

Digital posters - talking cycles for academic literacy

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CHAPTER 22

DIGITAL POSTERS—TALKING CYCLES FOR ACADEMIC LITERACY

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This chapter explores an inter-disciplinary collaboration which set the written word to one side to explore the student voice in a space between speech and writing. It presents an emerging Digital Posters pedagogy in which student experimentation with the spoken word is designed to support their critical engagement with their subject and by extension their ability to produce the structures of academic writing. The method has been developed collaboratively over three years by the authors: an academic, a writing tutor and an educational developer. The approach has proved liberating for both staff and students and has provided a means of exploring conceptions of academic literacies as being about critical and constructive growth through the students' exploration of language and their representation of knowledge.

THE CHALLENGE

The massification of UK higher education and the growing diversity of the student body exacerbate the difficulty of establishing appropriate expectations for, and engagement with, academic writing. Diversity was central to the challenge in this case study, which involved students enrolled on two Sheffield Business School Level 5 (year 2) Business units: Managing in a Global Context (full-time degree, Erasmus, Chinese students, full-time Higher National Diploma (HND) students) and Globalization and Business (part-time degree/HND students). The primary challenge, stated simply, was how to engage these students in writing that promotes learning at degree level; a challenge further compounded by the teaching team's diverse understandings of the function of writing.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

Colin Bryson and Len Hand (2007, p. 360), in discussing learner engagement, reflect that “positive engagement ... is unsurprisingly linked to [students] enjoying what they do” and as Karen Scouller (1998) argues, good performance in essay writing is linked to students developing and using deep learning strategies. We felt

a fresh approach was required in engaging the students, one that was not likely to be perceived as addressing a technical deficit and one that developed within the subject itself. As a team we wanted to create a novel arena; one in which students could explore their own voices and, ultimately, re-engage with their own thinking and appreciation of writing as a space for exploring thinking.

DIGITAL POSTERS AND THE DIGITAL VOICE

The realization that a deeply engaging novel approach to embedding writing development was needed coincided with a university innovation project called Digital Voices. This initiative aimed to explore the value of the recorded voice to enhance learning and one of the methods being promoted in that work, Digital Posters, appeared to offer a new environment in which students could discover their academic voice. The Digital Voice project proposed that new, every-day technologies disrupt existing understandings of the “learning environment” and introduce diverse opportunities for using the recorded voice as a way to promote learning. At the same time, the Digital Voice project was intent on exploring usergenerated media as an integrated, pervasive phenomenon; not as something distinct and supplementary to existing teaching and learning concerns.

WHAT ARE DIGITAL POSTERS?

In this case, a Digital Poster is a video based on a single power point slide and produced by a student during a two hour workshop. Students are expected to record a five minute visually rich presentation with spoken commentary. They use screen capture technology, rather than a camera, to record their PC screen. The resultant recording is saved as a digital video file which can be played back immediately in the classroom or later online (see example: <http://youtu.be/NitL1LqtG9c>).

Technically, digital posters are made feasible by the simple production process which involves the use of familiar software (PowerPoint) and less familiar, yet reliable and highly accessible screencasting software (Camtasia Studio). Familiarity and usability are critical characteristics of the Digital Poster method, supporting the principle that, even though students will be required to work in a way that is new to them, the technical interface should not raise anxiety or otherwise disrupt the primary learning activity of talking about, listening to and reflecting on ideas and knowledge. It is important for the effective engagement of the students that the activity is straightforward, enjoyable and ultimately understood by them as being relevant and useful.

In this case study students used Digital Posters to report on the initial findings from their research into an agreed topic. Prior to attending the workshop, the students selected four or five images, representing their findings about the topic,

which they were expected to organize on a single PowerPoint slide. It was explained to the students that they would need to use the images as “visual bullet-points” to support their commentary on their research topic. The students were required to work without written scripts and, instead, to depend on their visual cues as prompts. This was intended to create a structure while allowing them to explore different ways of explaining what they had discovered. The students were each given a headset and screencasting software to record their slide and talk. They were asked to begin by introducing their topic before addressing each of their selected images. To conclude, they were expected to identify any connections between the structural components. Once satisfied with their commentary, the students were able to add zoom and pan effects to their recording using other features in the software. This process resulted in the production of a visual and verbal journey around and then across their slide of images.

