

Escaping the Talking Head: Experiences with three different styles of MOOC video

Jonas Langset Hustad, Andreas Schille and Eirik Wattengård

NTNU, Trondheim, Norway
jonas.l.hustad@ntnu.no

Abstract. The Talking Head dominates the MOOC video landscape. In this paper we discuss whether copying the lecture format truly is the best way to learn through video. We list some of video's learning affordances that are underutilized in traditional lecture videos, divided into "access", "visual demonstration" and "narrative". We then share three examples of our own video production at NTNU where we used different video styles to try to utilize these affordances. The styles used were on-location feature, fictional case-study and narrative animation, and we discuss our choices and experiences with each. We then conclude with some recommendations for educators who want richer video content in their MOOCs.

Keywords: MOOC, E-Learning, Video Production, Educational Video

1 Introduction

Video. The medium that can take you to the centre of the Sun, let you experience life through someone else's eyes, or make you fall in love. It can also simulate the experience of sitting in the back row of an auditorium while a lecturer stumbles around in PowerPoint. Thirteen years into the evolution of MOOCs, are we using video to its full potential?

A norm for MOOC video seems to have been established. In 2015, a sample of 449 MOOCs on the biggest platforms found that 87% consisted of a person talking to the camera, the infamous Talking Head, while 38% used presentation slides [1]. Copying the lecture format has been a strategy for MOOCs since its early iterations. This way, traditional course material can be easily transferred to an online format, the videos are relatively cheap to produce, and the lecturers already know how to lecture. But is it the best way to learn with video?

2 Affordances of video

One way to investigate this is by looking at video's affordances in contrast to an in-person lecture's affordances. Affordances in a learning context can be defined as «*the properties or functions of technology that extend our learning and perceptual capabilities*» (p 208) [2]. What can the video format do that the lecturer in an auditorium cannot, and how can it help us learn? The affordances of video in learning have been described in different ways, such as [3], [4] and [5]. In this paper we will

draw on these sources to present three affordances of video that the lecture format lacks.

Access. Video can take you places you cannot send a university class, whether it is a foreign cultural site or a one-of-a-kind laboratory. Video can reveal things the eye cannot see on its own, like close-ups of leaf structure or the exact way glass shatters in slow motion [5]. Video can also supply a variety of voices to the student [3], from experts in an engineering course to everyday native speakers in a language course. By giving students access to the world outside the auditorium, we can give them richer learning experiences.

Audiovisual demonstration. Video can illustrate things that would be hard to explain fully through other media, often involving motion and behaviour [5], like an expert demonstrating how to sauté an onion in a cooking course or footage of a zebra's mating behaviour in a biology course. When such behaviours are transferred to text, something is lost in the adaptation (pp 16-18) [6]. Video can also help students understand what they should be looking for in visual demonstrations, for example by using voice-over, graphics, or close-ups [4].

Narrative. Video is an excellent tool for storytelling, and storytelling is an excellent tool for learning [7]. Many forms of knowledge can be shaped into a narrative, which brings with it affordances of its own. There are many strategies for this, like creating a parable explaining a concept, or introducing a protagonist who needs to solve a problem by using relevant knowledge. Storytelling in learning can increase student engagement [4], affect students' attitudes [5], and help them make the leap from abstract knowledge to concrete solutions [7].

3 Our Production at NTNU

In our project NTNU Drive, we help educators create MOOCs, flip classrooms, and find new uses for learning technologies. This also gives us an arena to test different MOOC video styles. Our model is to employ video professionals and include them in the course creation process from the beginning. They form a small team together with experts on the relevant subject and pedagogy, so that together they can figure out exciting ways to use video for communicating the course material. No standard format is imposed, leaving room for experimentation. This way, we try to create videos that utilize affordances of the medium that are underused in the traditional Talking Head format. Some of our courses are already available online, while others are in pilot or development.

Here are three of our recent attempts to escape the Talking Head.

3.1 On Location Feature: The Stave Churches of Norway



Figure 1: Screenshot from «Conservation of Norwegian Stave Churches»

For this MOOC on wood conservation, we sent one of our videographers on an expedition with a team of stave church experts. The experts function as on-site reporters, showing and explaining the details of these unique constructions. The videos are made much like a segment in a TV program, using varied photography, music, and editing to immerse the viewer in the story. Unlike a TV segment however, the videos end with presenting a problem students can discuss in the forums. Here they use what they have learned about wood conservation to decide how to best take care of the building they have just seen. In a MOOC context, the videos thus become prompts for social learning.



Figure 2: Screenshot from «Conservation of Norwegian Stave Churches»

An important goal for the videos is to inspire student engagement. We try to do this by giving the student simulated access to an exciting and relevant location, showing the value of conservation knowledge through practical application and creating a journey narrative for the course. In wood conservation, every object needs a unique approach, which is why it was important to introduce specific objects and their surroundings for the assignments. We also wanted to let the location give some extra authority to the experts, by demonstrating their first-hand experience with stave churches throughout the course.

