12 "What is this place?" – using screencasts to guide international students around the virtual learning environment

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Abstract

When using Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) on university modules, international students unfamiliar with such platforms face navigational as well as linguistic barriers. Short, intensive language courses may not spend time on VLE orientation and rationale, with the result that students do not receive clear guidance on exactly how to move around the site, and why. This paper presents a narrative account of a teaching and site design intervention which used screencast videos to show students narrated examples of page navigation. These screencasts could be accessed multiple times and were not limited to an induction phase of the course. Take-up of these screencasts was high, and reported problems with VLE navigation reduced.

Keywords: VLE, screencasting, international students, pre-sessional.

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1.   Introduction

Pre-sessional language courses are offered to prospective university students who have not met the language proficiency requirements of their degree programmes, often in an intensive six or ten week format. Due to this intensity and short duration, teaching students how to make best use of a VLE may not

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be a priority for the course designers, and students might be reluctant to spend time "learning how to learn" (Mitchell, Stephens, & Cook, 2006, p. 74). On the other hand, pre-sessional courses at many institutions are huge endeavours with a large team of tutors and technicians involved, and the value of a VLE for coordination and communication has been commented on in a UK higher education setting (e.g. Read, 2016).

This paper will focus on a pre-sessional course in which the students were exclusively from China, and draw on literature relating to attitudes towards VLE usage from Chinese learners. Nevertheless, much of the below will be relevant to international students more generally, and to the principles of good VLE design.

Studies (e.g. Chen, Bennett, & Maton, 2008) have shown that for Chinese learners new to higher education in another geographical context, the use of a VLE can seem 'doubly foreign', in that both the confrontation with technical language and the practice of navigating around an educational webpage specific to a module are new experiences. However, it is also important to note that students from China, and international students more widely, benefit from the use of VLEs as a form of learning which is "away from real-time communication", meaning that "the barriers of being embarrassed or being shy are partially removed" (Thompson & Ku, 2005, p. 35).

With these concerns in mind, this paper outlines a strategy for reducing the navigational barriers that VLEs can pose to international students unfamiliar with the online learning environments adopted in UK universities. This is based on a design approach taken on the University of Liverpool in London's pre-sessional course in 2018.

2.   Approach

The use of video in a VLE has already been noted as a way to bring course content material alive (e.g. Hill & Nelson, 2011) due to its nature of a visual, kinetic medium as opposed to text or static image. In this teaching intervention,

however, and in light of the navigational barriers remarked on above, it was decided to utilise videos for the objective of orienting students, rather than for content delivery. To be specific, on many VLE pages a video was placed to show students how to navigate the page and explain the usefulness of the content.

