Integrating Podcasting into two Masters' distance learning programmes in Occupational Psychology

Abstract

This case study reports on the incorporation of podcasting into the curriculum design and delivery of two distance-taught Masters' programmes in Occupational Psychology (OP). **The same case study using the same research methods and student population and revealing the same evidence has been previously published in a journal article by Nie, Armellini, Harrington, Barklamb and Randall (2010) on ALT-J.**

The two OP programmes attract work-based Occupational Psychology practitioners, most of whom are in full-time employment throughout their studies. Challenges faced by the course team included adding flexibility to the curricula, increasing learner engagement (both with learning materials and feedback) and reducing learner isolation. As part of a coordinated enhancement effort, which included changes to curriculum design and delivery, more than 100 podcasts were introduced into the curriculum. The research was conducted as part of the JISC-funded project called DUCKLING (Delivering University Curricula: Knowledge, Learning and Innovation Gains, http://www.le.ac.uk/duckling). Evidence suggested that the students' learning experiences improved as a result of five key benefits associated with the integration of podcasting in learning design: (1) personalisation, (2) an additional and different format for providing clear and engaging guidance, support and feedback, (3) increased flexibility and mobility within the curricula, (4) improved retention, and (5) 'design once, deliver many times' with minimum adaptation.

The programme

The University of Leicester's School of Psychology is one of the very few places in the UK to offer the opportunity to study OP through distance learning. The OP team started delivering two distance-taught programmes in 2000: the MSc in Occupational Psychology and the Diploma/MSc in the Psychology of Work. Each programme involves six 20-credit modules and a 60-credit dissertation. All modules are compulsory. There is no on-campus equivalent of these programmes. The two programmes attract about 50 part-time students per year, and can be completed over two years. Almost all students are in employment throughout their studies.

From 2000 to 2006, both programmes were delivered through printed materials posted to students, who submitted their assignments and dissertations on paper. They received hand-written summative and formative feedback.

In 2006 the OP team began to significantly develop its use of the University's Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) beyond a document repository to enhance the delivery of the

programmes. Initially, the team used Blackboard's discussion board to build an online community that would enable students and staff to communicate and work collaboratively. Tutor-moderated discussion forums provided guidance on the content and assignments for each module. Later, the team extended the use of discussion boards to support and supervise learners at all stages of the dissertation process, from initial ideas to final submission. Course materials have now been supplemented with web-based versions and active links to course readings. Blackboard is now the central hub for all student resources. Since 2007, students have submitted their assignments and dissertations through Blackboard's online submission system, and marking is now fully electronic.

The design and delivery of both OP programmes have seen major developments since 2006. The podcasts were part of a suite of changes as the course moved into its '2nd generation', i.e. interactive e-learning as opposed to using the VLE primarily as a repository of materials for distance learners.

Since 2006, the OP team have been systematically addressing four key challenges in curriculum design and delivery, most of which are common in distance learning:

- Improving learner engagement with materials by bringing the materials to life and offering a variety of teaching approaches

- Improving learner support by offering enhanced guidance, support and feedback in a variety of media formats

- Enhancing flexibility and mobility in programmes aimed primarily at time-poor, work-based learners

- Reducing learner isolation through the provision of additional opportunities for student-student and student-tutor interactions

- Enabling skills development and transferring theory into practice for work-based learners

The OP team has focused on enhancing the overall learning experience of distance and work-based learners through the appropriate incorporation of four DUCKING technologies: Podcasting, Second Life (SL), e-book readers and Wimba Voice Board. In this case study, we report on the experience of incorporation of podcasting into the two Masters' distance work-based programmes in OP.

The podcast intervention

The OP podcasts

The OP team produced more than 100 podcasts in six categories (see **Table 1**): (1) module overview (for two modules), (2) research methods, (3) assignment guidance and support, (4) discussion key concepts, issues or topics (for one module), (5) dissertation guidance and support, and (6) formative feedback for module assignments (for one module) and draft dissertations.

