

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

EDEN Annual Conference, 10th-13th June 2009, Gdansk, Poland

Dr Palitha Edirisingha, Prof David Hawkrigde and Prof John Fothergill, University of Leicester, UK.

Table 1: Key features of three podcasting approaches

	Presentations and assessment podcasts	Feedback podcasts	Transition podcasts	'Profcasts'
1. Pedagogical rationale	To develop study skills	To help students to learn from feedback	To help students' HE transition process	To support online learning
2. Medium	Audio	Audio	Audio	Audio
3. Convergence	Integrated with VLE	Integrated with VLE	Stand-alone	Integrated with VLE
4. Contributors	Lecturer, current and senior students	Module lecturer	Senior students	Lecturer, senior students
5. Structure	Two weekly	Attached to each assessment	A pre-determined number	Weekly
6. Reusability	Reusable	Reusable	Reusable	Part-reusable
7. Length	10 minutes or less	10 minutes or less	5 minutes or less	10 minutes
8. Style	Mixture of formal and informal	Informal, one-to-one tutorial	Informal interview	Informal, radio magazine style
9. Framework	With signposts	With signposts	With signposts	With signposts
10. Access system	Via VLE	Via VLE	Public access website, iTunes, RSS feeds	Via VLE

Podcasting to help students to prepare presentations and assessed work

An approach adopted by Rothwell (2008) at Kingston University was to use podcasts to help undergraduates to develop their skills in preparing mid-semester presentations and an end-of-semester portfolio as assessed work. Rothwell's students, who come from varied backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences, take her core module in English Language. They receive very little support from their peers as they have no previous cohort identity: many are meeting for the first time. She felt that the conventional, face-to-face study skills sessions were inadequate, and used podcasts to address the skills her students required for assessed work.

Rothwell developed a series of podcasts, each about 10 minutes long, and made them available fortnightly on the course VLE site. Her podcasts aimed to: enhance students' understanding of the module's core concepts and issues, improve their revision, writing, speaking and presentation skills, and offer them frequent advice on developing the end-of-semester portfolio. She divided each podcast into short sound clips. Some clips explained key concepts covered in lectures and seminars, some were discussions between students and staff on assessment tasks, and in others, the student mentors (senior students) provided study tips. With a view to developing collaboration and cohort identity among her students, she arranged for podcast content to be generated from interviews with current and previous students, and from interviews with student mentors who help Level 1 students at the Faculty's drop-in academic skills development centre.

Rothwell's approach to using podcasting yielded benefits and positive learning outcomes for her students (for full details see Rothwell, 2008). Her podcasts became a valued resource for students to learn more about and clarify issues related to preparing presentations and developing portfolios for assessment. The podcasts, as a useful complement to other sources such as the advice centre, offered her students choices of time, location and sequencing of their learning of study skills.

Podcasting to offer feedback from staff on students' assessed work

The rationale behind France and Ribchester's (2008) approach to using podcasts at the University of Chester in the UK to offer feedback to students on their assessed work was that feedback can perform an important function in the teaching and learning process. Feedback, if it is of high quality, can help students to reflect on their work. They decided that podcasts would improve the nature and quality of their feedback comments. Their series of podcasts provided feedback for students on two geography modules (one in first year, and the other in the final year). In the first year module, students were assessed using short question-and-answer tests and a fieldwork report presented as a web site. In the final year module, undergraduates completed three assignments: a single PowerPoint slide (an e-postcard) designed to 'persuade' a world leader to change policy on a key aspect of climate change, a group oral presentation and a fieldwork report (France and Ribchester, 2004).

Their feedback to students was via two kinds of podcast for each assignment. They created a personalised one for each student, with feedback on the quality and mark for each assignment. The second kind contained comments on the performance of the group as a whole, reflecting on general strengths and weaknesses of the students' work. Each student received a single sound file containing both podcasts: his or her personal feedback and the group

feedback. Students received an automatic email as soon as a new sound file became available for them to download. They were encouraged to listen to comments on their own performance and then to compare what they had done with the group's performance. These podcasts did not replace textual feedback altogether; students also received brief written feedback and a mark for the assignment. In addition, the podcasts were posted in the feedback section of each student's electronic progress file (personal development planner), embedded into the university's VLE.

