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Using video as a form of artistic communication: preparing for undergraduate assessment in Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

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Abstract

In a fast-evolving Higher Education (HE) landscape amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for a Lecturer in Education to be dynamic and innovative with assessment pedagogy is no longer a desired skill but mandatory. In response to the demand from students as consumers and other key stakeholders, our innovative and somewhat artistic license in the learning context. At the student-facing edge of HE, Lecturers react to the ever-changing landscape with dynamism to positively impact the student experience. These continued efforts to provide the best student experience, enables HE institutions to remain competitive with Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision as part of a cutthroat consumer driven marketplace. This article will present how video as a form of artistic communication supported year one ITE students to make sense of institutional assessment methods. Qualitatively, this research was focused on student perceptions gathered through a questionnaire. Student accounts expressed overwhelmingly that the use of video as a form of communication was easier to understand than written formats. The article concludes that to support a diverse student population at a distance and online, a choice of artistic assessment formats including video should be provided. The evidence herein shows that both student understanding and outcomes of assessment were statistically improved and that the format itself facilitated a willingness to engage online in a purposeful way with assessment. Students also repeatedly revisit assessment materials embedded in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Keywords: *Artistic communication; video; pedagogical innovation; assessment methods; COVID-19; online*

Introduction

This project began from a personal reflective perspective. As a Lecturer in Education, I was constantly reflecting on my own practice: to innovate learning and teaching and to enhance student satisfaction by supporting their preparedness for university assessment. This reflective stance stemmed from my interpretation of the Sector's desire to respond to the student voice and react to the National Student Survey (NSS) scores for assessment and feedback. The NSS (Ipsos MORI, 2018) is an online questionnaire aimed at final year undergraduates and asks twenty-seven questions across eight aspects of the student experience. It is a widely recognized authoritative survey, the results are made available through the Unistat website (2018) projecting the perceived quality of UK HE. This data is made public to support perspective students and interested stakeholders to make decisions on where to study. Institutions have a vested interest in the NSS data and its quality threshold and rely on this to support institutional marketing and recruitment. Data affects Lecturers' roles and the difference they can make to the student experience from the student-facing aspect of the HE sector, that in turn would impact the assessment and feedback data positively. The quality of HE teaching matters. As many academics in HE now experience scrutiny of their teaching, leading to quality statements based on performativity and outcomes as detailed in the metrics of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). This framework (GOV.UK, 2017) and subsequent institutional data published by the Office for Students (OfS, 2018) provides information to students as consumers of Higher Education, and is used to judge the quality of universities. This project and the use of artistic communication of assessment continues to provide choice for students once in-situ at their chosen institution. Students have expressed through this research a preference in the way they receive information about assessment. This research is timely in its exploration of ways to innovate assessment in HE, given that the COVID-19 Pandemic has forced HE

teaching and assessment online at pace (World Health Organisation: WHO, 2020). With HE staff increasingly exploring online and blended pedagogies (OECD, 2020), this article aims to highlight the specific need to provide alternative assessment formats that can be adapted and delivered online or in a blended pedagogy to benefit all students. This research indicates that it is possible for the sector to evaluate the direct or coincidental impact that assessment format has on student achievement, experience and satisfaction.

Aim of the research

The aim of this research was to determine whether a cohort of ITE first-year undergraduate students (n = 86) had a preferred format of assignment guidance. This was examined using the following three research questions (RQs).

RQ1. What are ITE students' preferred mode of assignment guidance?
RQ2. What reasons do they give for this communication preference?
RQ3. How does their preferred format support their preparation for assessment?

Scoping the relevant literature

Video as an artistic format from a philosophical perspective (Ghosh, 1987) can be described as a use of technology in a multi-modal format. There is research available in other disciplines such as nursing that supports visualization and auditory stimuli to enable students to engage in meaningful ways with assessment. Students in the disciplines associated with medicine are heavily assessed and so require the assessments to be in accessible formats that foster a depth to the learning and effective as an assessment process. Haverkamp and Vogt (2015) talked about the shift from teacher- to learner-centred environments. Students are often immersed in technology which is often taken for granted: they learn in visual spaces socially and use the technology to embed knowledge in an organized way (Barone, 2003). This enables students to visually engage with material presented, which helps them to construct meaning and experience a deeper learning. Video communication is personalized and specific to the task (Crook et al., 2012) and offers detailed explanations of instructions (Lamey, 2015).