Podcast categories	Module(s) the podcasts were relevant to	No. of podcasts	Purpose
Module overview	Personnel Selection and Assessment	2	To provide an overview of the modules
	Training and Development	1	
Research methods	Research Methods in OP	11	To explain key concepts and approaches associated with research design, data gathering and analysis in OP
Assignment	Research Methods in OP	1	To provide support and detailed guidance on module assignments, including: ▪ Clarification of assignment requirements ▪ How to tackle assignments ▪ What markers are looking for
	Psychology of Organising	4	
	Training and Development	4	
	The Individual at Work	4	
	Personnel Selection and Assessment	4	
Key concepts	Training and Development	2	To provide discussions about key concepts, issues or topics
Dissertation	Dissertation	17	To guide students through the dissertation process (see Figure 1 for a small sample of these podcasts) To offer a scaffold and pointers to sources of help
Feedback	Training and Development	3	To provide general feedback to module assignments
	Dissertation	47	To provide individual feedback and comments on draft dissertation chapters

Table 1: Summary of the OP podcasts

Podcast development

A simple tool was used to plan each podcast (see an example in **Table 2**, used to plan a podcast entitled *What makes a good research question?*). The grid helped the OP tutors to focus on the purpose and key messages that they wanted to deliver in each podcast.

The maximum recommended length of a podcast is 10 minutes (Edirisingha et al., 2008). Some of the podcasts feature a single OP tutor but most include the input of two, three or four tutors. Although carefully planned and structured, all podcasts are informal and relaxed. They were largely unscripted and designed to motivate and engage OP learners by exploiting the affordances of digital audio.

Section	Purpose	Key concepts	Length	Who
1	To highlight the importance of well-articulated research questions	Achievable? Researchable? Novelty or repeat? Too broad? Narrow enough?	3'	AS & KB
2	To illustrate the need to explain the focus of the research	Why is it worth researching this? What contribution will this research make?	3'	AS
3	To highlight the need to demonstrate knowledge of existing literature covering earlier research	Literature review Related topics Contextual factors Creating, challenging extending	2'	KB
4	To recap	Review of main points covered	1'	AS & KB

Table 2: the planning tool applied to a *Research Methods* podcast

Podcast delivery

All learners had access to the module overview, research methods, assignment, discussion about key concepts, dissertation podcasts and podcasts providing general feedback to module assignments through the university's Blackboard VLE (See **Figure 1**). Podcasts providing formative feedback on students' dissertation drafts were made available to individual learners. These podcasts were not reusable. However, general feedback points were accessible by all and reusable across programmes. All podcasts were produced by four members of the OP course team using a free software package called Audacity (http://audacity.download-latest.com) and with minimum input from DUCKLING learning technologists.

Figure 1: Sample podcasts to support the writing of the dissertation

Research methods

Research design

The research was conducted using action research methodology that involves the 'action-reflection' cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006 p.9). The action-reflection cycle started before the creation of the podcasts. Through surveys and interviews, OP staff and students were consulted on the challenges faced in course design and delivery from the very start of the project. Their views were analysed and results were fed back to the OP team to inform the course redesign. As podcasts were incorporated into the redesign, feedback from students and staff was regularly gathered and analysed. Evidence was fed back to the OP team to inform the next set of design changes.

Data collection methods

Before the incorporation of podcasts, all members of the OP staff were consulted on curriculum design and delivery issues through meetings and informal discussions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a self-selected sample of seven students to find out the issues and challenges they faced in their studies, their views on how they could be addressed and the role of technology in the possible solutions.

Two VLE-based student surveys were also administered: (a) a standard module survey and (b) a survey designed to capture learners' ideas on how podcasting might enhance their learning (the 'technology survey'). Students were recruited on a voluntary basis. Each respondent was rewarded with a £10 Amazon online voucher. The surveys were completed by students on both OP programmes but from different cohorts (see **Tables 3** and **4**).

Survey types	Purpose	Occupational Psychology	Psychology of Work	Student sample
Module survey	To evaluate satisfaction with a specific module, covering: quality of material, content, reading list, assessment, support and feedback.	18	5	23
Technology survey	To find out the level of student access to technologies such as computers, the internet and personal mobile devices; To establish learners' previous experience with podcasting and other technologies; To gather learners' ideas on how podcasting and other technologies can be integrated to improve their learning experience.	25	9	34

Table 3: Sample distribution of the online student surveys

Surveys/Cohorts	October 2007	April 2008	October 2008	April 2009	Total
Module survey	5	2	16	0	**23**
Technology survey	5	1	19	9	**34**

