Designing video and audio resources on the history of political thought

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of The Hobbes Project, a project based at the University of Huddersfield that produced a number of video and audio resources (VARs) and accompanying worksheets to support the teaching of the module entitled 'Introduction to political philosophy'. In so doing, it will discuss the benefits of creating such VARs, comment on the format that these should take, include a discussion of academic decisions made about content, and offer tips on how to go about presenting VARs.

Keywords

philosophy, e-learning, politics, video, audio, resources

Introduction

This paper aims to provide a report of The Hobbes Project, a project based at the University of Huddersfield that produces of a number of video and audio resources (VARs) and accompanying worksheets to support the teaching of the module entitled 'Introduction to political philosophy' (a standard first-year history of ideas thinker-based module introducing students to the ideas of Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke,

Rousseau, Burke, Mill and Marx). This module was chosen for the production of VARs because the author, who also led the project, is committed to the idea that when students have started to get to grips with the history of political philosophy, they relish it, as 'it provides them with a space in which to reflect on their own, previously unexamined, but cherished, views on what politics is for' (Coleman, 2000: 152). However, sometimes students need to be nurtured in the early part of their studies to get to this point, and it was hoped that VARs would help in this endeavour. As such, The Hobbes Project (named after the first video produced) can be seen in the same vein as other attempts to use informal educational methods within the university curriculum (for other examples of the use of informal means to teach political ideas, see, for example, Schaap, 2005; Woodcock, 2006, 2008).

This paper aims to briefly outline what was done in The Hobbes Project and also highlight why certain decisions were made so that it can be used as a guide for other academics considering creating VARs for their students. In so doing, it will discuss the benefits of creating VARs, comment on the format that these should take, include a discussion of academic decisions about content and offer tips on how to go about presenting VARs.

Summary of project

The Hobbes Project aimed to produce some reasonable broadcast quality, reusable learning objects (in the form of VARs combined with worksheets) to help teach the history of political philosophy. It aimed to host these on the university's website and to make them available in a variety of different formats to ensure that they could be easily

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accessed. The VARs took the form of mini-lectures of approximately ten minutes in length on each of the thinkers discussed in the module in question. Each mini-lecture was simply a 'talking head' shot of the module leader (Pete Woodcock) filmed in a static format in order to a) keep filming simple and b) ensure that the file size was small enough to facilitate successful hosting on the web. These resources were available to students as a streamed video to be viewed online, a MP4 file, which could be downloaded onto a portable device, and a MP3 file for students wishing to use the mini-lectures in a purely audio form. Also hosted on the site were a number of worksheets designed to be completed by students as they used the VARs, in an attempt to make them interactive.

Benefits of mini-lectures

A popular way of using VARs in teaching is for lecturers to record lectures (either as a video or audio file) while they are being delivered in the usual fashion and for these files to be made available to students afterwards, perhaps via a virtual learning environment (VLE) of a university intranet. This approach has obvious benefits. It is relatively easy to do, and once the lecturer has got to grips with available recording equipment, it requires little additional time in terms of producing materials as one is already delivering lectures and simply recording them in situ. This approach also allows students who miss lectures to see an entire lecture in order to catch up or indeed enables revising students to view a whole lecture rather than just a portion of it. Recording entire lectures, however, is not without pitfalls. First, a lecture might be anything from 45 minutes to two hours in length, making the available VAR long and large in terms of file size. Students may be unlikely to view entire lectures on a regular basis, they may be awkward to host and distribute

(especially in video format) or picture quality might have to be compromised in order to reduce the file size. Second, from the point of view of a lecturer, even the best lecture may be filled with awkward pauses, misquotes or ill-judged jokes, meaning that one might be uncomfortable about allowing them to be viewed later on. Lectures are generally delivered without a script and certainly without the aid of an autocue that helps smooth presentation on television, meaning that even the best lecture will struggle with coherency over a long period of time. Nor should a lecture be reduced to a recording session for a VAR as this will diminish the sense of spontaneity and reaction to the audience, which is stock-in-trade to the lecturer and vital in building social capital amongst the students on a module.