The constructivist model builds on this idea of deep learning, with reflection at the core of HE assessment (Dalal, Hakel, Sliter & Kirkendall, 2012). This is an opportunity for students to showcase knowledge and skills and video can enable the Lecturer to use narrative in the audio commentary to show expression and interest to the viewing student. This multi-modal (verbal and pictorial) dialogue in video enables students to explore the meaning of the assessment guidance to support their understanding (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010; McArthur & Huxham, 2013). This builds independence, autonomous problem solving and an ability to gauge the quality of their work against the prescribed learning outcomes (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 1985). This can support the students to engage, who are often, whilst watching the video simultaneously, beginning to construct their ideas about the requirements of the assessment. Video as a format one would assert, enables the Lecturer to demonstrate connections between the theory taught on the ITE course and how to synthesize the assignment to enable a reflection on experiential learning. Those students awarded first-class marks are more often able to synthesize more effectively the theory into practice. During assessed work, they critically analyze literature within the scope of the assignment title and learning outcomes. According to Few (2013), the strength of artistic forms is the brain's ability to process visual information and retain it more rapidly than written or verbal communication. As stated by Smiciklas (2012), this format of information can be transformed more readily into easily understood contextual knowledge.

Australian academics Dawson, Bearman, Boud, Hall, Molloy, Bennett and Joughin (2013) acknowledged that a good range of technologies have been designed to support HE assessment but these are poorly adopted and inconsistently used. Accessible assessment is key to student engagement and has a critical role to play in learning a concept that students have to master to graduate as teachers. Dawson et al. (2013) postulated that staff need to support and innovate learning, teaching and assessment but that there are often tensions between elevating efficiency and introducing innovations that bring added risks. These risks when innovating *as we go* and reacting to the changing landscape may impact negatively on the student experience. Carless (2009) thinks that this may lead to a conservative application of new technologies because of the perceived risks. This aligns with the view of Selwyn (2010) whose research showed that academics argue for further research into the 'state of the actual' (p. 70) concerning the truth of what is *actually* happening when technology is integrated into education settings.

The work of Dawson et al. (2013) concluded that introducing video as a form of assessment actually introduced economic benefits in terms of the video *fitting the brief* and being more efficient particularly for supporting the

development of practical competencies and the immediacy of communication with students. This immediacy also supports workload – in my experience those students not present in face-to-face sessions purposely for assessment guidance, reflected they did not have any guidance. Misunderstanding the text-document in handbooks led to a triage of students waiting to get further guidance, which is time-consuming for the Lecturers. The OECD (2020) recently created annotated resources to support online teaching, grounded by an empirical literature review to produce a taxonomic view of teaching and professional development resources. Pellegrino et al. (2012) who visualised competences needed for work and life produced by the National Research Council (National Academies Press) in the United States supports the types of skills that might be developed in online platforms. Video offers a simple solution, immediate access to assignment guidance and materials twenty-four hours a day through the VLE, which is not possible for one Lecturer to accommodate with large cohorts of students.

The literature reviewed above highlights the need for technological advances in assessment and online formats to be planned for, and applied consistently, for the best student experience. This enabled students to demonstrate their competences like cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Self-efficacy and regulation are important at a distance when learning in online or blended environments. Video is a popular media with students who choose to be immersed in social learning networks on virtual platforms as highly functioning digital natives. They learn constructively in these environments in deep and meaningful ways – ways that get them ready for challenging professions such as medicine and teacher education.

The methodology

Ethical assessment was rigorous and clearance was sought from the Faculty of Arts, Cultures and Education (previously Faculty of Education and Social Sciences) and was granted in October 2017. The researcher considered the recruitment and convenience sampling of the student population. Informal verbal and then explicit written consent was sought and participant information shared before the research began. Anonymity was maintained through numerical coding of participant data and consideration of how data would be stored securely on institutional network drives was delivered with encryption of files. Participants were kept informed at each stage of the research and had the right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

During the Baseline cohort year (October 2016-July 2017), seventy-five students (n = 75) were provided with the standard university test only (1), placed in the university module handbook. This cohort would provide a comparison of the perceived benefits the research cohort cite for being provided with more than one format. The baseline cohort were not disadvantaged in any way, because historically, students had been presented with one form of assessment guidance (text only format) supplemented by verbal instructions from the Lecturer in face-to-face taught sessions. The limitations of using a Baseline Cohort is that they are completely different people to the research cohort so other factors may have been contributing to the perceived benefits the research cohort experienced. This has been acknowledged in the discussion where applicable.