Table 4: Sample distribution across cohorts

After the incorporation of podcasts, evidence collecting was focused on their impact on staff and students. The impact of podcasting on the staff's experience was captured through informal but regular meetings with four OP tutors. Semi-structured interviews were again conducted with seven students to find out their overall experience of using the podcasts. All seven students had listened to some of the available podcasts and volunteered to be interviewed. Four of them were among the seven who had been interviewed before the incorporation of the podcasts. Data from interviews were supplemented by the comments and feedback contributed by students through the VLE-based surveys and via the discussion board. All the students who were involved in the interview were mature work-based distance learners in full-time employment. Six of the interviewees were female and one was male.

Additionally, 11 Psychology students completed a short questionnaire (see **Appendix 1**), reporting specifically about their use of the podcast feedback provided for their dissertation draft. The questionnaire was sent to students via their personal emails.

Data analysis methods

Quantitative data collected from the surveys were transferred into Excel spreadsheets and descriptive statistics were applied to close-ended questions. Qualitative data from interviews, surveys and discussion boards were coded using data-driven (inductive) coding (Boyatzis, 1998) and analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Joffe and Yardley, 2004) to identify categories and combine categories into themes.

Summary

The methods adopted for data collection and analysis are summarised in **Table 5** below:

Methods for data collection/ analysis	Description
Data collection	Staff views were collected through informal meetings and discussions with four OP tutors. Students views were collected through: • Semi-structured interviews with seven OP students • Two Blackboard-based surveys: A module survey completed by 23 OP students, and a technology survey completed by 34 OP students • A survey about the use of podcast feedback completed by 11 OP students • Blackboard discussion forum
Data analysis	Descriptive statistics applied to close-ended questions from the surveys Thematic analysis applied to qualitative data collected from interviews, open-ended questions from the surveys and informal feedback from Blackboard discussion forum

Table 5: Summary of research methods adopted in the podcasting study

Results

Podcasting made a major contribution to the way the two Masters programmes are delivered and extended the ways in which students are supported. The key findings on the impact of podcasting on students and staff are presented below.

The human dimension

The distance learners on these programmes, who were largely work-based, valued highly the production and delivery of personalised content through podcasting. Consultation with students before the incorporation of podcasts showed that, typical for distance learning courses, they perceived a need for more personalisation in the curricula. The evidence showed that podcasting added a human dimension to the learning experience. Compared with reading course materials, articles and textbooks, listening to the tutors' voices added a personal touch and livened up the learning experience. The following student quotations illustrate this:

> I feel [a] more personalised service when I can hear the voice from the podcasts.

> It [podcasting] makes the course less impersonal. For example, listening to the lecturer's voice on podcasts is a big improvement than reading notes.

> Sometimes it seems cold when you receive [feedback] on paper. In a podcast, [the tutor] says, 'you've done well', you can feel something personal.

Students considered that listening to a podcast resembled 'direct communication'. They felt that they received more of their tutors' time and that it was possible to 'have a conversation' with them. As a result of that, students felt less 'distant' and 'isolated', but more 'connected' with their tutors.

> The most interesting thing was hearing someone's voice. I didn't feel quite so distant.

> Podcasts made me feel closer to my tutors and I think they help you to build a relationship with them.

Over time, by listening to the tutors' voices, learners were able to build a relationship with their tutors, which is a well-documented difficulty in distance learning contexts.

Support, guidance and feedback

Podcasts increased learner engagement with the guidance and support that was already available on both programmes. They enabled tutors to convey key, clear and detailed messages in an effective and motivating manner, which was highly appreciated by students. Tutors offered and students benefited from feedback in a way that had not been possible before, which generated a valuable form of interaction between tutors and learners.

Students pointed out that the assignment podcasts 'make the instructions clearer'; 'give clearer guidance' and 'clarify everything'. As one student put it:

> Thanks for the podcasts. I've found them very helpful. I managed to understand more what we are expected from MA 1[Module assignment 1].

Students also found listening to the podcasts 'consolidating' and 'reassuring'. Through the surveys, learners commented:

> It [the podcast] sets you in the right direction.

It reconfirmed a lot of what I had read already.

It reassured that I was on the right lines.

I feel comfortable that I'm on the right track.

