

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Multimodal Academic Writing in HE: Students' perspectives on creating screencasts as an assessment task.

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Research Domain: The Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: This presentation reports on early findings from a research project which is investigating undergraduate students' technical, creative and communicative experiences of academic writing in a digital format through screencasts. The research is being conducted using a novel method, ethnographically-contextualised Multimodal Discourse Analysis, in order to give a rich, multi-layered description of the student experience in a relatively new terrain for academic writing in the discipline of Education Studies. The study investigates students' experiences from multiple perspectives using videoed interaction, observation and focus group interviews. Early findings focus around three emerging key themes; students' concerns with technological competency; students' perspectives on design and presentation; and student understandings of the screencast in terms of its function as an assessment tool influenced or controlled institutionally, by the module tutors and the university as a whole. Insights into the creative, collaborative process of multimodal writing will also be presented.

Paper: [Introduction](#)

This paper reports on emerging findings from research conducted with third year Education Studies undergraduates investigating their technical, creative and communicative experience of creating a screencast as an assessment artefact. Screencasts are animated films combining text, visual images and sound with an authorial presenter soundtrack. The use of digitally-produced texts for assessment purposes may be present in some media, arts and computing undergraduate degrees (Laingen, 2013) but their potential for use across wider disciplines is relatively untapped. The writing of digital texts has been examined in relation to early years' learners (Marsh 2016, Daniels, 2017) and Primary and Secondary age learners (Bearne, 2003; Buckingham, 2008, Rowsell and Walsh, 2011) but there is comparatively little research into multimodal writing in higher education (H.E.) contexts. Goodfellow's review (2011) examined what it means to conjoin the terms 'literacy' and 'digital' in H.E. and Spante et al (2018) reviewed the conceptual uses of the terms 'digital competence' and 'digital literacy' seeking to refine our understanding of terms used liberally in H.E. policy and strategy

documentation. It remains, however, that the *experience* of writing multimodal texts for assessment purposes and the *process* of producing of academic digital texts have not been examined closely.

Methodological Approach

The purpose of the qualitative research design of this study is to examine the complexities and nuances of this experience at multiple levels through an interpretive and ethnographically-contextualised multimodal discourse analysis approach (ec-MDA, Author, 2016). In order to uncover the ways in which meaning is made through multiple modes, a framework for analysis of video-recorded interaction is used. This involves microanalysis of interaction through a multimodal transcription grid, which includes gaze, gesture, posture and spoken language. This is understood alongside contextualising data, generated through observation and focus group interviews in conjunction with an insider perspective to the student experience through the researcher who had studied this module 2 years previously.

The overarching Research Questions are:

1. What do learners take account of in terms of academic content, design, imagery, text and sound in the construction of their screencast?
2. What are learners' perspectives on their technical and creative experiences in the construction of their screencast?
3. How are multiple semiotic resources employed in the collaborative construction of a screencast?

The context for this research is a third year undergraduate module on an Education Studies degree course focussing on the topic of education in the digital age. Eleven final-year undergraduate students agreed to be observed and audio-visually recorded in IT workshop sessions as they prepared their screencasts and accompanying presentations for submission. The study underwent ethical review at Sheffield Hallam University and informed consent and pseudonimisation procedures were followed in line with BERA guidelines.

Early Findings

Q1. The students discussed what they take account of in terms of academic content, design, imagery, text and sound their experience in crafting their digital texts. Three broad themes emerged from the focus group data following coding: a creative theme, a technical theme, and an institutional theme. Early analysis of both focus group, and video and observation, data point to a nexus of understandings about the assessment purpose of the screencast which seems to be driving decisions about what it is possible or desirable to include. This resonates with understandings of tensions in text construction from an academic literacies perspective between meanings brought to university learning from own experience and those laid down in sedimented (Pahl and Rowsell, 2012) academic literacy practices.

Institutional

Creative

Technical

Screencast as a new technology to learn and apply in a set time.

Screencast as an assessment tool where particular content/understanding should be showcased.

Screencast as a creative endeavour with aesthetic merit and individual style.

Fig 1: Student understandings of the purpose of the screencast

2. Insights into learners' perspectives on their technical and creative experiences in the construction of their screencast are largely gained from interview data and here I share views on technical experience. Extracts from the initial focus group conducted at the beginning of the module demonstrate the anxiety and self-doubt largely from unfamiliarity:

"I'm feeling anxious about it just because I've never used anything like this before and I don't know how it's going to work out. I don't know if my voiceover's going to match up with what's – I don't know quite how to get that to work yet. I've not tried it so – yeah." – Student B., Group 1

However, towards the end of the series of workshops a more confident, positive tone is noted:

"...both of us had dabbled in screencast stuff before, we'd given it a go but we hadn't used PowToon or anything like that... it's really interesting and I think it's a lot more interactive than your standard powerpoint so I think it's a useful skill to use in the future as well." – Student C, Group 2

3. The observation and video data are most useful in understanding how multiple semiotic resources are employed in the collaborative construction of a screencast, but inevitably they also provide insights into overlapping creative and technical experience. Talk in this study is understood to be a multimodal endeavour following Kress' (2010) principle that all communication is always multimodal. One example of the multimodality of face to face interaction occurs during paired interaction at a computer during IT workshop 2 while the student C has finished telling her partner to scroll back up, her pointing to the screen is still conveying the same instruction, and her gesturing to a specific point on the screen precedes her saying 'there', demonstrating that gesture is the more dominant mode in the exchange at this specific point.

Conclusion

The significance of this study lies in its purpose, which is to provide a rich description of students

engaging in the construction of digital academic text for assessment purposes and the illuminate the technical, creative and communicative student experience. It is about disseminating the experiences of one group of students tackling challenging and unfamiliar digital terrain and showcasing the multimodal academic work involved.

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