During the research year (October 2017–July 2018), eighty-six students (n = 86) were presented with four formats, three of which were new applications (2–4). The students could choose which formats to use. They are summarized below:

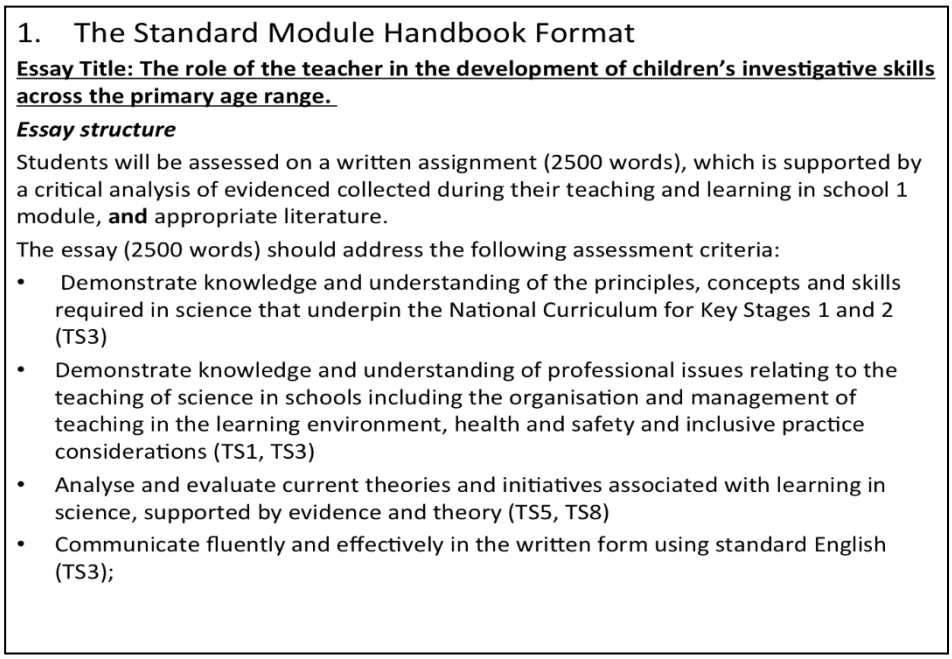
- The standard university text only format in module handbooks
- A video
- A flow diagram
- A word tree

The reason a choice was given during 2017–18 was because of student feedback; they reflected that just a word document for assignment guidance was not sufficient. Therefore, as part of our module review, we provided a choice of formats in the 2017–18 academic year. The research enabled us to evaluate the effectiveness of both format of guidance and choice, the former seemed to be most important to the students. The four formats were presented face-to-face on two separate occasions during lectures and then were stored on the VLE for students' immediate and continuous access. Questionnaires were used to gather qualitative data (the student perceptions). I was interested as their Lecturer in the student perceptions of these formats, those perceptions were treated as valid data from a 'humanistic perspective' (Newby, 2014, p. 39). Statistical or quantitative data was also gathered directly from the VLE to tell me how the students interacted with the materials provided at the electronic interface online. Although I used a mixed method approach, which enabled me to triangulate the data and compare the format choice and interaction with the modes of assignment guidance, I was primarily interested in the qualitative data. The richness of students' thoughts, feelings and perceptions of assignment

guidance formats and why they felt they were useful to prepare for assessment. I was mindful as a researcher that students might have valued a range of formats for different purposes to suit the needs of a diverse student population. One format may have been dominant in preference over the others and it was students' specific reasons for these preferences I was particularly interested to find out more about.

The assessment formats in more detail

Below are the visual figures to support the readers to envisage the four formats that students were provided with as part of this study. The first format was a text document shown below.



1. The Standard Module Handbook Format

Essay Title: The role of the teacher in the development of children's investigative skills across the primary age range.

Essay structure

Students will be assessed on a written assignment (2500 words), which is supported by a critical analysis of evidenced collected during their teaching and learning in school 1 module, **and** appropriate literature.

The essay (2500 words) should address the following assessment criteria:

- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the principles, concepts and skills required in science that underpin the National Curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2 (TS3)
- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of professional issues relating to the teaching of science in schools including the organisation and management of teaching in the learning environment, health and safety and inclusive practice considerations (TS1, TS3)
- Analyse and evaluate current theories and initiatives associated with learning in science, supported by evidence and theory (TS5, TS8)
- Communicate fluently and effectively in the written form using standard English (TS3);

Fig 1. The standard university text format

This standard format was embedded in the module handbooks provided by the institution, and was made available to students via the VLE. The abbreviations in brackets (e.g., TS3) are reference to the Teachers' Standards (2012) available from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665520/Teachers__Standards.pdf , which are badged to the learning outcomes for each of the student assessments to demonstrate to the English government that teachers are meeting the required professional standard.

