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*Chapter* 18

Authentic Vlogs

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# BACKGROUND

Employers are critical of graduate skills gaps (The Bureau of National Aﬀairs, 2018). The design of a new assessment on a first-year MBA course oﬀered an opportunity to address concerns that employees are often “uncertain or incompetent” when speaking in front of a camera (Moss- ner & Herhausen, 2017). Furthermore, a reliance on PowerPoint has been said to weaken verbal reasoning and encourage superficial argumentation (Wolstencroft, 2019). An MBA program aims to support the future-proof- ing of careers, and the human resource module (HRM) emphasizes the importance of active communication for an eﬀective human resource strat- egy. An assessment scenario on presenting evidence-based ideas was added to the program. The assignment set the scene for an HR director to pre- pare a video brief for its geographically dispersed board. The themes to be covered in the briefing were made explicit, having been mapped to the course content and learning outcomes. This was the second submission of the first year HRM module, carrying 50% weighting of marks. Students were required to deliver a credible and authentic 15-minute video presenta- tion (+/- two minutes).

The students were assessed on their authoritative relay of appro- priately researched and contextualized ideas to influence the board’s decision-making. This professional context vlog (PCV) design is dif- ferent from the more common vlog design used to capture students’ reflections.

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# DIGITAL LEARNING ACTIVITY

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Aimed at part-time professional students, the PCV oﬀers a real-world appli- cation of new HRM knowledge and understanding. The main emphasis of the vlog assignment was to support students to communicate evidence-based ideas verbally. Unlike a written submission, the focus is placed on the stu- dent’s ability to prepare and verbally communicate coherent and persuasive arguments to a specified audience, which then supports the justification for the recommended actions. Claims or statements made were to be under- pinned by a good range of academic research and cited verbally. Students were urged to consider tone, energy, pace and setting and to plan for a brief and appropriate welcome and close, clearly outlining the context and purpose of the video briefing. Selection of relevant and credible sources, appropriate to the selected context, and thorough evidence-based argu- ments to justify recommendations was reinforced.

Students were encouraged to produce a draft written script that thor- oughly answered the assignment brief before editing to fit the strict vlog running time requirement. This encouraged work on structure and ﬂow of argument and analysis before the subsequent fine-tuning of their com- prehensive communication. The first version of the PCV summative assess- ment prohibited any text or media curation, the core focus being oracy. Students were advised to break their script into practical segments before practicing for the camera. The latter stage invited focus upon tone, back- ground setting and use of techniques for persuasive speech. The students were required to upload their PCV to YouTube or record in Panopto, with outputs saved as unlisted to prevent unauthorized access. References and the Panopto or YouTube link were submitted formally in a Word or pdf document and uploaded to Turnitin. The lecturer also requested the vlog script or supporting notes to be uploaded to a separate Turnitin link to check the originality of content and, where necessary, decipher various accents across the globally distributed student cohorts.

The second PCV iteration tested the consequences of aﬀording students a little more freedom in making use of media content. This responded to first cohort feedback that 15 minutes of presenter dialogue was argu- ably not fully authentic, with professionals typically making use of some text, media or stimuli to enrich a digital communication. However, the lecturer was concerned that the student submission did not slip into an exercise in media curation. The previous results of experimentation with submissions encouraging multimedia showed that although students would create incredibly polished content, their work lacked academic depth and originality.

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The lecturer verbally discouraged slide or text dependency to avoid weakening of the targeted oracy skills development, insisting that the student remain visible at all times. Digestion and confident delivery of well-researched and executed communication remained vital. Similarly, a fully narrated, voiceover PowerPoint in which students were not physically visible was discouraged. While video production oﬀers myriad skill devel- opment opportunities, the PCV targets confident presentation in front of the camera in a professional business context. There remained a strong academic focus, as students were required to verbally cite literature or the ideas of experts within their subject area, providing reasoned and informed arguments for any actions recommended. The lecturer adapted standard university assessment criteria to capture and reward the vlog production and targeted skills. Feedback captured in Transferable Skills for Life and Professional Practice on the assessment paperwork allowed for targeted commentary on the eﬀective use of the vlog device to communicate infor- mation, arguments and analysis to the targeted audience and overall ﬂu- ency of expression.

