

Practical Video Production for eLearning - Do It Right (Sep 15)



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“Practical video because we have to be practical. Frequently, we have to rush because we don’t have the time in our budgets to get things done the way we should or want. But we can be practical and still make great video. The more you do it, the better you’ll get at it.”

You’re probably making some video (maybe a lot of video) for your eLearning courses these days. But are you making the best use of video? It can engage your learning audience in so many different ways. Are you stuck with having to “scale back” your video production every time you get an idea? Are you wanting to do more, but don’t exactly know what you can do to get more video into your lessons that isn’t just a talking head? Let’s take a look at some ways to think about video to make it both practical and to look like you had a bigger budget than you had.

What’s “practical” mean for you?

Video production is a strange animal. So is audio production, so you audio people are not exempt! In a studio, you can control most of the environmental variables, but unless you’ve got a big studio and a department or workshop where you can create sets, you’re pretty much out of luck shooting anything other than a talking head, or a talking head in front of a green screen so you can put a different background behind your talking head. If you’re not a video production company, or a network, you don’t have the equipment and wherewithal to commit to large-looking productions. What do you do?

Most commercial production houses eschewed shooting in the studio years ago. Going outside to create video can be a bit scary and it can make your life, um, exciting sometimes! No matter how well you’ve scouted your locations, you’re going to be faced with a bit of the unknown. Hollywood production companies have the money for lots of lights and electricians to light them, sound equipment and people to operate it, video (film) equipment and all the etceteras and whatever goodies you can think of. But even they still have a lot of unknowns on the set.

This article is about how to control the unknowns and do great production every time you make a video. Our audience (I think it used to be called our “learning audience”) will remember more about a video that’s shot on location than a talking head with flapping lips. Let’s take a look at what makes video production practical. I’m going to walk you through the equipment it takes, and then discuss shooting on location—inside, and outside. I’ll wrap up with my ten best tips.

Equipment

There are two things to know about practical video production: your equipment, and actually going out and shooting the video with your nice shiny equipment. First comes practical equipment.

I've never run across a training department where money wasn't an object ... a very large object! So let's take a look at a practical approach to equipment with minimal spend for maximum impact.

Cameras

Face it, you probably can't afford to make video with a [Red](#) or an [Arri](#) or any other over-\$25,000 camera. I have in the past, but not recently. The reality is you don't need expensive equipment to shoot great video. Do expensive cameras make a difference? It depends. Good lighting makes the biggest difference, as does understanding how to use the camera. If you know how to light well, and have a camera operator who understands how to shoot beyond just pressing the start button, you'll do fine. eLearning video production has to move quickly. We don't have all the time in the world to get the best shots to tell the story.

What can do you do with a really limited budget? Let's go up the price range. You get an affordable piece of equipment that you can upgrade when you need to. I still have a Canon XL2 that was state of the art about 10 years ago. If you're still shooting in standard definition (720 X 480 pixels) either as 4:3 or widescreen 16:9 aspect ratios, you can create unbelievably beautiful images with this camera, and you can get one for about \$500 on eBay. That includes an incredible Canon zoom lens that was designed for this specific camera!

If you're shooting HD video (why would you be doing that for eLearning?), then your best bet is going to be to buy a new camera. One thing you can do is get a DSLR (digital single lens reflex camera) like a Nikon or Canon. But you'll still need a lens. If you want to change focus or the exposure during a shot, you need a lens that can do that quietly. DSLR lenses are generally *not* designed to change exposures smoothly without a click between f-stops. And many DSLR lens-focus motors tend to be loud. A different camera option is to get a Sony HandyCam, Panasonic, JVC, or whatever kind of really portable camera that comes with a built in lens. Those are less than \$600 to \$800.