3.2 Fictional Case Study: Mentoring in Physiotherapy



Figure 3: Screenshot from “Praksisveiledning i fysioterapi”

This MOOC was designed for physiotherapists who want to mentor students. In its three video case studies, we follow a patient, a physiotherapist and her mentor as they experience challenging situations that are typical for the profession. Every video begins with a short patient history in text accompanied by voice-over and ends with questions for reflection. The situations are shot using classical film techniques, with varied photography, continuity editing, and wireless mics for good dialogue sound. This was made possible by having a team of three film workers behind the camera, functioning as director, photographer and sound recordist. The actors were a real patient, a real student and a real mentor, all amateur actors, but with real-life experience in their roles.



Figure 4: Screenshot from “Praksisveiledning i fysioterapi”

Our goal with these videos is to use a narrative to trigger reflection for the students, as well as train their eye for important details in real-life work situations through audiovisual demonstration. Exactly what is to be done in the different case studies is not obvious, which mirrors the actual mentoring process. Hints are given through the use of film language, such as close-ups of important details, just like in a crime film. The replayability of online videos make it possible for students who missed something to go back and check again.

3.3 Narrative Animation: Habilitation Course Module Intros

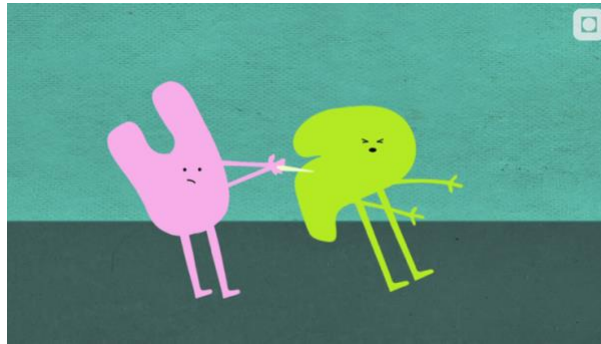


Figure 5: Screenshot from «Kunnskapsbasert habilitering»

For this MOOC on assisting people with disabilities (“habilitation”), we chose to start off every module with a short animation. We wrote a voice-over explaining the basic concepts of the module, and created a visual parable to match the voice-over. An abstract style with characters in different shapes were chosen to portray the way people with disabilities sometimes need adaptations in order to participate in society. For example, a round character in the intro for Module 1 has trouble fitting through a door built for squares. Two workers from our video team taught themselves to animate characters using Adobe After Effects, which made it possible to do the entire production in-house. Sound effects and music add life to the films, while still staying in the background so the voice-over becomes the central audio element.

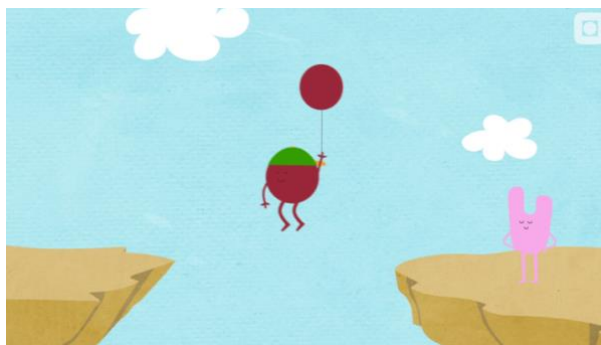


Figure 6: Screenshot from «Kunnskapsbasert habilitering»

Our goal is to give a basic overview of the module content, but also to infuse this information with energy and emotion through the use of narrative. We want the content not just to be comprehensible, but to feel important. This way, we hope to give students a little boost of motivation at the beginning of each module as well as increase their empathy with disabled people.

4 Conclusion

We examined three learning affordances of video that the lecture format does not utilize. Then we shared our experiences with three different styles of MOOC video that attempt to utilize these affordances. Our experience with each of these videos is that they would not have been possible without early input from video professionals. Educators know their subject best, but they cannot be expected to know the best way to translate it to the film medium, a task that requires film experience.

The production styles used here are more time-consuming and expensive than standardized lecture format production. Animation takes time, fiction shoots require more personnel, and on-location features are subject to uncontrollable factors like the weather. However, we believe it is better to have one hour of varied, high-quality video spread throughout the course than to have ten hours of monotone, mediocre video taking up a large part of it. That is why we try to identify the parts of the course that are better suited for text, images and assignments, and leave video for the parts that let us utilize the affordances of the medium. This approach is also recommended in other research on MOOC video production [3][5]. The courses are still in pilot, so we are looking forward to seeing how students respond to the material.

Online learning video is still a young format full of possibilities. By pairing video professionals with academics, we hope to find new ways of utilizing video's unique affordances. Who will join us in escaping the Talking Head?

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