The guidance provided on how to approach dissertations and assignments gave students feed-forward information that they regarded as useful, for instance, in terms of time management. While this guidance had previously been provided in written format, learners engaged with and related to it differently and positively when it was delivered to them through the tutor's voice.

Additionally, eleven Psychology students commented about their use of the podcasts that provided feedback to their dissertation draft by responding to an electronic survey. All 11 students found the feedback podcast very useful in terms of providing a different way to engage students with feedback, supporting students in the emotional aspects of learning, and providing in-depth information, detailed and specific examples, which helped to clarify messages and identify the most important issues and topics in the feedback. They preferred to have a combination of both audio and written feedback on their assessed work. They usually used the audio feedback first then the written feedback, as they found the audio feedback helped in understanding comments as a whole, and written feedback helped in understanding comments on individual sections.

Podcasting offered tutors a quick and effective mechanism to provide guidance, explanations and feedback. One tutor concluded:

It's amazing how much information you can pack in a 3-5 minute podcast. The material that might take 4-5 pages to write can be covered in a 4-5 minute podcast. Again, in terms of time-saving, the lecturer may not have 5-6 hours to write something, but he or she has half an hour to do a podcast. (Tutor A)

Another tutor added:

For a 5-minute podcast, I only need to plan half an hour to complete the recording and editing. It's a very fast and efficient way to turn things around. (Tutor B)

The availability of podcasts provided additional opportunities for learners to benefit from guidance, support and feedback in different ways, which helped reduce learner isolation. The value of podcasts and the asynchronous tutor-learner interaction that they foster was universally acknowledged by students.

Flexibility and mobility

The integration of podcasting into design and delivery also had an impact on the learners' approaches to learning. Student surveys and interviews showed that students used the podcasts in various ways. Some listened to the podcasts on computers or laptops at home or in the office. Some played the podcasts on their mobile devices (such as MP3 players, iPods and iPhones) in public places or on the move. The following two quotations illustrate how students used the podcasts, and suggest that podcasting has the potential to address some of the flexibility and mobility challenges in work-based learning that were identified by the OP team:

> I use my MP3 player especially for the podcasts. I downloaded them to my MP3 player and listened to them any time on my way. (Interview)

> I was able to download the dissertation podcasts on the computer and then onto my iPhone. This made it easy to listen when I had a spare gap. This was useful and enabled me to think things through while I was at work or out. (Survey)

Making podcasts available in formats suited to different mobile devices (including e-book readers with MP3 compatibility) offered time-poor students on both programmes added flexibility, which they highly appreciated.

Design once, deliver many times

There is indicative evidence that the clarity associated with these podcasts had a positive impact on tutors' workloads. Before the incorporation of podcasts into the curricula, OP students used the VLE discussion boards or email to enquire about administrative, operational and 'housekeeping' issues, many of which had been explicitly addressed in the programme handbook. Tutors reported that students did not always read the handbook. These queries did not require specific academic support. Tutors had the time-consuming and mundane task of dealing, in writing, with similar non-academic questions from many students. Although some students still do not make appropriate use the resources and continue to email standard queries to the team, the podcasts dealt with the vast majority of recurrent issues raised by learners in a clear, friendly and efficient manner. In consequence, there was a notable reduction in the number of non-academic questions requiring tutors' attention on the discussion board.

The podcasting planning tool (see **Table 2**) was considered very useful by the OP tutors. Breaking the podcast into sections helped them to stay focused on the key objectives. As they grew more and more familiar with the technology and as they gained production experience, tutors adopted, over time, an informal, unscripted style that engaged and motivated learners. Tutors were able to 'design once and deliver many times' by transferring content between podcasts with minimum adaptation and versioning, which has contributed to the sustainability of the innovation.

Allowing for individual differences within the team, OP tutors largely found creating podcasts easy, quick and intuitive. Using free, stable software and their own voices, they were able to offer students support, guidance and personalised feedback in a cost-effective manner.

Quality of assessment and retention

Evidence from this podcast feedback study suggests that the quality of the dissertation improved and the number of re-submission of dissertation dropped. The provision of the dissertation podcasts and feedback podcasts to students' dissertation draft played a key role in these improvements. A Psychology tutor observed:

> …not a single one of our dissertation students has needed an extension this year (this is unheard of and a very pleasant surprise!). All those who have not suspended have handed in their final dissertations on time. The only difference from previous years is that all have had access to the feedback podcasts on their draft dissertations. (Tutor A)

These impacts should be attributed to the range of curriculum design and delivery changes implemented by the Psychology team in recent years, of which one was the podcasting. Firm

conclusions can only be reached over time and after several cohorts have completed the programmes.

