming these videos, creating accompanying teaching guides, and screening the videos in the classroom. We discuss lessons learned during this initiative in the hope that more librarians will develop videos as teaching and learning tools.

Fig. 1. Student discussing his approach to research

**Literature Review**

Few articles discuss the planning and production of videos in academic library contexts (Callahan 24-5; Perry 282-283; Saines 532-535). Burrell and Lee detail the technical aspects of planning and producing streaming videos for distance education but do not explore the use of the videos for in-class instruction (204).

The overall value of videos in teaching and learning, however, is well documented. Berk reviews a number of studies examining the cognitive effects of videos (2-4). These studies find that videos are not only emotionally appealing, targeting different types of intelligences, but ultimately have the potential to increase cognitive abilities such as
memory and comprehension. Videos are especially useful when documenting experience and demonstrating visual information (Hampe).

Nevertheless, videos are sometimes seen as a passive medium (Hampe), potentially turning viewers into unthinking "zombies." Videos can be less effective if they incorporate too much talk ("talking heads") or attempt to present abstract ideas and arguments (Hampe).

Despite the potential passivity of the medium, video can be used effectively to engage and motivate students in the classroom, given the right circumstances. Karppinen emphasizes that "simply presenting information in a stimulating and interesting digital video format will not automatically lead to in-depth learning" (235). Karppinen reviews the theoretical literature and outlines six characteristics of "meaningful learning":

a) active,
b) constructive and individual,
c) collaborative and conversational,
d) contextual,
e) guided, and
f) emotionally involving and motivating (235).

In the "Teaching Guides" section of this paper, we assess the videos in terms of these characteristics.

**Project Principles**

After reviewing a number of informational library videos, we noticed there was a tendency in library-related videos to feature experts (librarians, faculty) who talked "at" students. As interesting or informative as these videos might be, we thought it would be interesting to hear what we felt was missing: the student voice. We set out therefore to create a student-centred, peer-to-peer learning tool — one in which the "authenticity" of student voices and experiences was paramount. It would take the form of a video series. The "student voice" would be recorded via one-to-one interviews with York University first-year undergraduates. The interviews were to be unscripted, reflecting as much as possible each student's "real" voice. An underlying project principle was that students should be considered experts in their own right. The principle of "student as teacher" and the notion of "authenticity/believability" would later guide us in selecting footage, despite some concerns that students' provocative or misleading statements might counter the views of librarians and other instructors.

**Video Production**

**Pre-Production**

Planning for the video project started in the summer of 2010. Since we had no prior experience producing videos, extra time devoted to preparation was needed. Pre-production was arguably the most important stage of the video-making process,
requiring extensive planning and decision-making. At this stage we cemented our overall vision, determined the purpose of the video series, and perhaps most importantly, considered whether creating videos was actually necessary. It was agreed that the intended audience would be first-year university students, while faculty and instructors were identified as secondary audiences. We decided that in the process of creating the videos, we would experiment with video production as well. We felt that a balance in tone, especially making use of humour, was needed in order to target both students and faculty/instructors.

Although York University Libraries had a number of online screen-casting videos instructing users on how to search the library catalogue, and a couple of videos promoting selected research collections, there were no live-action videos created expressly for in-class teaching and learning purposes. As a result, we conducted an environmental scan. In order to get a sense of what form the videos might take, we reviewed several live-action, library-created videos on YouTube. The "ASU Library Minute" and the "University of Alberta Libraries" videos were especially inspirational. After reviewing numerous online videos, however, none satisfied our requirements: to reflect the "student voice" and encourage critical thinking: thus, the decision to create 'in-house' videos instead.

Since the stated goal was to design teaching and learning tools, it was important to draft learning objectives. From the outset, the focus was on research skills (for example, the research process, choosing and evaluating resources, using Internet sources). Later, at various stages, the learning objectives evolved to include other academic skills such as writing, time management and exam preparation.

Having established general project principles and specific learning objectives, the next step was to set a realistic time frame. Some of the time-related questions we asked ourselves included: How much time is available to work on this project? How long might the project take to complete? Could the videos be produced during a less busy period (e.g., summer, weekends, evenings)? How will this project impact our daily duties as librarians? The project's timeline ultimately depended on a range of factors, including the scope of the project, the number of videos planned (seven), the length of each video (three to five minutes), the number of people who would assist in the project, and the level of creativity involved (e.g., we wanted some animation included). Thankfully, we were able to work with an on-campus video production team. This saved us a good deal of time that might have been spent learning to use filming equipment and acquiring any technical production skills we lacked.