Another solution could be a [Blackmagic Design Pocket Cinema](#) camera. The retail price for one of these is \$995. I got mine on sale for half that! It's a truly professional camera without a lot of bells and whistles but it can make extremely beautiful pictures. It shoots RAW video, which is incredibly flexible and which you can easily color grade. RAW means the video files the camera records are sensor data without any image processing. RAW video requires color grading software (Adobe has it handily built into Premiere Pro CC) in order to be viewable (in other words, pretty). Color grading (or [color correcting](#)) is the process of altering and enhancing the color in a video. Think of RAW video like old color negative film (if you remember it.) Color film had an orange mask. RAW video frequently has a green mask. Color grading gets rid of the mask and shows the beautiful color recorded. Here's an [example](#) of what you can get for your efforts. You still have to buy a lens for the camera, but you can get some really good video-specific lenses that sell for around \$250 to \$300. For \$1,300 or so, you can have a camera that doesn't take years of training to make the best use of and that can make video as good as anything out there. Yes, you'd have to learn some different skills in the editing suite (color grading), but they're easy to pick up and make perfect sense once you've done them once.

One final note about the Blackmagic Design Pocket Cinema Camera: it is serious professional gear, and it requires appropriate skills to get the most from it. I recommend viewing these videos as part of your homework: <https://youtu.be/XKFzEBf-K68>, <https://youtu.be/p3zCOoeweEg>, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIBbT2_pSoA. The bottom line is that to use this camera well, you need to be a bit of a camera geek. Not a bad thing, but it's got to be something you really want to do.

You'll also need a tripod and fluid head. A fluid head allows smooth tilts—moving the camera up and down on the axis of the camera—and pans—moving the camera left and right along the axis of the camera. You can get a really good one for under \$200, since cameras in this price range are pretty light.

Audio

Here's an area where practicality can really shine. There's not much difference between a \$1,000 microphone and a \$150 microphone if you shop carefully. Audio is a funny thing. Most of your content will be seen on a laptop or tablet. Maybe some of it will even be seen on a phone. But most of it will be heard through pretty terrible speakers or earphones. The screens are great, but the sound isn't ... go figure. While doing webinars, many people tell me that I should just buy a \$50 headset. I've never heard one of these devices that most people use sound like anything other than what they are; a cheap microphone that sounds like you're talking on a phone from the 1950s! So, sadly, the eLearning bar on audio is set pretty low.

But you have to record better than you'll expect your audience to hear. A \$150 condenser microphone by Sennheiser or other good brand will do it for you, but read reviews. You'll also need a mixer and these days you can get a really good one for \$150 or less. *Do not* think your camera's microphone can be used for audio even as low as the eLearning audio bar is set! You simply cannot depend on the camera's built in mic to do any kind of a reasonable job. So get a decent mic and a mixer and plug that into your camera. Your sound will be great!

I've been doing something different these days. I have a digital audio recorder. I use a Zoom H4n. On its own, it's a really good recorder. It's small enough to conceal behind something and it's really easy to sync sound to video even if you record it with a mic through the recorder. In fact, it can be better. A Zoom H4n costs around \$200 on Amazon or B&H Photo. So between a microphone, stand or boom, a mixer, and a recorder, you'll spend about \$400, give or take.

Lights and other equipment

You'll need some lights and reflectors along with some light stands, etc. Good LED lighting units can be had for under \$75 each and if you look for deals, you can find them with stands for about half that. Three of them are perfect along with a \$30 reflector kit. The reflectors fold up nicely into a little circle that's easy to transport. The lights are LED (and small), maybe not the best kind of LED (which can be really expensive), but far more than adequate to get the job done and done well. That's practical. And because they're LEDs, they're powered with some AA batteries, so no cables to find power for and snake around the set. They're dimmable, too!