The second format, the video, was recorded by Dockerty (2017) and is an original contribution to the University. It was recorded using an integrated laptop camera. It was fairly low-tech but was valued by the students for being 'real' and accessible to all the students via the VLE. The video shared images, audio, instructions and links to secondary materials to support making the assessment guidance accessible and the outcomes of the assessment clear. The importance of this format was its accessibility to and for all types of learners. It was 'artistic' because the person recording had license to say and perform as they felt fitting on the video. Artistic also from the viewers perspective as they could interpret the multi-modal format in the way that suited their individual needs. The collage of screen shots from the video below (Image collage 1) show that the video was able to connect with the learners for the following reasons. 1. They could see the Lecturer, which maintains the learning community and makes the students feel that they have a connection with the Lecturer that is important when learning online or at a distance. 2. The sense of community is very important to learning. The community aspects of supporting online learning are mandated by theories such as in *Communities of Practice* (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2000) and *e-moderating* when working online (Salmon, 2011).

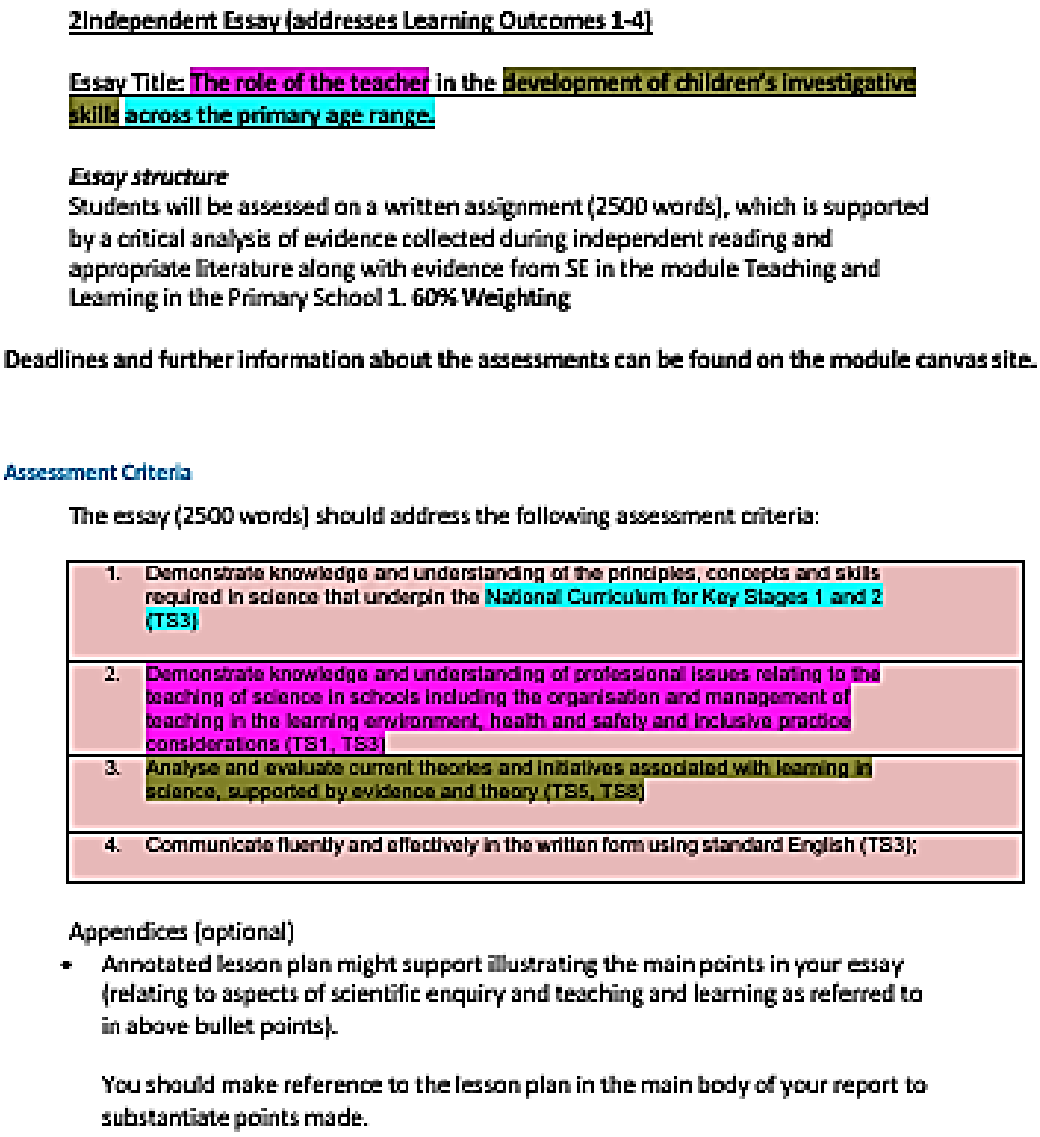


Image collage 1. Screen shots from the video of assignment guidance by Dockerty (2017)

Colour coding parts of the title and assessment criteria combined with an audio explanation supported the students to make connections with the title and expectations in the 2500 words essay. For example, highlighted in pink (in the right hand picture), the students were expected to explain 'how children's investigative skills progressed across the primary age range,' and in the first assessment criteria (in the left picture), it stated 'the National curriculum for Key stage 1 and Key stage 2,' which is the entire progression of the curriculum in primary schools in England.

