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GOING EYE TO EYE

The impact of camera angles in learning videos on the perception of teaching excellence and emotional connectedness of students in the creative industries

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework in England, and parts of Wales and Scotland, has put an increased emphasis on the importance of students' perception of teaching quality in Higher Education (Ashwin, 2017). This has seemingly resulted in a disparity between disciplines within Higher Education institutions, with subjects associated with the creative industries, such as Design and Communication Studies, traditionally scoring worse for teaching and learning in the National Student Survey compared to other disciplines (Burgess, Senior & Moores, 2018). Possible explanations for this range from the pedagogic culture in creative subjects to personality traits emphasised in the creative industries. Irrespective of precisely what causes the disparity between disciplines, the reality is that the comparably lower score with regard to perceived teaching and learning excellence has put additional pressure on educators within creative industries subjects to identify and apply novel teaching and learning approaches in order to boost the (perceived) teaching quality.

Generation Z, those born in or after 1995, currently makes up the majority of undergraduate students in the UK's Higher Education institutions. This socio-demographic cohort exhibits a distinct desire for 'educational opportunities that use technology and visual media' (Mohr & Mohr, 2017, p.92); thus, furthering the continuous production and integration of video content in Higher Education as part of online, hybrid and collaborative learning environments. The advantages associated with the use of video content from a student's point of view are manifold and include the 'thinning of classroom walls' (Siemens, Gašević & Dawson, 2015, p.205), as well as the enabling of students to re-visit and re-view classroom material more independently.

According to Hansch and colleagues (2015, p.4), 'talking head videos' – that is, videos featuring one or more presenters talking at the camera – are amongst the most widely used audio-visual content in online learning settings. This presenter-centred content can facilitate a connection between the presenter and the audience, adding 'nurturing value' (Koumi, 2006, p.46) to the educational environment, which facilitates a connection with students and improves student engagement and motivation (Guo, Kim & Rubin, 2014; Hansch et al., 2015). All of these aspects have been identified as playing a key role in students' evaluation of teaching quality (Su & Wood, 2012).

Creating video content

When it comes to the creation of video content, it appears to be the exception that presenter-centred videos are produced in a professional film studio environment. The production at brick and mortar institutions rarely falls within the responsibility of a centralised department, but is, instead, often subsumed into the responsibilities of individuals or course teams without specialist equipment or training. The use of built-in cameras in laptops and desktop computers to record videos for educational purposes has, therefore, become commonplace (Berger, 2019). This, however, might have unintended consequences for the perceived teaching quality, as the material produced by educators might not be developed using any media-based principles. Indeed, research has repeatedly shown that one key area, the camera angle, has a distinct impact on how audiences perceive video content and how emotional connections with people on screen are formed (Schwender, 2001).

Ramlatchan and Watson (2017) investigated, amongst other things, camera angles in learning videos – comparing the impact of high angle and eye level shots on instructor credibility and immediacy. The authors concluded that videos featuring an eye level shot were significantly better received by students compared to those shot at a higher angle. The study did not include lower camera angles, which might seem surprising, as the established use of laptops and desktop computers for the recordings of learning videos likely results in such shots. Low shot angles often trigger feelings of inferiority and powerlessness in audiences (Schwender, 2001). In the context of students' perception of teaching excellence, this might be particularly concerning, as learning partnerships with mutual respect between learners and teachers are paramount (Fried, 2001).

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Given that teaching is a 'profoundly emotional practice' (Su & Wood, 2012, p.151), and that it is essential for excellent teaching to have 'a capacity to forge meaningful connectedness' (ibid.), it might be that certain camera angles in learning videos improve or hinder the connection with students. This paper contributes to the on-going discussion by examining the impact of low shot and eye level camera angles in learning videos on students' perception of teaching excellence and emotional connectedness. Due to the specific challenges arising from the introduction of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, the focus of this study is on the creative industries within Higher Education.
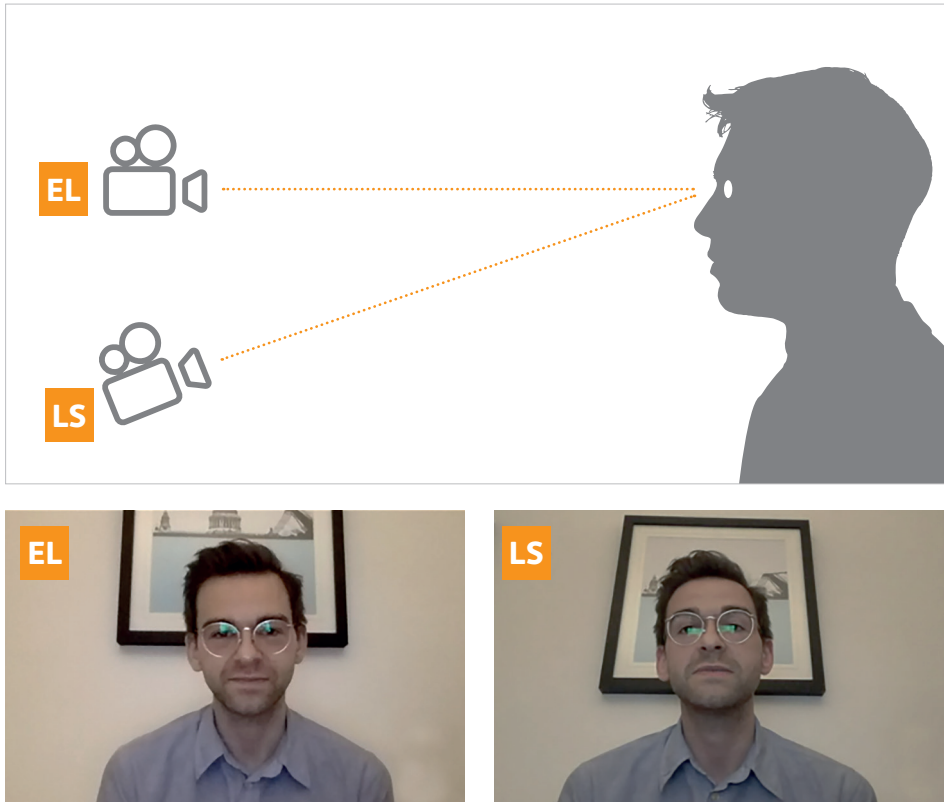
FIGURE 1 The investigation material consisted of two learning videos, which were identical except for the camera angle

