

Why I Love (*Good*) Training Videos

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Good “how-to-do” videos allow viewers to learn how to perform tasks in ways that books or even live teachers cannot do. One minute of a video demonstration can take five pages of reading instructions that may not be at all clear to the reader. Videos can be a powerful tool to learn practical activities and are relatively cheap. However, the term “good” should be stressed, since bad videos can result in a waste of time and effort. A good video has a knowledgeable and persuasive teacher who is able to provide guided, step-by-step, detailed, descriptive and practical solutions and techniques. Given that videos can be more accessible to low-income clientele than computers or the Internet, perhaps more “how-to-do” videos could become available in developing countries.

I Am a Convert

During a powerful storm, waters migrating from the ceiling invaded my living room. Something wrong with the roofing, was an easy conclusion. Visiting the Home Depot store, a home improvement store in the United States, I found a video explaining how to repair asphalt roofs. It was free if I also bought the shingles for the repair. I saw the video twice and considered myself ready to climb to the roof and start yanking the old shingles and revealing the rotten plywood underneath. At this moment, a friend arrived to spend the weekend—an old school colleague, turned venture capitalist. I offered him a tool and we both proceeded to discover that the damage was much worse than expected. We spent the entire weekend on the roof but managed to fix it. Why this poor fellow remained my friend still baffles me. But coming from countries in which asphalt shingles are unknown objects, the video taught me how to do a credible repair on a leaky roof.

When the time came to install ceramic tiles in the kitchen, another video gave me the courage and the know-how. Lots of work but quite a success. The same with laminate flooring in the family room. Changing a toilet was also preceded by a video. Gluing wallpaper was the same thing.

Altogether, videos allow me to successfully tackle tasks that I would not have dared otherwise. And they truly show how to do things in a way that books cannot. Think of the words and drawing required to explain how to unfold the wallpaper on a table, spread glue, fold it, carry to the right place the entire gooey mess, line up with the previous sheet, hold it with one hand, squeegee with the other, trim the edges and so on. Minutes of video tell it all.

Recently, I bought from Taunton Press a video showing thirteen different ways to do *mortises* and *tenons*. I am presently looking for some task where a mortise and tenon are vitally needed.

Several years ago, I had to visit a dentistry school where I was shown videotape of a gory surgery of the upper jaw. I hated every minute of the projection. But I had to agree with the dentist-cinematographer that I could see the surgery in the video much better than if I were a spectator trying to see something from behind the shoulders of the surgeon and the nurses (a completely unlikely event but a reasonable hypothesis).

Seeing a video of arc welding, one can see a competent welder run a perfect bead of metal on the two surfaces being joined. This is much better than real life attempts to see the same bead, with sparks flying and burning holes on your pants and having to stay much farther away than the camera image brings us.

Thus, I am a convert. Videos are a powerful tool to learn practical things, tasks where words are weak or confusing. Videos are cheap. The ones I mentioned cost US\$10 and still are profitable to the producer. There is an endless supply of such videos in industrialized countries. Tool vendors add them to their products. (My new Ryobi table saw has a nice video on how to assemble the machine and use it in typical conditions.)

There are thousands of videos on how to do every possible task on the face of the earth, from Tai Chi to embroidery. They are so ubiquitous and unassuming that we tend to look down on them. But no high tech gimmick, no flickering Internet video clip can achieve the same training feats. To teach such practical endeavors, the Internet is a glorified farce. No other technology can beat a good how-to-do video; often, not even a live teacher.

Good Videos and Bad Videos?

Having praised training videos (and by extension its former incarnation, which are films), let me now add some qualifications to my infatuation. Surely, not all videos are good. In fact, most videos are plain bad and mostly useless.

How many silly sunsets have we had to endure before anything interesting happens? How many images of flowers and grass leaves waving in the wind? How many teachers preaching to idiot-looking students? How many images of busy students sitting in front of computers? How many robots, crowded downtown streets or highway interchanges? Unfortunately, too many. The average video is slow, takes too long to deliver the message, uses the media poorly and fails to serve any practical purpose. My daughter wrote to several New England preparatory schools asking for information and just about all of them also sent a video. They were all slick, full of pretty fall scenery and utterly uninformative—a complete waste of time.

Therefore, comes the next question: What makes for a good video? We need to understand the language or the languages of video. We take for granted that the printed paper is used for bibles, pornography, novels, newspapers, scientific journals, advertising, and so on. Why would videos have one single specific language or style? In fact, they don't. There are many video languages, some better than others, depending on the use. A dull speaker—a talking head—in a video is worse than a paper saying the same, mostly because it takes longer to listen than to read.

Rummaging through mountains of videos, we can identify two cases in which they are particularly useful.

The first case is when they are a means to transmit human charisma or magnetism. Some people are endowed with the power to teach, to persuade, to convey ideas. They are the super teachers. With one of those rare people in front of the camera, the bells and whistles of TV production are not truly necessary. The super-teachers are a show by themselves. Tom Rollins, founder of The Teaching Company, hit a winning formula along these lines. He finds the most persuasive teachers in American universities and invites them to give a series of lectures on the topics in which they excel. Production is plain and unsophisticated to an extreme. But the personality and charm of the super-teachers is what matters.

