

HOW TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN ONLINE TEACHING MATERIAL? THE MAKING OF AN E-LEARNING PROGRAMME FOR UNIVERSITY RESIDENT ASSISTANTS

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Abstract

This paper introduces a pilot online training programme that utilises both dramatised and traditional videos to engage university resident assistants (RAs) in the training. It explains the principles adopted to motivate the RAs to access the online material. The present study invited ten RAs of different backgrounds and experience at a university in Macao to attend an online training for two weeks. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The authors, one of whom was the programme developer, share their insights about the project and give recommendations for further research and practice.

Keywords: Online Learning, E-learning, Engagement, Dramatised Video, University Resident Assistants.

1 INTRODUCTION

Online learning has been a popular topic in recent decades. With the outbreak of novel coronavirus all over the world, many kindergartens, schools and colleges are rushing to switch their traditional classrooms online to minimise face-to-face contacts and the possibility of virus transmission. However, there are many challenges to conduct class online, for example, students having low motivation to access the online material, students being less attentive, and teachers needing prior related training and support [1]. The training of university resident assistants, hereafter RAs, also faces the same problems. RAs are the first contact persons of student residents in university residence, and responsible for offering pastoral care to residents. Thus, they should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to talk with their resident students emphatically, and to identify and intervene with students with mental health issues. In current literature, most of the RA trainings are conducted face-to-face, except one conducted online [2]. The online training, which was conducted in the United States, adopted a dramatised video to engage learners. Though participants reported the online training was interesting and engaging, only 50% of them completed the online training. The training was also reported not effective to improve trainees' knowledge on how to deal with students facing mental health issues. The current study aims to replicate the positive findings in the eastern context and to work on the deficiency of learner engagement and training impact.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study design

Mixed-methods was adopted in the present study. Ten RAs of different experiences (five were new, and five were returning RAs) were invited to take part in the study. The participants were requested to attend an online training which consisted of 37-minute video clips and some interactive short quizzes. They were allowed to attend the training in their dorms or their preferred places and using devices, such as desktop, laptop or smartphone, within two weeks. The online training was hosted on Moodle (version 3.4), which was the official online learning management system of the institute under study. Data collected include two focus group interviews, and the data stored in the online learning system.

2.2 The online training programme

The training consisted of two units: dramatised video and traditional video, details of which are presented as below:

2.2.1 Dramatised video

This unit aims to draw the interest of participants in the training content, and to deliver the knowledge and skills to identify students with mental health issues and on how to make a referral. The dramatised video consisted of ten video clips, each lasting for one to two minutes. Short duration of video clips is helpful to maintain audience attention [3]. The story board of this unit was adapted from Thombs et al. [2], which demonstrates how an exemplary RA intervenes a resident with mental health issues (see Fig. 1 for a screencap of the dramatised video).



Figure 1. Screencap of a dramatised video.

Rather than one-way information transfer, concept check questions are arranged at the end of each video clip (see Fig. 2). Learners are required to make decisions about how to respond to each particular situation until the right response has been chosen.



選擇最合適回應:

回應1. 你看來沒有事，不過下次不要飲這麼多酒啦，再見。

回應2. 既然你不用我幫忙，那麼你要照顧自己啦，拜拜。

回應3. 我只是想幫你，但不要緊，你要確定自己沒有事，我先走。

回應4. 冇問題，你要確定自己沒有事。我考完試立即回來。

Figure 2. Interactive quiz (Chinese version).

Feedback is provided to each response in order to let them know the consequences of different responses, which could build learners' foundation progressively and equip them for the subsequent higher level learning activity (See Fig. 3) [4].



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Figure 3. Instant feedback (Chinese version).

The original dramatised video was conducted in English which might be difficult for participants of the present study who are native Putonghua or Cantonese speakers. Thus, different language versions of the video were provided to improve the accessibility. The language choice is expected to improve the perceived ease of use of the video, which is suggested to be helpful to engage learners in a new learning technology [5].

2.2.2 Traditional video

The traditional video unit covered the knowledge and skills to listen actively and make response emphatically. It was a seven-minute online video with no interactive contents or concept check questions in the middle of the video. Yet, different language choices were provided. Fig. 4 shows a screencap for the traditional video.



Figure 4. Screencap of the traditional video.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Qualitative result: focus group interviews

Interviewees unanimously agreed that they enjoyed learning through the dramatised video because they regarded it humorous, interactive and helpful in illuminating the content. For example, some interviewees expressed that they were attracted to watch both appropriate and inappropriate answers (responses), which help them better understand the content. Most interviewees commented that the video was entertaining to watch because it was casted by real RAs whom they knew personally. They expected that the scenario of the video might happen in real life thus the video helps them to prepare how to respond in advance. Comparing to the dramatised video unit, most (eight interviewees) commented the traditional video unit less interesting and they spent less effort on watching it. Students also reported they have no problem to access the online material on Moodle because they were used to retrieving learning materials of other courses on Moodle. Their most preferred place and device to attend the online training are respectively their dorm (ten interviewees), and desktop or laptop computer (six interviewees) and smart phone (four interviewees). Although they reported that the online training was engaging, all (five) returning and most (three) new interviewees suggested that follow-up talking practice with resident students or reflective exercise would be needed so that they could strengthen their crisis communication knowledge, skills and confidence.

3.2 Quantitative result: time spent on viewing course materials

Table 1 shows the average time spent on the two types of online videos by the participants. In general, participants spent more effort on the dramatised video (averaging 22.4 minutes of out 30 minutes or 74.6% completion rate) than the traditional video (averaging 3.15 minutes out of 7 minutes or 45% completion rate). Compared to a similar study [1], the dramatised video of the present study had a higher completion rate (74.6% vs 50%). The new RAs spent more effort on the dramatised video (averaging 24.2 minutes or 80.6% completion) and traditional video (averaging 3.5 minutes or 50% completion rate), respectively, than the returning RAs (averaging 20.5 minutes or 68.3% completion of the dramatised video, and averaging 2.8 minutes or 40% completion of the traditional video). The quantitative result echoes the qualitative result that the dramatised video is more engaging than the traditional video.

Table 1. Average time spent on the online course material.

	<i>Dramatised video (of 30 minutes)</i>	<i>Traditional video (of 7 minutes)</i>
New RAs	24.2 (80.6%)	3.5 (50%)
Returning RAs	20.5 (68.3%)	2.8 (40%)
Total	22.4 (74.6%)	3.15 (45%)

4 INSIGHTS

The training material was hosted on the Moodle platform of the institute being studied. It is not difficult to set up and no pre-requisite of programming knowledge is needed. To achieve an ideal result, instructors who wish to produce dramatised videos may need to seek support and resources on the planning and production activities, such as storyboard writing, casts identification, video shooting, video editing, voice-over, and how to set up interactive activities in Moodle.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Dramatised video is effective in engaging students in online material in the context of a Macao university, as it is amusing to watch, student-centred, useful for their practice, flexible and easy to use, and it develops their knowledge progressively with timely feedback. Follow-up talking practice and reflective exercise are suggested to further build up trainees' crisis communication knowledge, skills and confidence. Practitioners who wish to engage their students online could make reference to the principles and insights from the present study. The present study has evaluated how dramatised video engages students in online learning material. The improved engagement may enhance the impact of other delivery modes, such as flipped classroom. Due to the small scale of the study, further studies with more participants will be needed and provide wider insights.

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