It was for these reasons that The Hobbes Project sought to deliver simply a number of short VARs, each approximately of ten minutes in length, which sought to sum up the key ideas of the thinkers in question rather than seek to emulate an entire lecture. It was thought that students might be likely to watch a ten-minute resume of a lecture, whereas they might baulk at watching an entire lecture of one and a half hours (the length of a lecture at the University of Huddersfield).

Format

We decided, for purposes of simplicity, that all the video mini-lectures would simply comprise a ‘talking head’ format. It is far easier to create files in this manner as a quiet room (a necessity when recording) can easily be found at a university to record several mini-lectures at one time. Changing the format would, no doubt, have made the clips more engaging and dynamic. However, this would have significantly lengthened the time

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needed to create them, multiplied the labour needed for the project and also increased the size of the files, making them more difficult to host and download. The first student cohort to use these VARs were given a form to feed back their comments on the resources. One student commented that the talking head format of the mini-lectures should be readdressed, suggesting that we 'liven them up a bit.' Another stated:

> I feel as you are static during the video there is little benefit to me watching them. So I have put them on my MP3. I really like them on this format, it also enables me to listen to them on the move.

The overall feedback on the project was very positive, with virtually all students using at least one of the VARs, with comments ranging from '[they were] helpful when recapping lectures' to just '[they were] 'very very helpful'. However, one should be aware that there is a trade-off between the ease of creating talking head resources on the one hand and creating a dynamic resource on the other.

Choosing the content

Creating a ten-minute mini-lecture, of course, means that the lecturer is faced with the unenviable task of deciding what constitutes the 'key ideas' of a thinker, decisions that inevitably involve compromises. The link below provides access to the streamed version of the video mini-lecture on the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes to be viewed as an example of how to create the content for a video clip, and the decisions that were made regarding content.

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http://hhsdbs.hud.ac.uk/resources/polphil/hobbes/hobbes_flash.html

The thinking behind creating this clip was to 'boil down' Hobbes's thought to show students a) why he was still important and should be studied by politics students in the twenty-first century and b) the key tenets of his thought. As one can see from the video, I broke this down into three component parts, namely obligation, the state and sovereignty. In the section on obligation, I tried to show how the view of Hobbes differed from two competing definitions of why one should obey the state: the divine right of kings on the one hand and Aristotelianism on the other. Both of these are broad topics, of course, and therefore some level of reductionalism is necessary for a ten-minute introduction for first-year undergraduate students. Of course, any attempt to break down a set of ideas in the history of intellectual and political thought is fraught with methodological dangers.

On divine right, I was trying to show how Hobbes differed from those authors who saw kings as ordained by God. He saw the duty of the individual to obey the state as identical to the Christians' duty to obey God and that, therefore, those who questioned the authority of government were 'usurping upon … the office of God' (James VI and I, 1986: 104). Hobbes gave grounds whereupon the rational man would not question the authority of the state – its powers came from the people via a contract *not* from God – and, as a result, he offered an ascending rather than a descending theory of how government obtained its powers. On the Aristotelian issue, I was trying to show how Hobbes's views differed from concepts that saw man, by nature, as a political animal, and the state, and one's connection to it, as being a natural process (rather than civil society and the state created as an artificial construct via a contract). Hobbes, of course,

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as I explain in the video, thinks man is far from being a naturally political being, and that, in his natural state, he would, in fact, lead a life that was in 'continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes, 1651/1981: 186). In taking this approach I was attempting to enthuse students about Hobbes, seeing his attempt to answer the question 'why should I obey government?' as providing a different answer to the dominant trends in political thought at the time and, as such, his views being novel for the time.

The second section tries to briefly outline Hobbes's idea, as outlined by Quentin Skinner (2006), that 'the duties of subjects are owed to the state, rather than to the person of the ruler', which was 'a relatively new and highly contentious' (p. 3) idea when Hobbes asserted it (see also Skinner, 2002). This separation between the state and the person operating the powers of the state is a crucial one in the history of ideas, and I felt it deserved mentioning in a mini-video resource that had the goal of explaining the relevance of studying Hobbes's ideas. One thing to note when considering ways to expand upon points is to consider not using examples that might date the resource unnecessarily. The video was filmed in the summer of 2007. The reference to George Bush was relevant then; however, it is regrettable when viewed now.