The second case is more difficult to explain but no less important. Let us think of two real videos.

- ? The first video demonstrates how to remove the bones from a trout. The maitre d'hôtel, in formal dress, tackles the fish as a performing actor in front of a full theater. His movements are swift and precise, no reluctance, not one second wasted. In no time, the bones are extracted and the fish is reassembled as if by magic.
- ? The second video is Julia Child, the upper-class American converted into French chef. She searches for the right word, stops to ponder what she is going to do next, fumbles with the knife, drops the

food, looks for a towel to clean the hands, discusses alternatives and looks a bit worried about the results when removing the ready dish from the oven.

The first is a dead end as an instructional video. No student can relate to that perfection, no student can hope even to get close. The video hides the difficulties and the path to learn the tricks of the trade. It is pure theater in an area where something else is needed. By contrast, Julia Child created a new video/TV language. She was asked to do one or two programs in a Boston education TV in the early sixties, when all television was live. Once the cameras were on, no matter what, they were not turned off until the end of the program. She had to talk and cook, at the same time. That exposed the viewers to all the real life difficulties and accidents. She explained, improvised, fixed the mistakes, elaborated on how to deal with the everyday problems of a kitchen. Not being a professional cook who has spent thousands of hours of repeating the same gestures, she fumbled more than a full-time chef would.

Without suspecting that she was creating a style, Julia Child truly found a very important space between the theory and the practice. To remain with culinary examples, Elisabeth David reproduced a letter of Mère Poulard, the owner of a restaurant at the Mont Saint Michel. Her omelets were famous in France and someone asked for the recipe:

“Here is the recipe for my omelette: I break some good eggs in a bowl, beat them well and put a good chunk of butter in the frying pan. Then I throw the eggs in the pan and stir. I will be most happy if this recipe pleases you.”¹

This is a perfect example of the theory that does not help because it is too far from the practice. What makes Mère Poulard’s omelets famous is exactly what is missing from the description. The secret lies in the details that were omitted, just like in the trout video.

The Theory of the Practice

There is a “theory of the practice” that is missing from both the trout and the omelet descriptions. Donald Schon in a fascinating book, *The reflective practitioner*,² discusses this intermediate space between the theory and the practice. Practitioners master a large repertoire of skills and strategies that are strictly required to perform a task. But these skills are usually not verbalized and even less are they explained in formal situations. Sometimes there is not even full consciousness of the techniques, they are performed but are not brought to the level of conceptualization and description with formal words. This is the “knowing in action” mentioned by Schon.

Learning a trade means learning this “theory of the practice,” usually with the help of someone who is a master of that trade—but not necessarily able to verbalize this in-between knowledge. This is what is not in the books, because it is not part of the official “theory.” Mère Poulard gave all the theory there is to make world-famous omelets, but she did not give the “theory of the practice” for making them. And she probably could not do it in letters, even if she tried.

This is what Julia Child brings to the art of making videos. She probably would not have invented the style, had she started with videos, rather than with live television where one cannot stop the camera and start again. But once invented, her spontaneous, somewhat fumbling style became popular and was imitated worldwide. Being a highly educated woman, capable of expressing with words what most cooks omit, she explored the “theory of the practice.” She also made a point of showing details often omitted, such as how to hold the knife, which fingers go where. She was able to bring to her cooking classes what was omitted from the run-of-the-mill cooking lesson, where great cooks showed off their skills but failed to delve into this fuzzy and evanescent space in between the cold descriptions of procedures and the well-

¹ Elisabeth David, *French Provincial Cooking*, (Middlessex, Penguin: 1972), p 224.

² New York: Basic Books, 1984.

rehearsed gestures. As a side comment, in a recent cooking series with Jacques Pepin, a true restaurant chef, one feels Julia Child much closer to the spectators than her utterly perfect partner. But no matter what, her style was emulated by all the TV cooks of today, to the benefit of all those who expect to learn from television something about cooking.

Hence, good videos on training are those that explore this uncharted territory of the little details, the feeling for the job, the in-between knowledge. They give the plain vanilla instructions, à la Mère Poulard. But they also show the details that she omitted in the letter (for instance, how do we know the butter is hot enough, but not too hot). The above examples focus on a hobby—cooking—but the ideas apply as well to other areas where the theory of the practice is important.

Foregone Media in Less Developed Countries?

Videos reach lower layers of society more than computers and the Internet. It is a pity that they have not been used more extensively in poorer countries. While VCRs are found in very modest households from very modest countries, the availability of practical, how-to-do videos remains quite limited. Arnold Schwarzenegger is easy to find. How to unclog a pipe or how to hang a door is not.

The problem is simple but misleading. Developing countries are not well endowed with cinematographers who like or respect manual or technical work. Hence, the tendency is to sneer at such applications and produce philosophical discourses on the ethics of work. How to guide the piece of wood to the circular saw is too trite a subject for all but those who have lost their fingers in this operation.