Since we intended to follow a cohort of students throughout their first year at York University, interview and filming dates were set at several different time periods. We planned to begin recording in early September 2010 even though the start of the fall term is the busiest time of the year for academic librarians. We felt that we could reasonably schedule the video shoots during the first two weeks in September, over a period of four days and with ten hours of total filming. Follow-up interviews were scheduled for January and April when we felt our work schedules were not as hectic.
Although we did not have official research or professional development releases, we were fortunate to have the support of the University Librarian and the Chair of our reference department.

Another essential task undertaken during pre-production was the sourcing of funds. The Learning: In Our Own Words video project received funding from the University Librarian Office and an internal research grant totaling approximately $7,000. This funding would be used primarily for filming the interviews and post-production editing by York University’s Learning Technology Services (LTS). LTS provided relevant equipment (video camera, microphone, editing software, etc.) in addition to studio space for filming the videos. We also had to factor in additional costs for LTS’s enhanced technical production work such as adding soundtrack music and images/animation. Some funds were used to compensate students with gift cards ($10) in recognition of their participation.

We also needed to make decisions about the subjects of the video: the students. In this regard, we considered the following questions:

a) Who will participate? How many? Are there particular demographics we need to consider?

b) Will participants be compensated? How?

c) How can we recruit participants?

d) What ethical considerations are needed? What consent forms or releases are needed?

We had settled on first-year students as our target population. Later, after reviewing early footage from the first round of interviews/filming, it was discovered that the demographics needed greater attention, given the diversity of York’s students. We had a good representation of students in terms of visible minorities, but there was a significant gender imbalance, with more female than male student participants. In the end, we decided to factor in gender representation when selecting final footage.

During pre-production, a considerable amount of time was devoted to storyboarding: organizing visual (text, graphics, and images) and audio (music and spoken content) information. The storyboard went through numerous revisions during pre-production and continued to be updated and reworked during the production stage. Additional considerations included securing university ethics approval and identifying locations for the video shoots.

Production

The student interviews were filmed during the production stage. Although there were relatively fewer tasks at this stage (mostly interview scheduling and film recording), it was nevertheless very time consuming due to the length and number of videos produced.
In early September 2010, twenty incoming students, primarily from the social sciences and humanities programs, were recruited for video interviews. They were invited to return for another interview in January 2011 (after their first term), and again in April 2011 (at the end of their first academic year). Of the 20 students interviewed in September, fifteen returned in January and eight returned in April.

At this stage, the video project was reviewed by the university’s research ethics committee. Although students were initially to sign consent forms to release their on-camera interviews, the ethics committee recommended that students see the final video draft before giving their final consent.

In late summer 2010, we began the recruitment process. The Centre for Student Success sent an email on our behalf to approximately 3,000 incoming first year students registered in Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies programs. The email invited first year students to participate in a video shoot about their experience doing research. A number of students were also recruited in September during the fall orientation week.

Throughout the interview/filming process, students were unaware that we, the interviewers, were librarians. We purposefully did not disclose our status because it was felt that this revelation might limit the content range of the videos (i.e., knowing that we were librarians, students might end up interpreting ‘research’ strictly in term of libraries or library-related matters, to the exclusion of other research-related concerns). We did not want to lead or influence students in this direction, so our initial recruitment contact with students was folded under the name of the Learning Commons — a term we felt most incoming students would not associate with the library. As a result, the student interviewees did not question our identity.

In September (Interview Stage #1), we interviewed our students on locations across campus, leading with the open-ended statement: Tell us about your experience doing research. The findings from these interviews were intriguing. While the original intention was to have students discuss their research experience — by which we assumed 'library and information literacy skills' — we found that students mentioned a much wider range of skills and literacies. In addition to library research skills, they spoke about struggling with time management, reading/note-taking, critical thinking, writing, citing sources and adjusting to university life. As a result, the content of the videos themselves shifted to include learning skills, writing skills, and adjustment to university life. Accordingly, our learning objectives were reworked. The student interviewees thus ended up decisively shaping the project.

In January 2011 (Interview Stage #2), after completing their first term at York University, students were again interviewed in various locations on campus. The interviews started with the question: What have you learned about research? What would you do differently? Students were also asked follow-up questions based on their September footage.
In April 2011 (Interview Stage #3), students were filmed in a studio using a green screen. All interviews started with the question: What recommendations/tips/hints would you offer to new students around research? Students were also asked follow-up questions based on their previous interviews. The students drafted answers to interview questions ahead of time, and read their scripts from a teleprompter during the video shoot.