Research design

Two short learning videos were produced, using two identical cameras for one low shot version and one eye level version of otherwise identical talking head videos (see Figure 1). Each video had a duration of 4 minutes and 55 seconds and discussed the concept of 'Unique Selling Proposition'; which included a selection of definitions, application strategies, advantages and limitations of the concept, as well as current industry examples. Whilst the eye level camera was adjusted according to the presenter's real-life eye level, the height of the low shot was selected to replicate an in-built camera in a 14" laptop.

After their creation, the two videos were shown to and discussed with two academic colleagues from the London School of Film, Media and Design at the University of West London who regularly produce learning videos as part of their own teaching practice. The purpose of this pre-test was to establish the appropriateness of the investigation material as a typical representation of a short learning video within the creative industries. Both colleagues independently confirmed the suitability of the investigation material, resulting in no changes to the videos for the final data collection.

Based on Schwender's (2001) investigation into audience perception and Reysen's (2005) Likability Scale, 13 open-ended questions were created. Before the final data collection, a pre-test regarding question comprehension took place with two undergraduate students (not part of the final sample), resulting in minor rewording of one question in order to improve clarity. Subsequently,

two focus groups with full-time second year undergraduate students from the University at West London were conducted on 20 March and 12 April 2019 at the University's St Mary's Road campus. The first focus group comprised six Advertising and Public Relations students (4 female / 2 male). The second focus group comprised eight Media and Communications students (4 female / 4 male). Both courses typically feature face-to-face learning environments, but occasionally incorporate learning videos in their Virtual Learning Environment, enabling students to revisit and review content outside of their weekly classes.

During each focus group, the participants were initially split evenly into two sub-groups at random. Each sub-group was shown and discussed either the eye level or the low shot video, before merging into one group. The focus groups were audio recorded and the data subsequently analysed, using qualitative content analysis. To ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a letter from A to N (the corresponding participant letter is indicated after each quotation).

Results

In the eyes of the participants, a good lecturer, irrespective of whether they are in a face-to-face or online learning environment, must be a dual expert with both '*knowledge about the industry [and] about how to teach*' (E); whilst at the same time '*not [being] patronising*' (C), that is, interacting with students in a respectful manner. A sense of humour was also repeatedly pointed out as '*very important to keep (…) engaged during a class*' (G) and to be able to build a good rapport with students.

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Regarding the learning videos, the groups unanimously agreed that the low angle shot '*looked patronising*' (I) and felt '*more informal*' (B) compared to the eye level shot, which was perceived as '*more professional*' (A). Although the presenter's body position was pointed out to appear more relaxed in the video featuring a low angle, this was not seen as a positive by all students, but amplified the perceived unprofessionalism, with several participants in both groups characterising the video as '*too relaxed*' (F), '*unserious*' (A) and '*sloppier*' (L).

Despite being more critical overall of the low angle shot, some students acknowledged that this reflected what they were familiar with from traditional face-to-face learning environments; however, participants' responses indicated that the reception of learning videos might be less influenced by their knowledge of classroom settings rather than the consumption of other video content in their spare time. '*Our generation watches a lot of YouTube and videos like that, it's always on [eye-level], whereas in the class (…) the teacher stands in the front and we are sat (…) But this is different. We've learned so much with video content and it is more on our level; when it's a lower angle, it's not necessarily on our level*' (C).

