Skills Hub: Review, Redesign, Rebuild
Research Project: Executive Summary
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About the project
In September 2013, Library and Learning Services (LLS) at the University of Northampton launched the Skills Hub (http://skillshub.northampton.ac.uk), a repository of open educational resources (OERs) for use by schools, students, researchers and the community.

Since its launch the content has had more than 50,000 views and has received a global audience. Around 70 of the OERs have been created in-house by LLS staff and many take the form of bite-sized videos. With the help of students, school pupils, teachers and a professional film-maker, the Skills Hub: Review, Rebuild and Redesign project aimed to critique and build upon this video content in three key areas:

- internationalisation of content
- use of content by school pupils
- maximising the quality of our most used videos

This document briefly outlines the aims and objectives, methodology, and findings of this project, and details key recommendations for improvement of future Skills Hub videos. Areas that will improve as a result of the recommendations are indicated.

Aims and objectives
The project aimed to:

- enhance and increase the number of quality open educational resources available via the Skills Hub
- improve cognition amongst LLS staff of the pedagogic and narrative possibilities that can be achieved through the medium of film
- provide OER study skills support from the University to local schools and the community
- internationalise Skills Hub content

Research design and methodology
Fifty of the Skills Hub’s videos were selected for analysis. These were chosen in order to represent the needs of different audiences (undergraduates, postgraduates, international students, and school-age viewers) as well as the videos that were most popular on the Skills Hub.

Fifteen participants were selected in order to gain an overall picture of responses and identify themes that were specific to certain viewer types (e.g. school-age viewers).

The research was inductive, seeking to find out what the key themes were in respondents’ assessments of the videos without having made any assumptions about what these may have been beforehand. Prominent themes were identified and explained, and relevant literature consulted following the analysis in order to situate the research in a broader context.

Recommendations were then written based on the findings, and opportunities for further research were identified.
Key findings

The key findings from the study are outlined below. It is recommended that video producers read and digest these findings, and the key recommendations that follow, in addition to the specific comments on their own videos.

The main findings fall into eight main categories. The first four of these are themes taken directly from the comments: technical problems, presentation issues, structural requirements and inconsistent information content. The remaining four categories are broader themes regarding viewers’ engagement with the videos, each of which represents a cluster of themes from the data. These are comprehension, concentration, information retention, and professionalism.

The comments on the individual videos are available as an open-access dataset on the project blog, which can be found at http://skillsinnovation.wordpress.com.

1) **Technical** problems are common and require significant improvement. These include

a. **Audio problems**

   i. **Generally poor audio quality**

      The audio quality of twenty separate videos was criticised in general terms for being poor, attracting comments such as that the sound was “fuzzy”, “tinny” or “dull”.

   ii. **Fluctuations in volume**

      Fluctuations in volume were noted in three videos, particularly between different speakers. This was “off putting” and made videos “difficult to follow” for respondents.

   iii. **Background music too loud**

      The use of background music was heavily criticised, attracting three positive comments in comparison with sixty-two negative ones in relation to thirteen separate videos. The most common criticism was that the music was too loud and overpowered the speaker. Excessive volume of background music was linked directly to problems in following the information in the video. Other frequent reservations were that it was very distracting, or that it was “unnecessary” or “irritating”.

   iv. **Speaker too quiet**

      Ten videos were criticised for the speaker being too quiet. This appeared to be related to poor mastery of technical equipment by video producers, excessively high volume of background music, and problems with speakers’ delivery.
v. **Background noise and interference**

The audio track on a number of videos included what was considered an unacceptably large amount of background noise or interference with the audio signal, including “crackling” noises. Respondents often found that poor audio quality exacerbated the problems caused by intrusive background music and thus hindered their understanding of the video’s content. This was noted to be a particular problem for international students.

vi. **Unwanted sounds**

Extraneous sounds were criticised by respondents. Two videos had a buzzing or flickering sound at the end – possibly caused by audio equipment being unplugged before the recording is stopped – which was described as “irritating”, “annoying” and “unprofessional”. Other unwanted sounds included pages turning, mouse clicks, stifled laughter, a microphone being turned off, and a microphone being continuously knocked by the speaker.

b. **Video problems**

i. **General poor video quality**

The quality of five videos was on twenty-three occasions simply referred to as “bad” or “poor”. More specific criticisms in this respect explain that “blurry” low resolution videos prevent viewers from being able to read the information on the slides.

ii. **Shaky camera**

On two occasions “shaky” camera work was criticised as distracting and unprofessional.

iii. **Pixelated or low-resolution images**

Six separate videos were criticised for being visually unclear due to either pixelated images or certain parts being too small to read.