The flow chart provided below was a scaffold for students to follow when writing their assignment. The purple column highlighted the evidence students can have in their assignment to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. The blue central column provided a paragraph-by-paragraph breakdown with approximate word counts to help the students to structure their assignments (it is important to note this is the first assignment the students complete in the first year of their degree, so they do require a little more support at this stage with their academic writing).

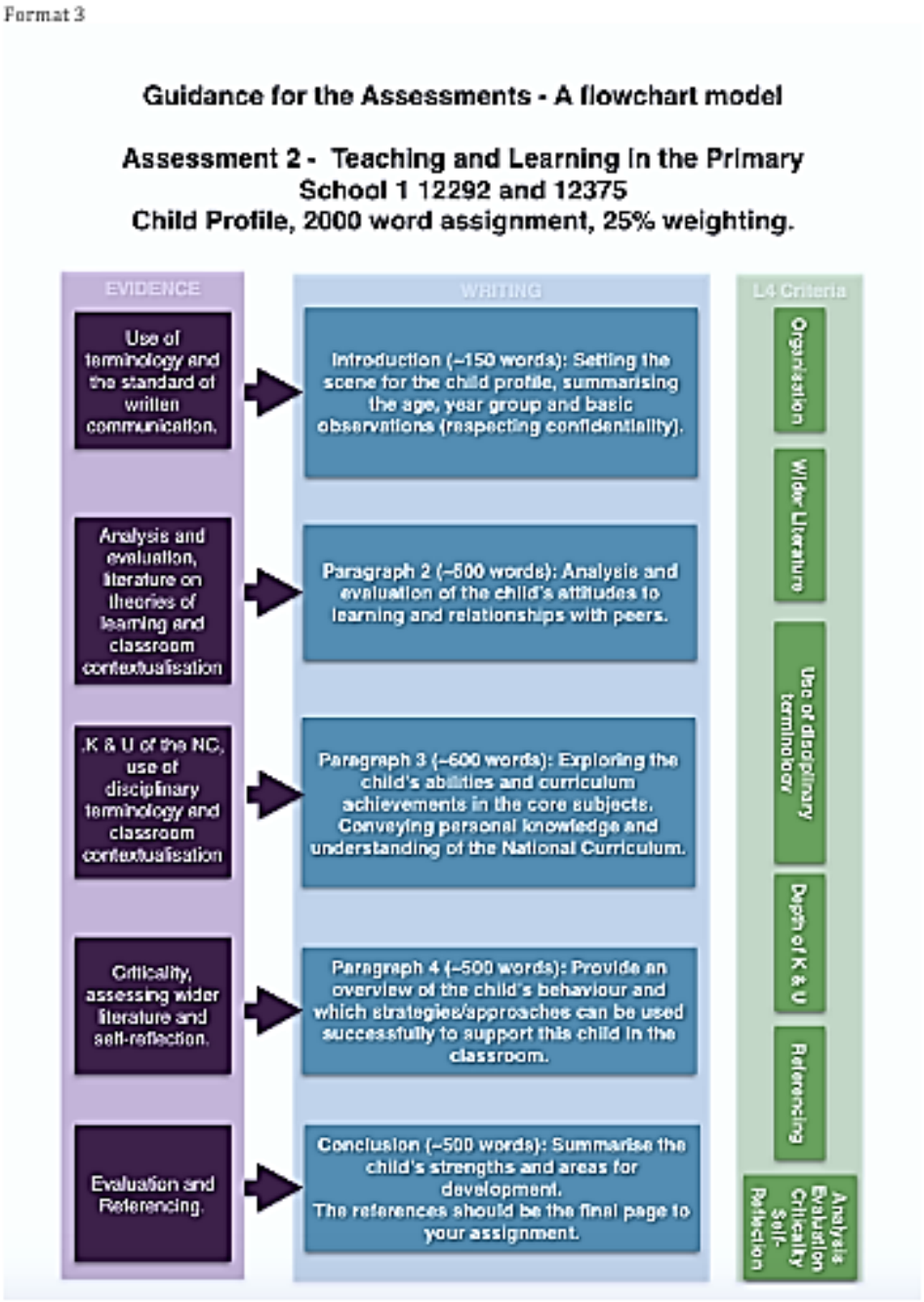


Fig 2. The flow chart – adapted from the frame provided courtesy of P. Hopkins, personal communication, August 26, 2017

The fourth format was the word cloud adapted using a 'Free online Wordcloud generator' (Zygomatic, 2017) that presented the words from the learning outcomes in a word cloud arrangement. The words are relative in size representing the words frequency of occurrence, for example, the larger the font in the word cloud, the more frequently that word appeared in the learning outcomes for the assignment.