Wrapping up the equipment rundown

Now you have a complete kit: camera, lens (or two) for \$1,500 or under, a microphone (or two), a mixer, and a recorder for a total of about \$400, and lights and reflectors for \$300 or so. That's a total of under \$2,500 (I inflated it for some flexibility). There's nothing you can't do that a Hollywood production can't do, except maybe the set-up for special-effects shots. This is a truly professional HD system that five years ago would have cost \$10,000 to \$15,000! And with this kit, you can certainly get the whole for less than \$3,000 and that includes some pretty good upgrades like a [matte box](#) (similar to a large lens hood) with a big [zoom ring](#) and focus puller (also called a follow-focus rig—it's quicker for you to Google this than for me to explain it). And this is close enough to professional grade equipment as to only make a little difference. Enough about practical equipment. What else is practical?

Well, you still have to edit the video you capture on those little SD cards. For the most part, tape no longer exists. My Canon XL2 uses tape, but I now hook it up to a portable hard drive that records directly. Sadly, that camera is now relegated to be a small coffee table in its square aluminum case. It mostly has a pile of "stuff" on top of it. Ah well...

OK! That's pretty much all you'll need to shoot really great video. Learn to use it. There's all kinds of online stuff you can find about how to use just about anything. Some of it isn't so good and some of it is terrific, just like our training can be.

Shooting on location—inside

Shooting anywhere is where the pedal hits the metal. On location, things can get a little crazy. Even in a not-so-good environment, you can shoot great video. And it will pay back big time to “scout” your location before you walk in the door with your equipment.

Even if the location isn't ideal, you can plan your shooting. Here's an example for indoor video; Last year, I had to use a location that was given to me. It was supposed to look like a coffee shop. It didn't. The room was painted black and had 20' ceilings, which also meant it would sound live with lots of reverb and echo. And it was a big room. Not at all smaller like a coffee shop. More like a barn. There were four actors in the shot almost all the time too, which exacerbates the difficulty in lighting. And to top things off for a bad shooting location, there was an enormous picture window on the west side of the room. Not bad in the morning, but the sun started to stream in as the time moved past noon and things started to get a bit more than strange with the lighting. Blocking the window was out of the question and I viewed the room early in the day, so couldn't tell what effect the window would have on the way the video looked, but I had my suspicions. I was right. That window had a really big effect on the way the video looked! So I had a lousy room, bad sound, and bad ambient light. Ugh.

My solution: For the light, we just quit in the afternoon. We had to. There was just too much light from that window. I lit with four or five flood lights just to throw some even light on the subjects. I ran two cameras from different angles to be able to mix up the shots. And the sound wasn't great with my condenser shotgun, so I used that little recorder and hid it behind a napkin holder. The sound was great after that. The shotgun mic had good sound, but the recorder was better because I could put it closer. There wasn't a lot of light from the floodlights, but I used a higher speed (ISO) than I normally would. Higher ISO usually means more grain, and this did, but it was still acceptable and actually gave the video a kind of grainy, edgy look, which worked for what we were doing.

That was the practical approach to shooting inside in a space I never would have selected, but hey, that's the way it goes sometimes.

Shooting on location—outside

While shooting video indoors gives you some control over lighting, sound, etc., outside is a different can of worms, sometimes literally. The first and foremost thing about shooting outside is to have a backup day. You can't control the weather unless you have a very large secret. Sodden talent is uncomfortable talent and unhappy talent. You want to keep your talent happy. Shooting in the rain (unless it's set up that way, and that has a whole mess of other issues) is not fun at all, unless it's what you want. In that case, I'll personally guarantee the day will be sunny and bright! So have a backup day.

When you're shooting outside, you have to deal with the biggest light bulb of all; the sun. And make no mistake, it's big. And bright. And often hard to control. This is where reflectors come in really handy. Shooting outside on a sunny bright day is difficult because the shadows are dark and the highlights are really bright. It's tough given the state of sensors today. This is what buying an expensive camera brings, a sensor with a wide dynamic range.