2) The presentation of videos requires significant improvement

a. **Spoken element**

i. **Slower pace is needed**

Twenty-two of the videos attracted criticism for their speaker being too fast. Excessive speed was found to be “bewildering” and “difficult to listen to”, causing viewers to have to watch videos several times in order to fully understand what was being said. Other respondents reported feeling “bombarded with information”, which made it “hard to focus on all of the
information given”. Swift pace of speech was noted to be particularly problematic for international students to understand, with one respondent advising the provision of subtitles.

ii. **Consistent delivery is needed, both within and between the parts recorded by individual speakers**

Certain speakers are noted to be inconsistent, talking “too softly/fast at times”. One speaker was criticised for the lack of clarity in their delivery “as the variation in volume can make the information difficult to follow”. Use of two speakers attracted criticism for the sharp contrast in pace and volume between presenters. Although the evidence indicates this may be a technical issue more than one relating to presentation skills, consistency in delivery should be sought.

iii. **More engaging or enthusiastic delivery is needed**

 Speakers in eight videos were criticised because they “lacked in enthusiasm” or “sounded bored”, which was described as making “the information harder to process” and failing to engage the viewer. Other videos in which the speakers appeared uninterested were simply described as “boring”. Another criticism (seven videos) was that the speaker’s delivery was “monotonous”, “dull”, or “robotic”, and thus failed to engage the viewer. This was noted as being a particular problem when addressing a school-age audience.

iv. **Mistakes made in the spoken element need to be checked for and corrected before the videos are uploaded to the internet**

Two of the videos were criticised for containing mistakes in the presenter’s speech, such as long pauses or stumbling over words. These errors were seen to “break up the fluidity of the video” and to cause “difficulties to follow the information”. Two videos contain audible laughter, which were both negatively received on those grounds. The sound of the speaker “laughing at [their] mistakes” in one video was considered “not engaging and extremely off putting”. Laughter in another video was “distracting and can appear amateur”.

b. **Visual element**

i. **Efforts should be made to make the videos engaging.**

A relatively frequent comment (sixteen videos) was that the visual elements of a video “could be more engaging”. Useful elements could include sound
effects, simple animations, keywords, colour, and humour. Other suggestions included giving “the information in a variety of ways. i.e. images, flash slides, lists on screen” and “highlight[ing] the area of text the speaker is referring to”.

ii. **Ensure that there is not too much information on the slides**

Five videos were criticised for having “too much information given on slides”, a factor which was linked to difficulties with engaging with videos. One respondent called the amount of information “daunting”; another complained that “the slides contain too much information, which meant that I couldn’t listen and read at the same time”. On three occasions the large quantity of information on slides was directly linked to lack of engagement, e.g. “the reading load of this tutorial is a great amount for a student, and most likely they will quickly lose interest!”

iii. **Take full advantage of the visual element – not just “simple PowerPoint slides”**

Five videos were criticised for resembling a PowerPoint presentation too closely. Respondents evidently expected tutorial videos to be distinct from lecture-type presentations. Suggestions for how this could be achieved included the efforts to make presentations more engaging outlined above, and also the use of novel presentation types and interactivity.

iv. **The ‘Prezi’ format is particularly well received**

Although only receiving direct compliments from one user, the four videos where this novel presentation format was specifically mentioned tended to receive large numbers of other positive comments referring to the effectiveness of the “animation and visual elements of the video” or similar.

c. **Fit between spoken and visual element**

Twenty-two videos were criticised over fifty comments for the lack of correlation between the audio and visual elements, which caused confusion and distraction. Key criticisms include:

i. A ‘lag’ between information being spoken and appearing on screen, or vice versa (ten videos)

ii. Information appearing in a completely different order on the audio track and the video track (four videos)

iii. The visual element holding on a particular screen for a long time, over which a large amount of spoken information is delivered (five videos)
iv. Information being mentioned in the audio track that does not appear on screen (three videos)

d. Audio element
  i. Opinion is overwhelmingly against the use of background music. In addition to the technical issues associated with music that are discussed above, other frequent reservations were that it was very distracting, or that it was “unnecessary” or “irritating”. The choice of music also attracted criticism, variously being reported as sounding like a “charity TV advert” or being “more suited to a night club than a university video”.