Neither of the camera angles were found to convey enthusiasm or motivate viewers to engage further with the content; both aspects, however, were pointed out as '*definitely important*' (M) for a good lecture. '*If I was doing a course and I was watching those sort of videos every single week, I'd lose interest in the course*' (L). '*I'd click on it, watch it for 10 seconds and then completely off-click it*' (N). '*You're facing a screen and you're watching someone talk directly at you. And obviously, you get that in real life experience when you go to a lecture, but that's more engaging than this*' (B).

Overall, participants from both groups seemed to question the use of presenters in learning videos, finding the experience '*a bit unsettling, starring at someone who is staring back at you (…); I felt uncomfortable*' (I). '*Why do you need to show your face? Just show some visuals*' (F). It also seemed, there was an additional level of scrutiny of both the presenter and the content in learning videos compared to face-to-face learning environments. '*It's the small things that bug me here (…) and in all videos that I see online, to be fair. In class with a lecturer, I'd probably not even notice*' (K). '*In videos, these things are more obvious*' (B). In terms of consumption situations, students agreed

that the implementation of presenter-centred learning videos within a face-to-face learning environment was not desirable, but an implementation as part of a Virtual Learning Environment might be beneficial for their learning experience. *'I would not want this as part of a lecture (…) but maybe (…) for when I am at home'* (H). *'This could be good for when I revise things between classes, but definitely not in class'* (A).

Inspiration for possible improvements was primarily drawn from social media, particularly YouTube tutorials: *'YouTubers are better at this'* (F). Participants unanimously agreed that what makes social media tutorials more successful than the presented learning videos was the fact that they were *'more like a conversation'* (D), involving interaction and movement on the presenter's part. Participants emphasised the importance of using visuals beyond the depiction of presenters, including *'visual examples'* and *'subtitles'* (A). All agreed that for them, it was crucial *'to make [the video] more of an interesting visual (…) because we have short attention spans anyway'* (B).

There seemed to be an expectation from students in both groups that the creative approach and production quality for learning videos in subjects of the creative industries should apply and reflect the skills that are purportedly being taught to the viewers. *'It's kind of ironic that we're talking about a Unique Selling Point, when the video is completely un-unique and completely not very well designed'* (N). *'Talking about something that is creative in the least creative way possible, I'd think I wasted my time and money'* (E).

Several participants in the second focus group also questioned the use of videos as a suitable mode of delivery for content outside of classroom settings overall, criticising the sequential nature of learning videos and the difficulties arising from navigating and searching for specific information. *'I don't like that I can't just jump in and out easily of a video (…) I'd always have to start again or search for the right stuff for ages'* (G). *'Maybe it would need to be broken down more? So, I can navigate (…); like maybe one-minute soundbites or something'* (M). *'I don't feel [a video] can replace reading a book. It is just way too difficult to go back and forth when I need to hear something again because I didn't get it the first time, or when I am looking for something specific'* (K).

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Discussion

Between the two camera angles examined, the findings indicate that an eye level shot might be more appropriate for learning videos. Similar to findings from Ramlatchan and Watson (2017), the eye level shot appears to positively affect the presenter's credibility and goodwill; which is in accordance with expectations derived from media theory (Schwender, 2001). An increase in perceived professionalism and decrease in the feeling of inferiority with an eye level angle also corresponds with Fried's (2001) call for a learning partnership and mutual respect between learners and teachers.

However, the findings call into question the use of presenter-centred learning videos overall, with both videos resulting in a lack of perceived enthusiasm, as well as an inability to motivate and engage, all of which were described by participants, and Su and Wood (2012), as key to student's perception of teaching excellence. Further, the eerie perception of presenters talking into the camera, irrespective of angles, appears to decrease approachability; a criterion also identified by Su and Wood (2012) to be important for a good lecture from a student's viewpoint.

The desired emotional connectedness therefore might not be achieved by presenter-centred learning

videos alone. A more visual-led approach, or at least enhancements, with an improved mechanism for navigation, could be a more effective way forward, which also coincides with this age group's desire for 'frequent educational opportunities that use technology and visual media' (Mohr & Mohr, 2017, p.92).

Limitation and implications

Due to the nature of the presented insight, based on two focus groups of undergraduate students in the creative industries, additional data from a more diverse student body is required to evaluate the generalisability of any findings. Nevertheless, this study, in combination with Ramlatchan and Watson's (2017) insight, suggests that when it comes to learning videos featuring presenters, an eye-level camera angle should be applied. Although likely not the default position of desktop computer or laptop cameras, the adjustment might be worth the extra effort, particularly considering the boost in importance of students' perception of teaching quality. A more professional approach to the production also appears to be advisable, particularly in light of the added level of scrutiny by students when interacting with video content outside of classroom settings. Creative industries departments within Higher Education institutions interested in supporting their teaching and learning experience with the help of learning videos might wish to consider additional support for academic staff involved in the production process.

The article summarises, and expands on, research undertaken as part of my PgCert in Professional Academic Practice and was presented at the Festival of Teaching and Learning 2019 at the University of West London; where it was awarded first prize.

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