Fig 3. The Word Cloud

Results and discussion

RQ1. What are ITE students' preferred mode of assignment guidance?

The consensus of the questionnaires analysed showed that students preferred assignment guidance in a video format. The number of times people visited the video compared to the other formats (x4.68 times more frequently visited). Students expressed their perceptions for preference as a series of reasons why they felt video as a mode of assessment guidance had supported their understanding and 'showcased knowledge' (Dalal, Hakel, Sliter, & Kirkendall, 2012), when comparing to text, word cloud or flowchart format.

RQ2. What reasons do they give for this communication preference?

Responses gathered from the questionnaires were grouped in two ways first, according to the mode of assessment guidance referred to, and secondly, according to the reason students specified that choice. The groups were identified inductively as the questionnaire data was analysed. Very small groups were merged with others based on one of the groups (the one with more responses) to ensure that very small data sets could be included in the analysis. The following stated reasons for preference of mode were typical:

'It [video] is more personal and less daunting'
'It [video] allows contextual interpretation and pinpoints the exact expectations of the task'
'Video can be paused to make notes, rewound to revisit information presented and revisited many times with immediate access'
'It [video] is like having a one-to-one engagement with the Lecturer, with insights into expectations for the assignment'
'Listening and watching video is easy'
'It [video] is easier to take in the information'
'I could relate to the video, opposed to just seeing the written instructions, the video is much easier to understand'

The latter three quotes here are reacting to the ease of accessing the visual and audio information and being able to process it easily (Few, 2013). The literature supported the view that this format of information can be transformed more readily into easily understood contextual knowledge (Smiciklas, 2012).

RQ3. How does their preferred format support their preparation for assessment?

The main reasons included the ease of access and personable nature of the video. It was available 24/7 and could be paused and revisited many times, and that it was like having a face-to-face tutorial with the Lecturer without having to leave the comfort of their place of residence or study. They felt the video added clarity to the purpose of the assessment, and that listening and watching the video was easier to understand than having to interpret a large amount of text. There seemed to be a relational aspect to a video that the other formats did not provide, and in the narrative of the questionnaires, the word 'real' or 'relatable' was used frequently in reference to the video. The students' perceptions demonstrated that introducing video as a form of assessment *fitted the brief* and met the student's needs (Dawson et al., 2013). It seemed more efficient at helping students to develop their ideas for writing whilst watching the video. The immediacy of understanding was evident at developing competency in writing to the assignment brief when supported with the highlighting to enable students to make connections. It is also important to note that no negative aspects or perceptions were shared regarding the video unlike the other formats. Students favoured the word cloud the least and said the 'jumble' of words was difficult to conceptualize in relation to the expectations of the assignment but that they could see how the words related to those that appeared in the assessment criteria.

When comparing the data of how the students interacted with the VLE, some interesting observations were made. There was a marked increase in the number of page views when the students had access to the four formats when compared to the baseline year (n = 75) with one format. We might conclude that this was to be expected, as there is more for the students (n = 86) to look at. Significantly, what the data actually showed was that the students kept revisiting the video rather than looking equally at all four formats. The graphical representations below show the page views and participation (which might include downloading materials) across the baseline year 2016–2017 and the research year 2017–2018.