Summary of key benefits

Evidence suggested that the students' learning experience improved as a result of five key benefits associated with the integration of podcasting in learning design: (1) personalisation, (2) an additional and different format for providing clear and engaging guidance, support and feedback, (3) increased flexibility and mobility within the curricula, (4) improved retention, and (5) 'design once, deliver many times' with minimum adaptation. **Table 6** captures the key points associated with each of the main outcome.

Outcomes		Key points
The learner experience	**The human touch**	Personalisation, interaction, relationship-building
		Livening up the learning experience
		Reduction in the isolation associated with distance learning
	Guidance, support and feedback in different formats	Effective provision of feedback, guidance and support in different formats
		Additional opportunities for effective engagement
	Flexibility and mobility	Access to quality content through mobile devices
	Retention	Improved retention
Innovation and sustainability	**Design once, deliver often**	Reusability of resources, minimum adaptation
		Low-cost, high-value innovation
		Reduced online traffic on non-academic matters
		Better and more cost-effective use of tutors' time
		Transferability of frameworks and lessons learned

Table 6: Summary of key research outcomes from OP podcasts

Limitations

'Push' or 'Pull' technology

Most HE institutions choose to deliver podcasts through their VLEs, as that is considered to be an environment that is both secure and familiar to staff and students. In our case, making podcasts available through the university's VLE offers another advantage: through the 'Content collection', staff can share podcasts across different cohorts and departments. The Content Collection is an institutional content repository, capable of supporting the sharing of content amongst courses and modules within the VLE. However, at the time of writing, RSS feeds were not available on UoL's version of Blackboard. Students have to log in to the VLE to download the podcasts onto their computers and mobile devices. Thus, podcasting has so far been used as a 'pull' rather than a 'push' technology (i.e. no syndication feeds have been used).

Taking advantage of the mobile potential

Data collected after the incorporation of podcasts show that many students listened to podcasts from their portable mobile devices, indicating the potential of podcasting to enhance the mobility and flexibility of student learning (Salmon and Nie, 2008). However, data from student interviews and surveys and informal comments from the Blackboard discussion forum indicated that not every student was aware of the possibility of using podcasts on portable devices. Additional guidance could maximise the benefit of podcasts for learners.

Impact and sustainability

Impact on the Psychology course team

The Psychology team considers podcasting to be a low-cost, high impact technology that has made a dramatic difference to the design and delivery of their two Master's programmes. Ease of creation, coupled with reusability, ensure sustainability beyond the end of DUCKLING. One of the Psychology tutors concluded:

> I think that the podcasts have been an excellent addition to the course overall. Not only has the feedback from students been very positive, but the experience of producing and recording them has been enjoyable. The process itself is very simple: 'Audacity' [the free, open-source software used] is easy to use and the resources required are minimal. The 'feed forward' podcasts (which talk through the requirements of specific MAs [Module Assignments] and UAs [Unit Assignments]) strike me as being a particularly useful addition to the existing course content and I will be keen to see how they are received by the students. It will also be interesting to see whether these appear to have any impact on subsequent grades. Overall, the initial findings suggest that the addition of podcasts can be an effective way of making a difference to the course with minimal additional costs.

Podcasting has become almost 'second nature' to many of the OP team. It is envisaged that the team will continue to use podcasts for both teaching specific module information and providing feedback. Podcasting is now truly embedded in the practice of the Psychology team.

Institution impact

The research into the impact of the curriculum redesign interventions described here, including the incorporation of podcasts into the OP curricula, has shown tangible and transferable benefits to students and staff, while promoting pedagogical innovation.