The evaluation of France and Ribchester's podcasts showed that their students valued the in-depth and detailed feedback on audio more than what they would normally get as written feedback. They appreciated the personalised nature of some of the feedback, and the immediacy and sense of intimacy conveyed by tutors' voices. Feedback via the podcasts reached students quicker, and they liked the flexibility of listening to podcasts where and when they wanted to.

Podcasting for transition from school or college to university

The most recent research within IMPALA is on a podcasting approach at the University of Leicester to support new undergraduates' transition from school or college to university (<http://www.impala.ac.uk/impala4t/index.html>). Studies of undergraduates' satisfaction, academic performance and retention identify the critical importance of the first year for shaping their attitudes and approaches to learning. Successful transition to university has a direct impact on students' later learning experiences, particularly during their first year.

Most interventions to support transition are based on institution-driven approaches such as courses on learning and study skills. The knowledge and experience of students who have already made the transition have rarely been exploited. Such knowledge (called 'hot knowledge' by Ball and Vincent, 1998), can be identified as the socially embedded knowledge prevailing in networks of friends, family, relatives and neighbours, and those who are generally considered as 'people like me' (Hutching, 2003, p. 110).

Podcasting can capture this 'hot knowledge' and make it available to aspiring entrants and first-year undergraduates. IMPALA taps the knowledge and experience of students who recently made their own transition. With a lecturer's guidance, second- and third-year students in the Department of Biological Sciences have created a dozen podcasts addressing a variety of social and academic issues important for successful transition to university. These podcasts are available at www.startinguni.info and on *iTunes U* for public access.

Early results from interviews with students suggest that they see the student-created podcasts as helpful in three areas of transition: social, academic and institutional. For each area of transition they identified specific attributes that need to be considered by academic institutions in supporting new entrants. Early results from interviews with students suggest that they see the student-created podcasts as helpful in three areas of transition: social, academic and institutional. For each area of transition they identified specific information needs that need to be considered by academic institutions in supporting new entrants. These include information and knowledge about services available within the institution, such as the library facilities, the VLE platform and support services; information about tutorials, assignment submission procedures and communication with tutors; and developing relationships with peers and specific interest groups.

' Profcasts' - Podcasting to support online learning

We consider first the IMPALA pilot study. Fothergill (2008) used podcasting in *Optical Fibre Communication Systems*, an undergraduate module in electrical engineering, with 30 second- and third-year campus-based students who studied the module online using the university's Blackboard VLE. He had substituted his "physical" lectures for e-lectures but did meet the students three times during the module for a tutorial, attendance at which was optional. He began weekly podcasts to supplement his online teaching through providing updated information and guidance on the weekly activities, and to motivate his students by incorporating relevant news items and a fun item such as a joke. His podcasts complemented the module's e-tivities (structured online group activities, see Salmon, 2002) by providing summaries and further guidance to students. Each 10-minute podcast appeared on the VLE at the beginning of the study week, for nine consecutive weeks. Usually, an introductory news item was followed by the main content section, which typically referred to the previous week's work and extended this forward to the following week. At the end, were lighter weight but fibre optics related items, perhaps a joke or even a rap! Since this module was and is being taught online, it would be fairly easily adapted for distant students. Fothergill's 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. In fact, he called it 'profcasting'. The real difficulties would arise in providing distant students with facilities for tutorials, not in using his podcasts.

Authors

Palitha Edirisingha is a Lecturer in E-learning in the Beyond Distance Research Alliance at the University of Leicester.

David Hawkridge is a Visiting Professor in the Beyond Distance Research Alliance and Emeritus Professor of Applied Educational Sciences in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University, Milton Keynes.

John Fothergill is Professor and Head of Engineering at the University of Leicester.