CrazyTalk

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CrazyTalk is software that allows the user to create facial animations and add audio, which the program synchronizes to lips and facial movements. Put simply, it allows you to create a “talking head.” You can make this talking head say whatever you want and then save it as a high-definition QuickTime movie with resolution up to $1,920 \times 1,080$. This software allows you to construct an animated presentation where you have complete control over the content. Or, in other words, it allows you to have an animated actor speak your words and have the performance saved as a video.

There are two options. Either you can use one of the program’s avatars as the base for your talking head or you can upload a photograph. Using the program’s avatars is the simplest and quickest way to produce an animation. All you need do is choose your avatar, choose your preferred voice, and copy and paste in the dialogue from your own word processor. Run it through to check everything is how you want it and then save. Alternatively, you can import your own audio and the program will lip-sync it to the avatar. Hey presto! You have your own custom-built animation in a format that you can insert into a presentation package such as PowerPoint, Keynote, or Camtasia or a filmmaking package such as iMovie, MovieMaker, or Final Cut Pro or simply run it as a stand-alone video.

From my experience of using this software with students, it is the second option that is more useful. Instead of using one of CrazyTalk’s avatars, my students have tended to upload a photograph and animate it. The process has an additional stage, but it allows you to have Steve Jobs, Maria Sharapova, Nelson Mandela, or Queen Victoria talk about your topic. The additional stage is that you have to map the features on the face of the person in your photograph. This is an intuitive and easy thing to do, but it takes 10 minutes...
or so to get right. Basically you have to stretch and contort points on a grid to match the position of the lips, nose, eyes, fringe, and so on. There are multiple points for each feature, and the better this mapping is done, the better the finished animation. Once this mapping is completed, the process is the same as using one of CrazyTalk’s avatars.

In summary therefore, you have an image choice and an audio choice. Your image choice is to use either CrazyTalk’s own animated avatars or your own photograph or image. Your audio choice is to use one of CrazyTalk’s own vocal creations or to import your own audio.

Before discussing how this software might be used in management education teaching, I should note a few weaknesses from using it with management and leadership students. The first, obviously, is that the animations are just of people’s head and shoulders; the rest of the person’s image remains static. Users can easily add movement to the head and shoulders and add in expressions, but after a short while the simple head and shoulders format wearies the viewer. Advanced users can import the animations into filmmaking software to add a moving background, but this does take time and a high level of familiarity with filmmaking software and none of the students I have worked with have done this. Instead, to lengthen viewers’ engagement with the animations, some students have produced a series of short animations using different images of their subject (i.e., they imported three or four different images of their subject, mapped each one, and gave each image a section of the audio material) and then simply stitched them together in iMovie or MovieMaker. This created a more dynamic and interesting presentation.

Another problem is that although the software can animate almost any face, it works best when the face is turned toward the camera. If the goal is to create a reasonable-quality animation quickly, rather than a fully professional animation, it is advantageous to choose images where the face is looking straight ahead.

A third drawback with CrazyTalk is that, as its name suggests, there is a comedic element to many of the avatars, voices, and actions. And with only about a dozen avatars to choose from, this limits their use in many management education settings. In addition, most of the voices have strong American accents, further limiting the software’s use in many locales. Consequently, most of my students have imported their own images, animated those faces, and either used a “Stephen Hawking–style” computer voice or imported their own audio and had the software lip-sync it to their image.

The final limitation to which I should draw your attention is that this software is designed to produce professional-quality output. It is possible to create exceptional lip-synced animations with CrazyTalk. Behind a simple-looking façade, there lurks a bewildering array of options. Students can be fearful of this and scared away from the program; alternatively, they could spend forever perfecting their animations. As a result, instructors need, more than ever, to be
very explicit in setting their expectations when using this software with students.

Application to Management Education Settings

I have been using CrazyTalk with students over the past 18 months in a variety of contexts, all of which seem to have worked well. In fact, of all the filmmaking, video, audio, and related software I have used with students, it has probably been the simplest to use and the most reliable in terms of output.

The simplest way to use CrazyTalk is as a substitute for traditional presentations. There are several advantages in using CrazyTalk in this way. First, it is less nerve-racking for some students compared to standing up in front of an audience. Second, it “guarantees” that the students say what they want to say. They write a text and input it, and that becomes the audio track. Third, and perhaps most usefully, it provides a record of the presentation that the students or the instructor can revisit time and again. This can be tremendously beneficial for revision and for people unable to attend the class.

However, despite these benefits, CrazyTalk is not ideal for simple student presentations. First, it is just a talking head with no additional visual aids. Second, the unusualness and humor of the format can mask the content, especially on initial viewing. There is also a danger that style overtakes substance. Third, once the presentation gets beyond a minute or 2, the static nature of the head and shoulders and omission of other visual aids quickly tire the viewer and make for a dull presentation to which it is difficult to listen. For these reasons, it is unlikely that the simple singular use of CrazyTalk as a presentation substitute will have much mileage. Instead, CrazyTalk is likely to be most useful when used in conjunction with animations and real action footage developed elsewhere and put together in a filmmaking package. Here, its comedic shock appeal will engage audiences without trampling on the content, and its head and shoulders style will work well for linking various clips. It is in this manner that I have had most success using the program with students.