Positive change is spreading at Leicester. Pro-active internal dissemination of findings undertaken by the OP team and BDRA, including Media Zoo events (Armellini et al, 2009), through Leicester's Assessment and Feedback Working Party, the Distance Learning Forum and BDRA's 2010 Learning Futures Festival (www.le.ac.uk/beyonddistance/festival) have taken the outcomes of this research to other parts of the university. Evidence gathered through the DUCKLING project and exemplars from the OP redesign experience have featured prominently in all of these events, which have constituted excellent opportunities for sharing experiences and research findings in technology-enhanced curriculum transformation and delivery. Academic and support staff from across the university have actively participated in the events and continue to do so.

So far, practitioners from five departments (Criminology, Engineering, Lifelong Learning, Management and Media and Communications) are now either redesigning parts of their curricula by making use of podcasting or planning changes that may, in future, incorporate the findings of this research. On the evidence from DUCKLING and earlier podcasting projects, this technology is being used in creative ways to enhance learners' experiences and improve efficiency across the institution.

The new Learning Innovation Strategy, approved by the University Senate in 2009, provides an appropriate context for these innovations to take place in a supported way across the institution. Through internal, national and international dissemination, including conferences, publications and a significant online presence, our research into podcasting continues to inform institutional transformation and innovation well beyond the University of Leicester.

Conclusions

This case study provided an example of the effective use of podcasting within a curriculum renewal initiative involving two Masters' distance learning programmes in OP aimed at work-based learners. The evidence shows that podcasting has enhanced the learner experience by offering added personalisation, opportunities to benefit from content presented in a new format, increased curriculum flexibility and cost-effectiveness.

Table 7 summarised how podcasting addressed the challenges faced in curriculum design and delivery that were identified by the OP team at the beginning of DUCKLING.

Challenges	How podcasts addressed the challenges?
Lack of interaction	Increased and improved interactions with tutors.
Dry material	Bringing materials to life
Lack of variety in teaching approaches	Enriching teaching approaches
Need for mobility	Enabling students to play podcasts from their mobile devices (i.e. iPod, iPhone, MP3 player) and use them on the move (i.e. on a bus or train).
Need for flexibility	Enabling students to use podcasts at different locations: at home, office, public places (i.e. Café) and on the move.
Need for transferring theories into practice	-

Table 7: How podcasts addressed the challenges in curriculum design and deliver

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Appendix 1: A questionnaire survey about podcast feedback

Part 1: Was the feedback podcast useful?

1. **Was the podcast providing feedback to your dissertation draft useful?**

   ☐ Yes

   ☐ No

2. **If you find the podcast useful, could you tell us how helpful the podcast was to your study?**

3. **If you find the podcast not useful, could you tell us why?**

Part 2: Which form of feedback did you find more useful?

4. **In relation to the feedback given to your draft dissertation, which statement better captures your experience?**

   ☐ I found the podcast feedback more useful than the written feedback

   ☐ I found the written feedback more useful than the podcast feedback

   ☐ I found the combination of podcast and written feedback useful

   ☐ I found receiving both forms of feedback repetitive. Either the audio or written feedback would be sufficient enough

   ☐ I found neither the podcast nor the written feedback useful

5. **Compared to the other assignments where you have only received written feedback, which statement better captures your expectation for feedback provision?**

   ☐ I would like to receive audio feedback to all my other assignments

   ☐ I would like to receive written feedback to all my other assignments

   ☐ I would like to receive a combination of audio and written feedback to all my other assignments

   ☐ I'm happy to receive either the audio or written feedback to all my other assignments

   ☐ It doesn't matter. Neither the podcast nor the written feedback is useful.

6. **Has the provision of a combination of podcast and written feedback to your dissertation draft changed the way you use the feedback and amend your dissertation?**

   ☐ Yes

   ☐ No

7. **Can you briefly explain the answer that you provided to Question 6?**

8. **What do you think are the differences between audio and written feedback?**

9. **In relation to providing feedback to your dissertation or assignments, what we can improve**

to make your experience even better?

Part 3: How did you use the feedback podcast?

10.   Did you listen to the podcast feedback one-off or repeat listening?

☐ I listened to it one-off

☐ I listened to it several times

11. Did you make notes while listening to the podcast feedback?

☐ Yes

☐ No

12.   Where did you use the feedback podcast?

☐ At home

☐ At work

☐ In public places (i.e. Café, library)

☐ When travelling or on the move

13.   How did you access the feedback podcast?

☐ I streamed it directly from my computer or laptop

☐ I downloaded it onto a personal device (i.e. my iPod or iPhone)