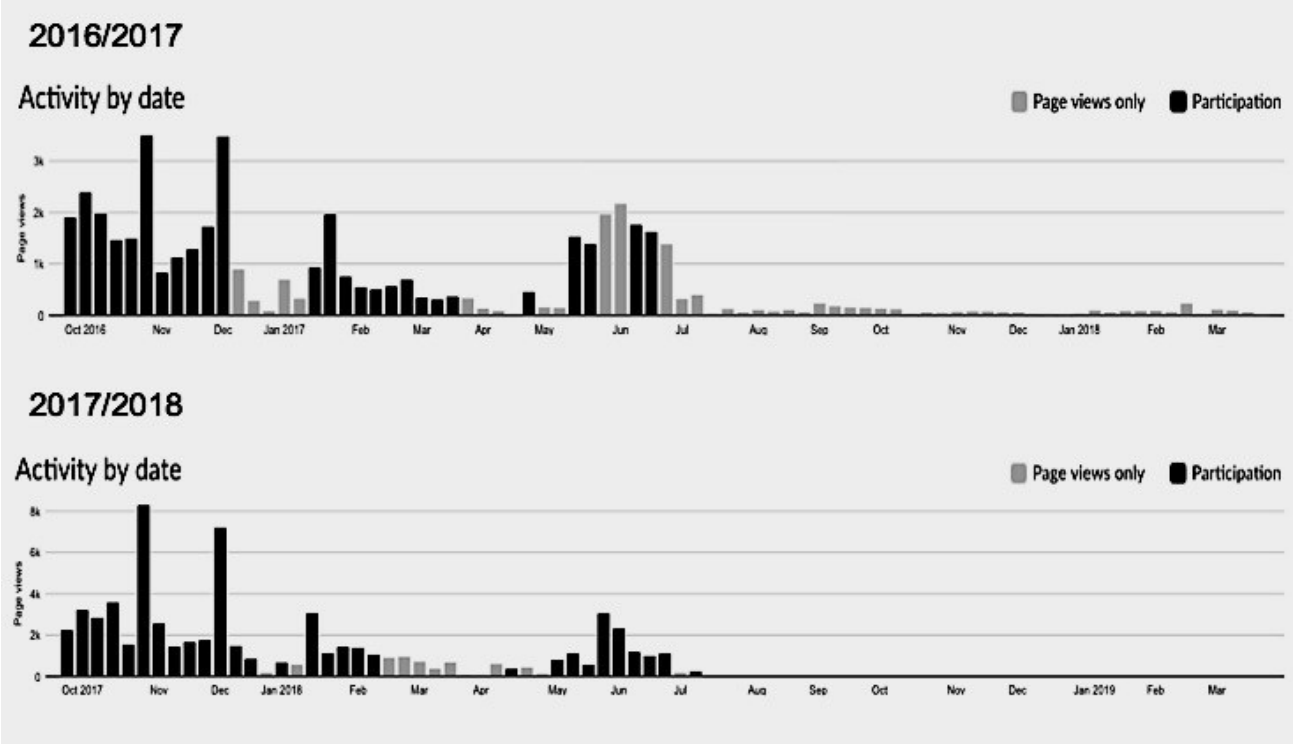


Fig 4. Graphs of page views in both the Baseline year 2016–2017 and the Research year 2017–2018

In both groups, we see peaks of activity,

1. Early in October (the start of the course)

2. Mid/end October (assignment guidance introduction 1)
3. November (assignment guidance introduction 2)
4. Early December (assignment submission)
5. June (School Experience)

The peak activity occurs during the five points in the academic year as described above. This was as expected due to the course design and schedule of lecture delivery; this was identical to both the baseline and research group. The only variables that changed were the cohort of students and the number of formats of the assignment guidance introduced to students in October and November. The details of the impact during these peaks becomes evident when we look at the raw numerical data.

Table 1. The raw statistical data taken from the VLE for both the baseline and research group

Raw data for Control Group 2016/2017											
Start of the course				Assignment Guidance 1				Assignment Guidance 2			
Day	Date	page views		Day	Date	page views		Day	Date	page views	
Sunday	02.10.16	113		Sunday	23.10.16	66		Sunday	27.11.16	203	
Monday	03.10.16	425		Monday	24.10.16	420		Monday	28.11.16	374	
Tuesday	04.10.16	614		Tuesday	25.10.16	190		Tuesday	29.11.16	278	
Wednesday	05.10.16	305		Wednesday	26.10.16	168		Wednesday	31.11.16	250	
Thursday	06.10.16	433		Thursday	27.10.16	245		Thursday	01.12.16	261	
Friday	07.10.16	316		Friday	28.10.16	203		Friday	02.12.16	263	
Saturday	08.10.16	99		Saturday	29.10.16	133		Saturday	03.12.16	116	
		2305				1455				1745	
Raw data for the Research Group 2017/2018											
Start of the course				Assignment Guidance 1				Assignment Guidance 2			
Day	Date	page views		Day	Date	page views		Day	Date	page views	
Sunday	01.10.17	376		Sunday	15.10.17	153		Sunday	29.10.17	32	
Monday	02.10.17	520		Monday	16.10.17	662		Monday	30.10.17	471	
Tuesday	03.10.17	729		Tuesday	17.10.17	771		Tuesday	31.10.17	3342	
Wednesday	04.10.16	567		Wednesday	18.10.17	806		Wednesday	01.11.17	1446	
Thursday	05.10.17	490		Thursday	19.10.17	772		Thursday	02.11.17	1568	
Friday	06.10.17	475		Friday	20.10.17	384		Friday	03.11.17	1107	
Saturday	07.10.17	180		Saturday	21.10.17	91		Saturday	04.11.17	194	
		3337	x 1.45			3639	x 2.5			8160	x 4.68
				* Guidance delivered 1 week earlier than in 2016				* Guidance delivered before autumn placement 3 weeks			
				because of MEQ feedback				earlier than 2016 because of MEQ feedback.			

