



Not another PDF, please: using ThingLink scenarios and Camtasia to build engaging virtual learning objects

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Presentation abstract

In this resource showcase, I presented ‘Refine your writing: better proofreading,’ a multimedia digital learning sequence I created as a Writing Skills Officer in the Academic Skills Service of the University of Southampton. This learning object sprang from my (and colleagues’) dissatisfaction with existing resources about proofreading: these largely elevate the ‘what’ over the ‘how,’ comprising little more than checklists of potential errors to look out for. I set out to create a resource that went beyond cataloguing to instead equip students with active strategies to interact with and enhance their texts.

In developing this resource, I followed best practices conveyed via the Learning Object Review Instrument (LORI), as well as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (Leacock and Nesbit, 2007; CAST, 2018). My presentation outlined how the ThingLink ‘Scenarios’ feature can be used to build inclusive virtual objects through which learners advance at their own pace. Incorporating original videos edited in Camtasia, the result was a resource that was not only accessible, but more likely than a text-based webpage or narrated PowerPoint webinar to sustain learners’ interest. Indeed, I argued that aesthetics and delivery energy must be prioritised in the creation of digital objects whose use is suggested to, but not required of, university learners (i.e. resources maintained by academic skills services, writing centres, and so on).

Although the primary focus was on inclusive virtual objects, my presentation was of interest to conference attendees looking to expand their knowledge of the IT skills, software, and platforms underpinning their resource designs. To support this, I shared my ‘lessons learned’ after diving into ThingLink and Camtasia with this project.

Keywords: multimedia digital learning; educational videos; IT learning skills; learning technologies; inclusive learning design; asynchronous learning.

Community response

Proofreading skills are necessary for a wide range of activities, but with built-in Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, from spellcheckers to Microsoft tools such as Copilot, becoming more commonplace, there are concerns that students become more reliant on such tools to identify grammatical and spelling errors in their work, making it increasingly difficult to engage them in proofreading skills sessions. There is clearly a need to provide training that is engaging and effective, moving away from the 'checklist of errors' approach criticised in the presentation. Attendees were very interested in the technologies discussed, and this led to some questions about the practicalities of adopting such approaches in smaller institutions with more limited resources:

I would like to create something similarly creative and engaging for my own students but work in much smaller institutions (or as a consultant on my own). My access to resources such as time, internal platforms for distribution and money for software is much more limited (Jo Dowds, Spurgeon's College).

Next steps and additional questions

The presentation encouraged the development and creation of multimodal resources to support the training of proofreading skills. Such resource production would clearly have further applications in the teaching of other subjects sometimes reduced to 'checklist' approaches, making them much more immersive and engaging. The provision of video content to students also improves the inclusivity of such resources.

- What would be the most important elements to focus on if someone wanted to provide a similar experience to students without the access to resources that you have had?
- Would mini videos produced on Canvas be a good starting point, perhaps although without such an interactive element?
- Are there similar digital packages available on a smaller scale?

- Is there an emerging best practice in proofreading training that engages active learning?

Author's reflection

It is heartening to hear back from LD practitioners who share my interest in producing asynchronous resources to support writing development, whether proofreading, critical argumentation, or something else entirely!

How to approach such projects when your resources are limited is a crucial question, but my first piece of advice is to take time and care in exploring what resources could be lurking in your institution's wings, unbeknownst to you. Your university's IT team(s), digital learning team, and staff working in media/communications, for example, might be aware of software licences, equipment loaning schemes, and other resources that simply haven't been publicised well. If you can hop onto an existing subscription/licence without your team's cost code needing to foot the bill, excellent! If your university has programmes in film, digital design, etc., networking with faculty in those areas could be another great option.

I mentioned this in the talk, but taking advantage of free 7- or 14-day trials is a must. Get some inspiration and ideas lined up, and then play around to see what platforms offer you 'jack of all trades' value. For example, Canva isn't the 'best' video editor in my opinion, but it has decent editing functions: combine that with its fantastic (and simple) graphics/animation facilities, and you might be looking at a single purchase that could enable a team to begin producing short videos that can be used across your VLE, on YouTube, etc. But as with all things IT, much of this comes back to user preference: that's why vetting via trials is the way to go.

Finally, I want to highlight student co-creation as another promising route here. Many of our undergraduates are arriving on campus with video creation/editing skills that outpace our own, and even if it's a 'dry' topic like proofreading, a short- or medium-term, part-time appointment to support the creation of video content could be exactly the sort of opportunity many students are looking for: something where they can refine existing digital skills, gain experience for their CVs, and deploy some creativity in the process. I realise

this does still call for a budget – let's not ask students to work for free, ahem. However, given the focus across the HE landscape on helping students build their 'employability', a pitch to recruit some interns to work on an endeavour like this might be met with more enthusiasm than restricting the experience to existing staff members.

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