An important learning outcome for my Principles of Leadership class is that students understand the key leadership theories and concepts. This is an introductory course and I want students leaving it with a thorough grounding and still enthused with leadership. In addition, I want to introduce students to some digital communication technologies to help them learn how to capture people’s imaginations. So, instead of adopting a didactic approach to the theories, I opt for an experiential one where they teach each other the theories by producing short explanatory videos. I place students in small groups (i.e., pairs or threesomes) and allocate a couple of theories to each group. I ask them to produce a short video for each theory that will explain it to the other students and engage them actively. I ask that they produce one without any
copyright material and the other with such material (both videos are part of the summative assessment). In addition to CrazyTalk, I introduce them to Xtranormal (see Stratton & Julien, this issue), GoAnimate (see Stratton, Julien, & Schaffer, this issue), ClipGrab (for capturing video content from the web), SmartConverter (to convert files into .MP4 or .MOV format), and iMovie and MovieMaker filmmaking software. These software introductions are conducted prior to the class when students are asked to produce a short (nonassessed) video introducing themselves. Even with just a rudimentary mastery of these tools, my experience shows me that students can produce elegant and impressive videos in just a few hours.

Typically, my students would use CrazyTalk to generate their hosts, anchors, and narrators. The “standard” video would begin with some music and titling followed by a CrazyTalk “host” welcoming viewers to the video. The host would explain the purpose of the video and introduce the first segment, which might be an Xtranormal or GoAnimate animation, or some narrated slides (usually produced in PowerPoint and exported as a movie), or a video clip. After the clip, the host would bridge to next segment and so on until the end of the video, at which point the CrazyTalk host would draw some conclusions and bid farewell. I give my students about 4 hours to produce their two 10-minute videos, but unbeknownst to them, I have another 1-hour buffer up my sleeve because they always underestimate how long the editing and rendering of the final videos take.

Once produced, we have a screening and discussion of each video, and I upload them to an intranet staging post where only registered students can see the videos. This is permitted by Australian interpretations of copyright law. If I were to allow public access to the student videos containing copyrighted material, I would contravene the copyright laws. One of the beauties of CrazyTalk (and GoAnimate and Xtranormal) is that its avatars are copyright-free. You run into copyright problems with CrazyTalk only when students upload photographs or audio material for which they do not hold clearance.

There are many beauties of this activity in addition to those already mentioned. My students stress the nontransient nature of the presentations. They can watch and rewatch these videos until they understand the course ideas. I find they still have to refer to the textbook and that many of the videos contain errors, but as long as these are noted during their screening, they act as further learning opportunities. I have some evidence that students find the acquisition of digital communication skills has been of practical benefit. Most of my students are postgraduates taking their MBAs, Master of Leadership, or specialist master’s degrees. They can take these skills into the workplace, and I have received feedback from about 20% of students saying that they have constructed their own videos at work. Uses have included training videos, newsletters, videos for websites, and promotional videos.
This video activity is widely applicable. It works particularly well when you want your students to gain an understanding of a number of theories but are afraid that ploughing through them sequentially may result in passive students becoming overloaded with theory. For example, it could be used to discuss theories about the nature of managerial work (e.g., Fayol, Drucker, Mintzberg, Stewart, and competency theories), or for motivation theories (e.g., Taylor, Mayo, Maslow, Herzberg, McClelland, Freud, Frankl, and expectancy theories), or for perception (e.g., sensation, schemas, fundamental attribution error, self-fulfilling prophesy, stereotyping, gestalt psychology, and self-serving bias). In all these cases, CrazyTalk can be used to provide actors for students’ videos quickly, simply, and professionally.

Some Practical Issues

CrazyTalk is quite an intuitive program to use. However, if students run into problems, the publishers, Reallusion, have produced help videos on their website (http://www.reallusion.com/crazytalk/help/CrazyTalk7/UserManual/). If these are not sufficient, Googling the specific issue will find many helpful posts and videos online.

CrazyTalk is currently available in its seventh edition. It will run on PCs that use Windows 8, Windows 7, Windows Vista, and Windows XP (with Service Pack 2 or later) operating systems and Macs with OS X v10.6.8 or OS X v10.7.5 or OS X v10.8.2 or later. It costs $29.99 in standard mode and $99.95 for the professional version. For all the uses described in this review, the standard version will suffice. Importantly, a free 15-day trial version can be downloaded in either PC or Mac format. My experience was that most students opted for the free download, with a substantial minority later choosing to purchase it.

RSA Animate

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The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) is an organization committed to finding innovative practical solutions to today’s social challenges. Through its ideas, research, and 27,000-strong Fellowship, it seeks to