WORKSHOP DESIGN

The workshop is organized around four phases: modelling, presentation, production and reflection. The tutor begins by modelling the process in the PC Lab using a headset and the installed screencasting software. The methods are also explained on an illustrated handout which students follow later. The modelling intentionally highlights the difficulty of finding the right words and celebrates the hesitancy found in utterances such as “um” and “err,” identifying them as being symbolic of the thinking required to construct an effective presentation of knowledge. This emphasizes that technical perfection is not an expected outcome of the exercise and that finding the right words requires some effort and experimentation.

It is important to stress here, as it is to the students, that the main value of the Digital Posters method is the formative process of making and thinking about the different ways they have to present their knowledge. It is the students’ consideration of how they can best visually represent their chosen topic; explain their engagement with their topic and their knowledge of it, which is important at this early stage in their assignment. The students become involved in an electronically mediated, self-regulated, iterative process of talking about their study and rapidly reflecting on their presentation by making design decisions. The iterative cycle in the Digital Posters concept involves the student speaking and recording, replaying and reviewing, and then revising and re-recording their presentation until they are happy with it, or until the workshop moves from the presentation phase into its production phase. It provides an environment in which students can organize their thinking.

The structure of the workshop ensures that students are continuously engaged in making decisions within an ethos of “good enough” production quality, typical of user-generated digital media tasks (Martin Weller, 2011). Each presentation cycle takes about ten minutes depending on the extent of the revisions the student

determines to be necessary. During the cycle students are asked to listen to the words they have used, the fluency with which they have used them, the suitability of the structure they have selected and how these factors enable or hinder them in making a coherent presentation. The intention, therefore, is not for students to get anything “right” but for them to explore the open-ended nature of an academic assignment, the need for them to manage this and to develop a suitable academic voice (Peter Elbow, 1995, p. xlv). The task confirms the uncertain, emerging and fuzzy state of knowledge at this stage in their thinking. The forgiving nature of the spoken word and the inherent open-endedness of images contrast with the apparent finality of the written word at the heart of the student’s anxiety. The spoken word gives the student room to navigate what they know and to find the appropriate structure and vocabulary they need. This multimodal view of literacy readily accommodates tentative and reflective expression and brings together the benefits of spatial logic through the visual elements and temporal logic in the use of words (Gunter Kress, 2003).

The production phase of the workshop provides some time for each student to develop their presentation using the software’s zoom and pan tools. It allows the student producer to add visual emphasis and to make connections across the structure as well as creating a high level view of the topic in conclusion. The final review phase of the workshop takes the form of a ten minute plenary in which students reflect on the method and whether it helped them to explore their thinking and identify gaps in their knowledge. This metacognitive approach highlights the importance of language, structure and voice in representing knowledge. It is the academic equivalent to a warm down exercise in which students talk about their experience. The following section is largely based upon an analysis of transcripts from these plenary conversations.

REFLECTING ON THE WORKSHOPS

This section draws on our classroom observations of students making their digital posters and, in particular, on the workshop discussion. The data come from eight workshops conducted with approximately 40 students in the third year of this work.

It was immediately evident that students were intrigued by the technology and engaged positively with it. Beyond some initial shyness, the usual reticence of students to speak up disappeared as they began to record their reports. The challenge of recording a personal artefact appeared to absorb the students, immersing them in a private space, albeit within the public environment of a busy PC Lab (Figure 22.1). Students sat side-by-side in the lab, each speaking directly to their screens before playing back the recording. Not only did the use of technology appear to transform the public space into private space, but it also worked as an interactive

mirror, creating a strong virtual audience for some students.



Figure 22.1: Students producing digital posters in a workshop.

The impersonality of the technology and the lack of social dynamic helped some students to focus on the task in hand:

When you make eye contact with people [in presentations] you kind of think you're buying yourself a bit more time. It's just different when you're staring at a computer screen. It's like "Go"—that's it ...

Others personified the computer as a listener; their partner in their dialogic exchange,

You can kind of forget you're talking to a screen. You're talking to someone. So it's like they're listening and there's a connection there.

The novelty of the technology and the task was perceived positively as being “fun,” “interesting,” and “a good way to engage your attention,” and contributed to a high sense of engagement and ownership:

You learn a lot because you don't want to do it badly. Because it's your voice you want to get it right.