These videos were screencasts of the page being used, meaning that students could watch where to click or move the cursor, while listening to the module co-ordinator explain the resource, give advice on its usage, and gloss its role in the course and relationship to other resources. Figure 1 below is an example of this. The resource in question is a link to a reading list for the course and it is accompanied by an embedded video. On playing the video, the students are shown a live example of someone navigating the reading list, commenting on the material, opening the links, etc. This offers much more detailed guidance on using the resource than the alternatives of (1) simply including a link to the resource or (2) including a link to the resource with a description or static screenshots. The kinetic nature of video is more engaging for students, less cluttered on the screen, and tackles the barrier often faced by international students of not knowing how to navigate VLE pages.
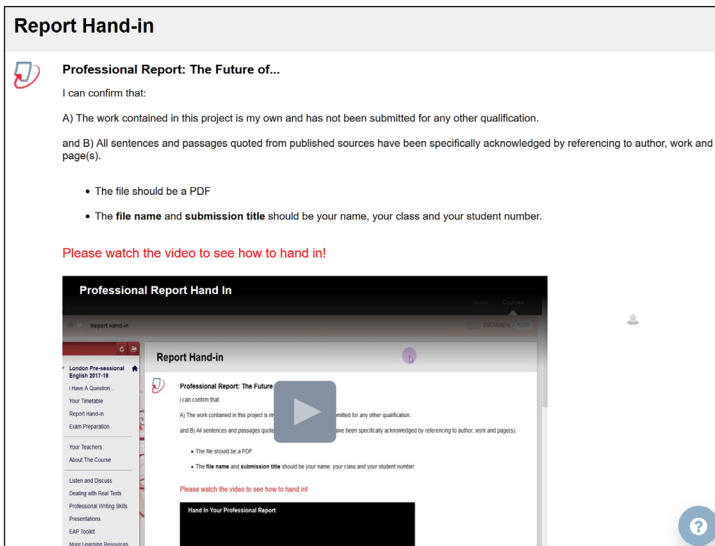
Figure 1.   Example VLE screencast, reading list resource[2]
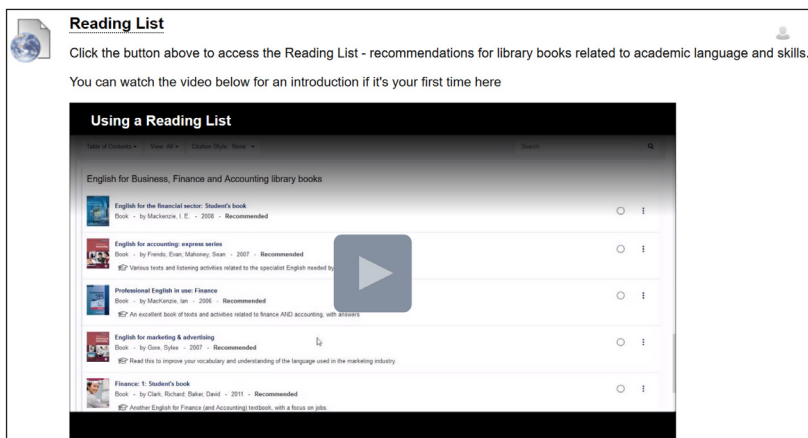
2. Screenshot, University of Liverpool in London pre-sessional VLE (Blackboard)

It has been remarked that VLE design is often institutional rather than course-specific (Ellaway, Dewhurst, & McLeod, 2004), meaning that the contents are set by policies outside the control of the module coordinators. The use of screencasts is a way to make the page more relatable for the students as the videos are specific to one particular course and linked (by voice) to familiar tutors. As learning objects, these screencasts are perhaps 'disposable' in the sense that they are designed specifically for one course's VLE, and would look out of place or incorrect if re-used. This requires more time, but means that the objects can be designed more carefully (Cheal & Rajagopalan, 2007, p. 68). Figure 2 is a screencast which was used to show students exactly how to navigate the Turnitin[3] submission for one particular assignment, and therefore which could not be re-used – the converse of this is that various concrete recommendations and reminders could be included, which would not be possible on a generic 'how to use Turnitin' non-screencast video.

Figure 2. Example VLE screencast, report submission[4]

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3. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the number of views of a selection of screencasts made available on the VLE. There was a cohort of 51 students on this course, so we can conclude that many screencasts were viewed multiple times by a large proportion of the students. However, it should be noted that the view count also includes tutors who might have watched the screencast, and that these figures do not necessarily reflect the video being viewed in its entirety.

Table 1. View count for screencast videos

Resource/Feature	Number of views of screencast showing how to navigate the resource
Turnitin hand-in	445
Learning on screen	509
The academic word list	449
Accessing the Financial Times	208
How to access TED Talks	148
Using Quizlet	210
Task on Blackboard discussion board	566

Here are some of the observed benefits of using screencasts in this way:

- Better navigation on the page: as remarked above, international students in an unfamiliar education setting can fall back on narrated guides to know how and why the resources should be used.

- Reduced 'troubleshooting': the video guides save time spent instructing students on how to use the pages. For instance, all submissions to Turnitin were made without issues, which can otherwise be a source of stress at the deadline.

- Increased personalisation: through narration and specificity of content, the students are left in little doubt that the resources available on the VLE have been precisely selected for them and their context.

4.   Conclusions

Using narrated screencasts to help orient students who are unfamiliar with how VLEs are used by an institution proved an interesting way to present resources to students and guide and encourage their effective use, and this technique is certainly worthy of more investigation. In particular, gathering more qualitative feedback on student responses will be a logical next step, as the above intervention was done quite informally and relies on simple view counts and anecdotal evidence of efficacy.

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