
A RENAISSANCE OF AUDIO: PODCASTING APPROACHES FOR LEARNING ON CAMPUS AND BEYOND

*Palitha Edirisingha, David Hawkrige and John Fothergill, University of Leicester,
United Kingdom*

We urge practitioners to consider the potential of podcasting for teaching, learning and assessment. Although audio has been proved successful in terms of student learning, especially in distance education (DE), its use has been often undervalued because of the lack of production, recording, distribution and playback facilities for audio, and, for radio, the lack of flexibility of broadcast schedules. Podcasting has changed the position of recorded audio as a medium of learning. A podcast is a digitally recorded sound (or sound with vision) file. The name comes from the Apple iPod, a small, portable player with a huge memory. Podcasting is often applied to the whole of making and using podcasts.

IMPALA on campus

Our perspective is drawn from research on IMPALA (Informal Mobile Podcasting And Learning Adaptation), involving colleagues in 10 universities in the UK, South Africa and Australia. It started with a pilot at the University of Leicester using podcasting in an undergraduate module in electrical engineering, with 30 campus-based students who studied the module online using the university's Blackboard VLE. The professor changed his "physical" lectures to e-lectures but met the students three times during the module. His weekly podcasts supplemented his online teaching with updated information and guidance on the weekly activities, and motivated his students by relevant news items and a fun item such as a joke. His podcasts complemented the module's e-tivities with summaries and further guidance. Each 10-minute podcast appeared on the VLE at the beginning of the study week, for nine consecutive weeks. Since this module was and is being taught online, it would be fairly easily adapted for distant students. Its approach to using podcasting would be admirably suited to them, helping them to feel a sense of community by 'meeting the prof' in each week's podcast. Difficulties would arise in providing distant students with facilities for tutorials, not in using podcasts.

IMPALA partners created their own podcasting approaches to address their specific teaching and learning challenges. Over 500 students and 20 academic staff have taken part in IMPALA since 2006. The podcasts' impact on students' learning was studied through collecting and analysing qualitative and quantitative data. We present examples of three approaches: 1) helping Kingston University students to prepare presentations and assessed work, 2) offering feedback from staff on Chester University students' assessed work, and 3) assisting Leicester University undergraduates to make the transition from school or college to university.

IMPALA for distance education

The approach to podcasting at Kingston University would convert well to DE, except that it was helping students in part to hone their presentation skills: distant students seldom if ever have opportunities to present their work face-to-face. It was also helping students to get their portfolios ready to be assessed: that is something distant students on certain courses have to do too, and podcasts would help them. Students, including the student mentors, were asked to help to create podcasts based on their experience. That approach would transfer well to distant students, who could speak up about the problems and solutions they had found, for the benefit of other students new to DE. The approach at Chester University in the UK to using podcasts to give students feedback on assessed work would convert to DE almost without alteration. Distant students would appreciate even more than their campus-based colleagues the spoken feedback from tutors on their work. The podcasts would help to bridge the gap, since in many cases distant students never meet their tutors. The University of Leicester podcasting approach to supporting new undergraduates' transition from school or college to university is very well matched to the needs of distant students, except of course the experiences and advice from students contained in the podcasts would have to be related not to campus-based study but to learning at a distance. Distant students are often older, therefore the transition might be from not having studied for some years to studying at university level away from the campus, using the materials and systems provided.

On the evidence available to date from IMPALA and other studies, we feel confident in predicting that podcasting will be integrated more and more into DE, to the immense benefit of the long distance learner.

Palitha Edirisingha, David Hawkrige and John Fothergill
University of Leicester
May 2009