The final section is a simple discussion of sovereignty, aimed less at explaining Hobbes's ideas but rather linking his ideas with contemporary politics. There can be little doubt that Hobbes played a large role in developing the idea of state sovereignty that is common currency in contemporary discussions of politics; whatever one might think of their claims, a 'common complaint made by Eurosceptics [is that European] integration means a loss of sovereignty' (McCormick, 2008: 15). Consequently, providing a link that

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shows how the ideas of Hobbes helped to form the way we discuss politics today might help students see the centrality of his ideas.

Video and audio resources are expected by the modern undergraduate student; students are, in Prensky's term, 'digital natives' due to the 'rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the twentieth century' (2001: 3). He notes that today's students represent:

> … the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and other toys and tools of the digital age … Computer games, e-mail, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives.

(Prensky, 2001: 3)

To this one might like to add the development of Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube that allow users to record, upload and view videos, often via their mobile phones; this simply supports Prensky's assertion of the centrality of technology in students' lives. So, whereas these trends might give us a compelling reason in and of themselves why we should produce resources such as those produced by The Hobbes Project, it should not blind us to the fact that they still support, in essence, a transmission mode of education. The real boon of computers and the internet with regard to creating learning resources is the ease of recording, editing, hosting, downloading and distributing that they afford. In essence, however, there is no pedagogical difference in downloading a MP4 file to one's

iPod and viewing a video created for that purpose; and there is only a slight jump from that to simply attending a lecture.

We concluded, therefore, that something more was needed to accompany the VARs produced by The Hobbes Project to make them slightly more interactive. The method we chose was a worksheet that was hosted alongside the video, which students could download and complete whilst watching the video (or, indeed, while listening to the MP3 file). Other, more elaborate forms of interaction are of course possible, such as online chat rooms or comments boards. However, these would have resulted in a considerably greater investment of time and the need for greater technical expertise. The link below will take you to the worksheet (in pdf form) that I devised to accompany the Hobbes video that you have just viewed.

http://hhsdbs.hud.ac.uk/resources/polphil/hobbes/hobbes_worksheet.pdf

This worksheet begins with short and simple questions that can be answered easily by viewing the video. They get slightly more complicated as the worksheet continues, but again they can be answered without too much trouble as they follow the structure of the video resource. The purpose of these sheets is not to form part of a module's assessment, but rather simply to give students a task to complete whilst viewing the video in the hope that this will help reinforce the key messages in the resources. Also, the structure of the VARs we produced, with each VAR being broken down into smaller sections, allows for greater ease of presentation as it is much easier to remain word perfect for a two- to three-minute section than for an entire ten-minute clip.

Presenting

The most helpful advice on the way to go about presenting these clips was given by Laing et al. (2006) who noted that it was best not to read from a script but to 'be informal, be personal, be yourself, [and] use your passion for the subject to enthuse and motivate your audience' (p. 514). Scripts were not produced, therefore, for two interrelated reasons. First, it is impossible to read a script while looking at the camera (essential if you wish to engage students who will be viewing the videos) without expensive autocue equipment. This is a downside, of course, to producing video resources as opposed to merely audio ones. Second, reading, it is often thought, prevents a video from appearing lively, fresh and engaging.

Rather than preparing a script for The Hobbes Project VARs, we found it helpful to prepare an overall structure (see above for a discussion of the academic side of this) of what was intended to be said that could be reviewed prior to filming each section to refresh the presenter's mind. Occasionally, bits of paper with cues were taped underneath the camera that could be read with slight eye movement away from the camera. Also, sections of text were often read from a book out of camera shot. This seems acceptable, so long as extracts are kept to a minimum.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed simply to produce a report of what we achieved at the University of Huddersfield with The Hobbes Project in the hope that it might provide guidance for other lecturers wishing to embark on a similar enterprise. Its focus on the academic decisions made when making a mini-lecture is an attempt to justify our approach and to

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consider seriously the academic choices that the lecturer is faced with when creating such resources.

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