As a consequence of this hybrid filming process, the final videos have a mix of both spontaneous, unscripted, on-location interviews, and in-studio interviews filmed with a teleprompter. One of the advantages of spontaneous interviews is that they appear more natural and appealing. However, unscripted shots are also difficult to edit in post-production. On the other hand, the studio-shot segments felt more unnatural and rehearsed (which they were). In hindsight, we believe that there is benefit to having both types of footage (scripted and unscripted): more often than not, students interviewed remarkably better in one mode of filming over the other.

**Post-production**

Post-production involved numerous revisions, reshaping, rearranging and reinterpreting the content. At this stage, we primarily reviewed and selected footage. The production team edited the footage and added animation/special effects, music and closed captioning. We determined that the videos would ideally run no more than 3-5 minutes to maximize attention levels.

After reviewing hours of footage, final selection was based on the learning objectives we developed for each module as well as the guiding principles for the project. When articulating the learning objectives, we considered the following questions:

**What did we want students to learn, discuss, and reflect critically on in this module?**
For example, in the "Doing Research" video, it was important that students understand that there are many paths to doing research: that the research process is non-linear and recursive. We included footage of different student descriptions of how they approached the research process.

**What was said? What wasn’t said? Which statements were controversial or problematic from an instructor’s (librarian/faculty/teaching assistants) point of view?**
For example, in the "Google/Internet Sources" video, the first student’s statement is "I only go on Google because it has the most number of research [sic]". This candid view reflects the student’s own experience, but librarians might have a problem with the use of Google for academic research. Yet, we felt that including the statement in the video could help engage students in discussion on the merits and pitfalls of Google in a university setting. Where possible, we tried to show a variety of perspectives on a topic (e.g., the use of Google as an information resource) as well as provocative statements that instructors might not necessarily agree with (e.g., one student opined that "what they taught you about writing in high school was all wrong").
The Video Series

In the end, seven different videos/modules were created as part of the Learning: In Our Own Words series:

1. University Life
2. Learning Skills
3. Doing Research
4. Choosing Sources
5. Google/Internet
6. Libraries
7. Writing and Citing

In addition, we created an overall "Intro" mini-video to brand the series and link all seven modules. The tagline "Real Life, Real Students, Real Experiences" was added to convey the "authenticity" theme associated with the video series.

Each video had a visual theme or icon, reflecting either familiar campus objects or items students might use during research (e.g., University sign posts were used in the "University Life" module, and a film reel was used in the "Choosing Sources" module). The videos were posted on YouTube and on the York University Learning Commons home page in November 2011.

The Teaching Guides

From the outset, the videos were intended to be used as instructional tools. To this end, we created a toolkit which included teaching guides to accompany all the videos, with contributions from York University's Learning Skills Specialists for the "Learning Skills" module, and Writing Instructors for the "Writing and Citing" module. Each teaching guide comprises a transcript of the video, ice-breaker discussion questions, a sample lesson plan incorporating the video, and an active-learning exercise.

As discussed previously, Karppinen outlines six characteristics to guide the creation of the teaching toolkit, which we would now like to discuss in relation to the video project (235). For Karppinen, learning tools are meaningful if they are:

Active: Each teaching guide was designed with active learning elements. Active-learning activities, used in conjunction with the videos, may include student self-reflection, one-minute response papers, hands-on searching, and group activities.

Constructive and individual: These videos focus on students' individual experiences. In the accompanying guides, we emphasize (for the benefit of instructors) that the range of on-screen student voices reflects unique research-related experiences. Students viewing the video can add their own experiences and knowledge to the discussion, constructing their own sense of the research process. As well, the videos and hands-on
activities appeal to a number of different learning styles (e.g., audio, visual, tactile, analytical, and experiential).

**Collaborative and conversational:** Each teaching guide includes discussion/ice-breaker questions to encourage students to reflect on the video’s content and join the conversation. Many active learning exercises in the toolkit are group-based activities.

**Contextual:** Meaningful learning needs to take place in "authentic, relevant and realistic contexts" (Karppinen 241). Accordingly, these videos are designed to address actual problems encountered by students and are followed up with an activity demonstrating how to solve the problem (e.g., how to select scholarly sources).

**Guided:** The videos were designed to provide information, but also to support student learning and provoke thinking and discussion. Instructors using the videos can guide students and suggest follow-up learning tasks.

**Emotionally involving and motivating:** Because the videos are "student-centred," student audiences are likely to feel a personal connection to their peers in the video — more than if librarian or faculty "experts" were talking to them. As well, the online video medium is itself appealing to most (first-year) students.