The Digital Poster method requires students to work without a written script or notes and many students remarked on how the use of images helped them to structure their thinking. This student's comment was echoed by many others:

I think it is useful [to think about structure in terms of pictures] because you think about a picture in a lot more words than just writing. You get an image in your head and you create thoughts around the picture. I think it helps to open your mind about the topic.

As the concept of photo elicitation suggests (Douglas Harper, 2002), the students explained that while the pictures made room for thinking, they also created a focus:

The pictures help you to concentrate. When you look at them your thoughts start to take shape and they help you to focus on your topics.

It was easy to come up with words just by looking at the picture.

The technology enabled students to capture their words with spontaneity and then revisit and reflect on this as they mentally redrafted their digital poster. The interplay of “product” and “process” involving the rapid reversioning of artefacts seems to locate Digital Posters in a space between speech and writing. The process encouraged a metacognitive engagement among students alongside their focus on producing content. Because the method is modelled as an unusual, imperfect, and transitory media, it created a space for low-stakes, critical self-evaluation.

Due to the novelty of the medium, the students were not inhibited by preconceived ideas of perfection. The medium acted as a mirror:

I spoke it initially, but when I listened back I realized I'd said it incorrectly ... it emphasizes the importance of having a good understanding of the subject you're talking about.

It's good listening back to yourself because you can hear whether or not you know what you're talking about.

There was some evidence that the iterative process facilitated a shift in tone from a more personal to a more public, formal voice; one more suited to the academic context and task. The Digital Poster workshops were an isolated event for

the students, but several suggested they might do something similar independently:

I think it will definitely help a lot [to do more of this at home].
It's giving me a clearer view about what I'm doing.

On future projects, if I'm not sure where I'm going, [using pictures to indicate structure] would help [me] to pick out what are the key points and elements which I need to use and which ones I need to research more on or change the ideas.

DIGITAL POSTER GALLERY

The students were given the option of uploading their posters to a “student gallery” in their Blackboard virtual learning environment. This created an audience for the products, allowing for peer review and comparison. The Digital Poster gallery also allowed the authors to reflect further on the approach. Having four pictures on one slide, rather than on a series of slides, meant the stronger students tended to make the connections between the visual elements, relating them back to an overarching idea or main point. This was echoed, but not replaced, by the use of the software's zoom and panning functionality to add emphasis.

The simple use of visual prompts encouraged students to engage in their topics in ways which could translate into their academic writing. For example, the relationship between carefully selected graphics and presentational clarity was a characteristic of the most successful posters. They created a coherent structure and organization; features that potentially make it easier for the “reader” to follow the presenter's train of thought, whether in speech or in writing. Feedback was given on the posters that had been uploaded to Blackboard. This provided an opportunity to deconstruct the best examples and begin to explore with the students how academic literacy develops, how abstractions such as critical analysis and the use of evidence and structure translate into language.

CONCLUSION

A major driver for this work was student disengagement with academic writing and their difficulty in valuing writing as anything other than a means of reporting their state of knowledge. Exploration of the Digital Posters method has not only helped to clarify to the students the significance of aspects of academic writing, but has been revelatory to us as developers of the method too. In particular the relationship of academic discourse to student selfregulation (Zimmerman, 1989), conceptualizations of multiple literacies and multimodality (Kress, 2003), and the benefits of reassessing digital media-enhanced learning environments have been influential in developing our own thinking.

The student production of Digital Posters created a useful framework with which to engage students as reflective and critical learners despite their reticence at being challenged. The novelty of the medium, the decision-making associated with designing the poster presentation, the clear communication required to represent the state of each student's grasp of their topic, and the immediate feedback coming through the iterative review, reflection and revision cycle, all contributed to creating a rich, immersive, intensive and engaging learning opportunity. For us, the shift from written media to the spoken word and the integration of audio-visual media seemed to recast the whole issue of student engagement in academic discourse and academic writing.

We found that the strongest indication of success in this study was in comparing the eagerness of the students to talk about their experience of constructing their Digital Posters, and their compulsion to produce "a good take," with their previous reticence to engage in discussions about academic writing. Looking to further developments, we are interested in exploring the intertextual and dialogic aspects (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981) in the transfer of presented knowledge from one medium to another, which we hope might help us to engage students more critically with the relationship between their digital posters and their academic writing.

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