# EVALUATION

Students spread over three cohorts took part in the PCV assessments. Stu- dents’ self-evaluation on challenges faced and learning achieved was col- lected through an anonymous online survey. These supplemented the first and second marker evaluations utilizing the university’s assessment crite- ria. There was consistency in students self-reporting on overcoming self- consciousness, ability to summarize work with ﬂow, increased awareness of being evidence-based and being fit for context, as well as improving pre- senting skills, verbal confidence, tone and personal brand. The majority reported some form of challenge, diﬃculty or frustration with the new submission format but credited new skills from having been pushed out of their comfort zone. One feedback statement highlighted that the PCV changed how they had consumed and made use of their new HRM knowl- edge, providing a clear target of what would be essential for discussion with their business leaders. The majority of the students who worked on the first PCV design tendered positive statements about improved self-awareness of presenting skills and the ability to filter for key points of emphasis for max- imum engagement. The feedback made clear that the PCV had disciplined many to aspire toward, achieve and relay a more authentic comprehen- sion of the module learning outcomes. Furthermore, one student publicly reported in a blog that the PCV equips learners for modern work, building essential skills ready for an always-developing digital workplace (Hughes, 2020). From the perspective of the academic markers, there appeared to be

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a considerable stretch in critical thinking, authenticity, contextualization, ﬂow of argument and oracy.

Comparing the original PCV submission with the submission of the revised PCV design, which allowed for media or text, there was a drop in the level of authentic voice, reduced stretch in personal confidence and less enthusiastic skill development self-reported by the students. These views were upheld by the assessments made by the academic markers. The second iteration, allowing for students to make use of media or text, had weakened the targeted skills stretch overall. The exception to this was where students had made more selective use of media or text to support or enhance their communication. When there is the freedom to integrate multimedia or text, there appears a strong pull toward producing a voiceover PowerPoint narration output.

Past a “sweet spot”, there is a shift of focus for students, away from developing an authentic voice to prioritizing the production of text-based content. The more curated the media content, the lower the levels of an authentic voice identified and increased presentation confidence that are self-reported by the student. From the markers’ perspectives, there was a distinct drop in ability to hold audience attention, which, in this context, was a board of directors. There was a higher incidence of superficial or general content usage. The second version had not stretched or taken the majority of students to such a point of discomfort and growth as the first ver- sion. Discussion with other lecturers moderating the submissions disclosed a higher risk of reading the screen rather than listening or engaging with the presenter (student) voice. A predominance of text-filled slides diluted the overall quality of the outputs and student oral performance. However, students who had made creative yet selective use of media or text achieved a more eﬀective balance. Retaining a strong sense of authentic and confident presentation style, they gave more robust and engaging communications, in addition to the skill stretch acquired from the higher-performing range of students in the previous cohorts. Consequently, explicit instructions are needed to curtail the extent of mixed media to achieve the higher level of skill development identified in the first version.

# CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The lecturer developed the PCV to give graduate students an idea of real- life applications and to highlight the importance of a confident oral relay of applied research in a professional scenario. In addition to first and second marker assessments, the students’ post submission reﬂections of experi- ences of the PCV assessment provide insight into the potential of a summa- tive vlog assessment design. The results should help teachers who wish to

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integrate technology into an evaluation or use the vlog as a robust, authen- tic summative assessment format for online modules. The PCV assessment design oﬀers a way to focus learners on developing robust, verbalized argu- ments as solutions for real-world issues. A third version is currently in design to encourage the use of alternative digital media from what appears to be a default to PowerPoint for the majority of students. The lecturer plans to pro- vide more content instruction on storytelling, infographic production and using oracy frameworks ahead of the assignment deadline. While the vlog has gained popularity for eliciting and assessing reﬂective practice (Körkkö, Morales Rios, & Kyrö-Ämmälä, 2019), it is rarely used as an authentic, end- of-module assessment device. Standardized university assessment criteria to inform vlog marking is also scant. The lecturer adapted standard university assessment criteria, but further work on a bespoke vlog assessment rubric is required to capture the increased oracy focus and all the nuances of script planning, vlog production and presenter performance.

The breadth of educational institutions and businesses have worked fre- netically to migrate business or teaching practices online to continue oper- ations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet it is invaluable to reﬂect upon how well prepared learners and employers had been to engage profession- ally on screen. The PCV, seeded in educational research and practice before the crisis, targeted authentic voice and contextualized persuasive argumen- tation as essential skill stretches for part-time online MBA students. To this end, a bespoke vlog design is a credible technology-enhanced assessment device that assists in the ability to communicate genuinely in front of a cam- era in a professional context.

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