**Teaching with the Videos**

In November 2011, one of the videos was piloted in three different types of library instructional settings: a first year Sociology course in a lecture hall (over 200 students), a first year Human Rights and Equity Studies course in a library computer lab (20 students), and a general undergraduate research drop-in workshop in a library computer lab (3 students). The same video, "Choosing Sources" was selected for viewing in each session based on its relation to the session’s general learning objectives and its relevance to specific course assignments.

In each session, to start the class conversation, discussion questions were selected from the "Choosing Sources" teaching guide. In the lecture hall setting, after screening the video, there was an especially engaging discussion involving the students, a faculty member and the librarian. There was a stimulating to-and-fro on the place of digital video in academic research. The use of videos — and whether the "medium is the message" — became topics of discussion. Students expanded on a range of questions from the guide: "What is a scholarly source? Why are you expected to use scholarly sources in your research in university? Can an online video (e.g., YouTube) ever be used as an academic source?" The discussion seemed to point to the conclusion that there were no "black and white" answers for any of these questions, and hence videos could legitimately be used as sources of academic learning. Also in this session, some of the criteria mentioned by the students in the videos led to an in-class demonstration of how to find and evaluate acceptable academic sources (books and articles).
The other screenings of the videos, during two library computer lab sessions, also engaged students in discussion. In these cases, however, students were able to reinforce earlier discussion points by engaging in hands-on, active learning activities. Students practiced searching for articles and selecting appropriate sources (scholarly and popular). The sample lesson plan from teaching guide #4 (Majekodunmi and Murnaghan 2-3) was used.

Feedback from students was solicited regarding how interesting the videos were and the importance of hearing other student voices. Students completed either the online survey (via Survey Monkey) or the paper survey administered in the library session. Overall, the majority of students agreed that the videos were engaging (78%), and that it was important to hear other students’ experiences (78%).

Results from using the videos in the classroom were encouraging; however we would like to see them screened in a wider range of classroom settings and courses.

**Lessons Learned**

**Video Production**

Students were interviewed in September during the busiest time of the year for academic librarians. We did not have any time releases from our regular duties as reference and instruction librarians, though we were fortunate to work in a department with flexible scheduling. Even though we had drawn up what we felt were reasonable timelines, in the end we greatly underestimated the overall time it took to complete the project: twice as much time was needed. We would likely choose to pursue such a project during the least busy time of the year for our library (e.g., spring, for academic librarians), or if possible, secure special release time for the project.

**Teaching with the Videos**

Preparation was key to successfully teaching with the videos. In our view, videos do not support active learning on their own, but they can be used effectively if paired with relevant learning activities. In each library instructional setting, therefore, it was essential to introduce and contextualize the video being used. Students were better engaged when we explained why they were watching the video, outlined our expectations, and what activities would occur after they viewed the video. Since "on-screen" students are speaking about their own experience and using their own words, we found it useful to emphasize to the "in-class" students that they may or may not agree with what was said.

We discovered that it was important for instructors to facilitate rather than lead conversations. To this end, being open to "controversial" issues (e.g., using Wikipedia, Google or YouTube as academic sources) helped further stimulate debate. We found that students were more engaged when they were encouraged to interact with the issues expressed in the videos.
Some of the additional challenges when teaching with the videos centred on technical issues such as lack of Internet connectivity and low audio/sound.

**Conclusion**

Creating a video can be a challenging experience. It can be intensively time-consuming — all the more so when creating a 7-video series, as we did. The pre-production stage involves recruiting students, applying for research ethics approval, securing a camera operator and video equipment, applying for funding, developing interview questions, scheduling the interviews, scoping locations, and developing an overall vision for the series. The production stage involves getting the students on camera and interviewing them as well as determining the types of shots (close-up, wide angle, etc.) needed. The post-production stage involves reviewing and selecting the footage and editing the videos, all to fit within a theme.

But creating videos can also be a dynamic and positive learning experience. Interacting with enthusiastic students, knowledgeable colleagues, and a dedicated production team can be rewarding in terms of creativity and teamwork. Video production can also change the ways in which librarians think about students and student learning: we learn to better think "with them," putting ourselves in their shoes and seeing the academic world through their eyes. Our experience shows that, when such a production takes the form of student-centred videos and is accompanied by integrated teaching guides, academic learning can be enhanced and democratized: it speaks to students in their own voices, positions the students themselves as "experts," and works toward transforming the student experience.

**Works Cited**


