One Button Studio

Scenario
Nina Parker, director of the Information Commons, is tracking student and faculty response to the newly opened One Button Studio. The facility allows members of the campus community to make video recordings in a studio setting simply by plugging in a flash drive and pushing a single button, which turns on the studio lighting and starts recording.

The software for the One Button Studio was available as a free download, which helped Parker secure support for the project. The recommended hardware was reasonably inexpensive, and the studio should require almost no maintenance or tech support. She hopes the studio will satisfy the demand from students and faculty for better quality video, and she is optimistic that activity in the studio will justify the loss of one of the Commons’ seminar rooms, which was converted into the studio.

Today, one professor is recording a brief video lecture. He is followed by a graduate student in theater who is recording an audition video. Later this afternoon a staff member at the Commons will be creating a brief instructional video for students interested in using the 3D printers. Parker checks the roster to ensure that everyone using the facility has put down a contact e-mail for the follow-up survey.

Three months after the launch of the One Button Studio, there have been no major equipment hiccups. Surveys and e-mail from faculty, students, and staff attest to how easy the equipment is to use for many purposes. Over the past few weeks, Parker has seen a procession of undergraduates recording foreign language assignments, interviews, public-service announcements, and digital stories. Graduate students have made performance videos and recorded rehearsals for thesis and dissertation defenses. Faculty have used the studio to host webinars and create short, video explanations of lessons that tend to stump students. Faculty members who have not yet used the facility drop by to ask her questions about it, often discussing how it could be used for future course assignments.

Parker is concerned that more usage might be on the horizon than the studio can accommodate. She’s reserved her own time today so she can practice her presentation to the bursar. She believes the university should install a second One Button Studio, and, given the data she has compiled, she thinks she has a strong case.

1 What is it?
The One Button Studio is a simple hardware-and-software combination that allows nontechnical users to make video recordings in a studio environment. The system, designed at Pennsylvania State University, emerged in response to a need in the campus Media Commons. Students were creating videos for course assignments but were intimidated by the complexity of traditional video studios, and most faculty were not comfortable providing technical assistance with video production. The university designed the One Button Studio, a room where faculty, students, or staff could quickly and easily produce videos of good quality. At the heart of the system is a software layer that pairs with a basic hardware setup. A complete basic studio can be built in an existing room for around $8,000, providing studio-caliber, mid-level video with virtually no staff maintenance. The final software design was released as open source and has since been adopted by other colleges and universities.

2 How does it work?
To use the One Button Studio, a user simply plugs a flash drive into a USB port, pushes a button to start recording, and then delivers the prepared speech, demo, interview, musical performance, or other content. Pressing the button a second time stops the recording and saves the file to the flash drive. Those looking to establish such a studio must identify suitable space on campus: a quiet, empty room, at least 10ft x 10ft, offering four outlets in the ceiling with corresponding wall controls. Basic equipment includes ceiling-mounted lights, a Mac Mini, a video camera, and a directional microphone. Optional equipment includes a green screen and a projector or display for presentation content. Where necessary, acoustic paneling can be added to create a quieter environment.

3 Who’s doing it?
At Penn State, the One Button Studio was so successful that the development team decided to share the code and setup. As a result, more than a hundred institutions have set up their own One Button Studios. Other colleges and universities have developed similar facilities (in some cases, also named One Button Studio). At the University of Notre Dame, users reserve the studio online and make their recordings at a One
One Button Studio

Button Studio kiosk—a sort of studio-on-a-cart. The projector is fitted in the ceiling, but the camera, mic, and monitors are stacked on a rolling surface. Connectors on a shelf beneath the monitors allow projection of laptop content. The camera angle is adjustable, and users can select a green or blue screen, if desired. This studio sees heavy use that includes dissertation and thesis rehearsals, class presentations, and TED Talk–style recordings. At the University of Miami, the Academic Technologies Department oversaw the university’s installation of One Button Studio. The video studio is part of the library’s Faculty Exploratory, where faculty interact with technology and discuss its use in teaching and learning. The studio has been instrumental in community engagement. Student-conducted interviews in the broader community, for example, have become part of the library’s Cuban Heritage Collection, and a Student Health Center video showing how to create healthy snacks in a residence hall features students taste-testing the finished products.

Why is it significant?

Video assignments are an increasingly popular way to teach students how to make presentations, a skill that for many is more relevant to the workplace than the term paper. Although students majoring in film or communication may have access to a high-end studio, most users on campus can’t take full advantage of its capacity and don’t need its level of quality. The One Button Studio presents an easy alternative, and this bump up in quality from smartphone recordings can be significant, particularly in the audio fidelity. The ease of the studio might encourage more faculty and staff to create videos. Students can record performance projects, skits, digital storytelling, or an elevator pitch introducing a portfolio. The One Button Studio invites faculty to develop assignments that would not previously have been feasible and enables students to create videos with more professional results.

What are the downsides?

Not all universities have appropriate space for a studio, and finding a quiet, unoccupied room on campus to house a studio could be a challenge. The expense of renovating a room could outstrip the technology costs. The simplicity of the design limits the studio to a single, fixed camera, and lighting cannot be changed. Many plug-and-play studios handle scheduling and reservations online, but first-time users may not know how much time is required to create a given amount of final video. Those needing postproduction work must look outside the One Button Studio to find equipment, software, and support. As with any video assignments, finding the right means to submit the finished product can be a challenge—posting on YouTube, a common option, raises privacy concerns to students, faculty, staff, or administrators.

Where is it going?

Requests for additional features must be balanced with the goal of keeping the studio very easy to use, and campus decision makers may differ in what they view as essential versus scope creep. A number of studios will be adding a teleprompter. At some institutions, a Lightboard will be integrated into the studio system so that presenters can face the camera from behind the clear surface as they write on it. With access to unlimited cloud storage, some colleges and universities are considering card-swipe access to a cloud account as a replacement for the USB drive. As equipment evolves, expect to see upgrades to the current one-button configuration, such as a camera that tracks the individual being recorded.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

One Button Studio makes it possible for campus users to make a quality video recording without worrying about lighting placement, sound levels, or camera adjustments. Practice before a camera allows students to hone their skills in oral presentation and brush up on their rhetoric. For faculty, easy-to-record video offers the ability to capture lectures for flipped classes or to present video explanations on course topics that are of interest to only a subset of the class. Faculty can assign videos without making tech-support arrangements or being knowledgeable about video production. At the same time, the process of reimagining coursework as video invokes opportunities for class discussion about copyright, citing sources, appropriate duration for verbal presentations, and the ways video differs in these areas from paper-based assignments.