That little Blackmagic Design Pocket Cinema camera (for all of the comments earlier) comes in handy. Smart phones are usually not appropriate for bright sunny days because their sensors don't have very much dynamic range. And the video you get out of the phone can have too much contrast to be very useful. Reflectors can do a lot to mitigate the contrast, but probably not enough. You can use lights to fill in the darkest shadows. But remember, sunlight is very 'blue' to your camera. Your lights, even LEDs,

although they are closer in color temperature, are still artificial. I like to make the light outside look as natural as possible while still being good for video. Sometimes you've also got those pesky clouds that can hide the sun just when you're shooting. It may not matter, but it's another thing you need to keep in mind.

Sound can be harder outside because of little features like wind. You can control the ambient sound more inside (remember that phrase, "Quiet on the set!"). And you can usually get the microphone close to the speaker ... if you have a speaker. The best and safest bets are wireless lavalier (lapel) microphones, but good ones are still really expensive. Or a good shotgun mic, but then you need a boom operator. *Do not* hurt yourself by leaving the microphone that came with your camera attached to the camera. Even that Canon XL2 I mentioned earlier had a mic, and it was a big one, that basically was just there to make the camera look more impressive.

My top 10 tips for practical video production

So that's it. Practical video because we have to be practical. Frequently, we have to rush because we don't have the time in our budgets to get things done the way we should or want. But we can be practical and still make great video. The more you do it, the better you'll get at it. And it's a lot of fun too.

10. **Be a Boy Scout:** Be prepared for anything. If you have cords and cables, have extras. My kit also has lots of clips of different sizes to hold things together and you'll almost always have things to hold together.

9. **Scout your locations:** When you set foot on or in wherever you're shooting, make sure you've had the opportunity to look at the location before the shoot. Sometimes it's not possible and I cringe when I've got to do that, but I worked in news for years where we didn't have an opportunity to look before we leapt, so I sort of got used to it. But when I get the chance, I always check out where I'm going to shoot. It makes your life way easier. Way easier.

8. **Always carry spares:** SD cards (or whatever your video camera and/or recorder uses), batteries, bulbs ... just about anything you consume along the way. You don't want to run out of memory space on your card just as you're getting the best videography of the day, or if a bulb burns out, or your camera runs out of battery. Have spares. Lots of spares. Except for LED lights. There are no spares for those, but they're not going to burn out.

7. **Carry release forms:** You need these. If someone gets in your shot, even if they work for your company, you need to get them to sign a release form so they can't come back to you later for a big movie salary.

6. **Set your equipment up carefully:** The more time you take (up to a point!) before you press the record button, the better your shots will be. You should check lighting, sound, and the overall look of the bright and dark parts of the image. Check your sound, check everything.

5. **Always wear earphones:** You should never record your video without wearing headphones, preferably from the monitor side of what is actually being recorded. And even this isn't foolproof. I got burned once because even though I was wearing a headset, there was something going on between the interface of the camera to the headphones. I wound up with video that looked good, but was unusable because there was a crackly sound I couldn't remove—and I was wearing my headphones. It happens.

4. **Sync your sound to the video:** Things happen between the microphone and the camera. Use a clapboard with the scene number, or at least have someone put their hands in front of the camera and clap them loudly when starting a scene. If your audio somehow doesn't sync up with the video, it's easy to do. And when you're using an external recorder, as I frequently do, it's really a piece of cake to sync the external sound up with the sound you recorded in the camera.

3. **Make a shot log:** Always have someone write down the shots as you take them. If you shoot several takes of the same scene, you should be able to go directly to the one you liked best. You can record time markers from the camera. You should!

2. **Try different angles:** Photographers use different angles all the time. Why not videographers? (That's what you are!) Try an angle you haven't tried before. Try something new with your camera. Use a filter. Underexpose or overexpose to see what effect you can get in the camera itself.

1. **Have fun:** You can't make good video unless you're having fun. Be creative. Do something a little different every day you shoot ... but not before you've got the shots you know you need!

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