e. Overall pace
  i. It is important that videos are slow enough to understand
     Eighteen videos were criticised for being “too fast for people to understand” and proceeding through different sections “without proper explanation of what is happening”.

  ii. It is important that the pace of a video is consistent
     One video was criticised for being “at times slow-paced”; another is apparently praised for offering “an outline...as to what exactly the video will cover”, although “however this is too long”. Three other videos are criticised for lingering on certain sections.

3) The structure of videos is inconsistent and requires improvement

a. Introductions are needed
   Two videos were criticised for “launch[ing] straight in without a proper introduction”.
   Positive comments about introductions reinforce their importance.

b. Summaries, re-caps or conclusions are needed
   Three videos were criticised for either having a poor or missing conclusion. A closely related and more frequent complaint (seven videos) was the lack of a summary of the video’s content or key themes, which was often associated with difficulty understanding or retaining the video’s information.

c. An overview of the video, to be referred back to periodically, would help
   Two respondents suggested this would aid understanding.
d. **Videos should proceed in a clear, linear way**
   Although rarely explicitly dealt with by respondents, a significant number of the comments that positively evaluated the structural elements of twenty-five videos indicated that clear, linear progression was important.

e. **Where possible, videos should be divided into a series of clear stages**
   Many of the positive comments about the structure of videos were also associated with their progression in a ‘step by step’ fashion. One undergraduate respondent in particular made several negative comments about the lack of steps.

f. **Stages or steps should be numbered to aid clarity**
   Comments about two of the videos suggested that this would further aid comprehension.

4) **The information content of videos is of inconsistent quality and requires improvement**

a. **Key points must be covered**
   Eighteen videos were praised for providing “key points” or “essential information”, which is a central criterion of perceived video quality. Thirty-two videos attracted some degree of criticism about lack of detail, although crucially many of these were suggested additions or general calls for greater depth rather than identification of key information which was missing.

b. **Video producers should not try to include too much information**
   Ten videos were criticised for including too much information, with respondents suggesting that videos could be split into smaller chunks in order to aid comprehension and concentration.

c. **Clear examples should be given**
   Examples were positively received (nine videos). This finding was supported by the call for examples to be added (five videos) or improved (two videos).

d. **Appropriate examples should be given, based on level of target viewers**
   Two respondents suggested that the including the use of internet sources in an example of literature searching may not be appropriate for postgraduate students.

e. **The inclusion of links to other material is well received**
   One video attracted praise for referencing other Skills Hub videos. Similarly, two suggestions for improvement focused on adding links to other learning materials.

5) **Viewer concentration is affected by the above problems**

   Specific details regarding concentration are given on page 31 of the main report.
6) Viewer **comprehension** is affected by the above problems

Specific details regarding **comprehension** are given on page 32 of the main report.

7) Viewer **information retention** is affected by the above problems

Specific details regarding **information retention** are given on page 34 of the main report.

8) Problems with the videos outlined above create an **unprofessional impression**

One respondent noted that this was not expected of a university: as the Skills Hub reaches a global audience, this is potentially an important issue.

**Key recommendations**

1) **Staff training is needed on presentation skills**, both in the sense of
   a. The spoken or narrated element of videos
   b. Skills to be an engaging presenter

2) **Staff training is needed on how to design videos**, both in the sense of
   a. The information content of videos
   b. The structure of videos

3) **Staff training is needed on the technical aspects of video production**, both in the sense of
   a. Procedures to ensure audio quality
   b. Procedures to ensure video quality

4) **Investment in better quality equipment is necessary**

   Technical problems were not always the result of insufficient training: sometimes it was clear that poor quality equipment was the cause

**Key areas that will improve**

As a result of these recommendations, it is predicted that the following key improvements will be made:

1) Greater levels of **viewer engagement** will be achieved. This will lead to
   a. Better **comprehension** of videos
   b. Better **retention** of video content

2) Higher levels of **professionalism** will be achieved. This will
   a. Aid **viewer engagement**
   b. Impact positively on the university’s **institutional reputation**

3) Greater **uptake of videos across different audiences and educational levels** will be achieved