Note - The purple cells in the baseline group and the yellow cells in the research group denote the days of the week that lectures occurred and when key information was provided to the students.

It could be argued that a change in the cohort of students might produce a different result; this is a justifiable observation. However, the researcher would argue in response, the scale of the change in the numerical data points to a significant difference that cannot just be attributed just to a change in the students themselves. The reason I am bold enough to say this is because I have taught this module since 2009 and the statistical data looking back from 2011 to 2016 was replicable where the students only had one format of guidance to look at. The range between 2011/2012 and 2016/2017 was at the highest in 2015 with 2338-page views recorded and the lowest in 2016 with 1745-page views recorded.

What we observe in 2018 when the students had access to four assignment formats is a 4.68 (to two decimal places) increase in the number of page views from 1745 in 2016/2017 to 8160 in 2017/2018 – this is a significant statistical difference, because all other factors remained constant, the reason for this change points towards the format of guidance, rather than the student cohort of the individual students themselves. If students were one of the crucial variables affecting

the data, we would have expected to see much more variation in the statistics since 2011 because the student group changes annually, but we do not observe this.

Positive observations from 2017/2018 include a greater interaction with the VLE: students wanted to look at the materials provided for them and this was corroborated by their perceptions reflected in the questionnaire responses. For 2016–2017, the assignment grade range was between 40 to 68 percent with a median of 60 percent. For 2017–2018, the assignment grade range was between 35 to 80 percent (grades above 70 percent are first class marks) again with a median of 60.

Analysis of the effect the amount of time students spent on the VLE when compared to their final grades, found that there was no positive association. A summary of this data is provided below with four examples.

Table 2. A comparison of student VLE activity and the final grade awarded

Student	Total Activity (hours:minutes)	Grade Awarded (%)
1	2:49	55
2	12:53	80
3	48:45	58
4	86:40	62

What the times do not tell us is what specific activity the students were engaged in and whether it was a purposeful study for the assignment. This was an interesting statistical comparison to make, although we can conclude that it made no difference to the students' overall achievement in their assignment. Some students were very effective at obtaining first class marks with very few hours engaging with the VLE. We might conclude here that these students made good academic use of their time in preparation for the assignment.

Tutorials were offered to both groups in 2016 and 2017 with an attendance of twelve and five respectively. Attendance to tutorials was historically poor. Anecdotal observations from the Lecturers were that students were less needy in 2017/2018, contacting them less by e-mail and not asking so many questions in face-to-face lectures. They seemed to use the information on the VLE as a point of reference and support, rather than needing to talk directly with the Lecturer in tutorials. This was corroborated somewhat by the data that showed an increased interest in the VLE and a significantly increased number of page views in 2017 to 2018.

Conclusions

This research has shown that first-year undergraduates in ITE are motivated to engage with assessments when a range of artistically communicated guidance formats including video are available to them. This particular group of students preferred guidance in a video format because they felt that this was less daunting than *wordier* formats and was easier to interpret when gauging the expectations of the assessed task. They liked the immediacy of access through the VLE, and because the Lecturer was visible and speaking, students felt it was like having a face-to-face tutorial with someone familiar, often described as a 'real' interaction, which supported a sense of community when learning. They could relate to the video and appreciated the ease of watching and listening to the information being presented by a familiar face of the teaching team. The grade range awarded to students in 2017/2018 increased, with eight percent of students achieving a first-class grade (a mark between seventy and eighty percent). The highest mark awarded the previous year was sixty-eight percent. The researcher acknowledges that other factors may have contributed to this but this is another shift in the data in a positive direction partly due to the artistically communicated formats corroborated by student testimony in the questionnaires. This research has a future in HE and within this particular institution is being disseminated wider within the Faculty through the subjects of Religious & Spiritual Studies and Music to see if replicable results are observed in other, HE subjects and disciplines. In the future, a comprehensive dissemination of the artistically communicated formats through an international collaboration with HE stakeholders will determine whether video, as a form of assignment guidance, can be used as an effective online artistic pedagogy in Education and other disciplines to support student motivation for assessment, achievement and satisfaction.

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