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Podcast Steering of Independent Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

Podcasting in higher education is a relatively new development that emerged mainstream in the latter part of the last decade (Stoerger, 2006; Salmon and Edirisingha, 2008). Since then, academics have variously begun to incorporate podcasting elements in a variety of teaching and learning contexts. The relative ease of using podcasts and minimal technical requirements for both lecturer and student means that it is a learning technology of considerable practical value, and its portability is particularly well-suited to the diverse and non-traditional student body of today. By drawing on the experience of podcast support provided for a final-year module of approximately 100 students in Geography at National University of Ireland, Galway, this paper reflects on the opportunities of technology-enhanced learning in higher education by outlining how podcasting can practically and creatively prompt and steer independent learning outside of the lecture environment.

Keywords: podcasting; student engagement; independent learning; student feedback

1. Introduction

My journey to realising the pedagogic potential of podcasting began while doing a learning technologies module at the Centre for Excellence and Learning in Teaching (CELT) at National University of Ireland, Galway in the autumn of 2009. In that class, we engaged with a variety of learning technologies, from blogs to wikis, from ODL to Twitter, and though I held a degree of scepticism towards some of the technologies we explored, I was nevertheless keen to not lose sight of the endgame: a more enabled teaching and learning environment. In thinking through potential projects for the module, I was guided by one principal issue: what was the key lacuna in my teaching and learning

environments that I felt I could offset by incorporating new learning technologies. That key issue, especially in large classes, was lack of engagement.

For a number of years, I had endeavoured to have the Blackboard support for my modules to be as comprehensive and wide-ranging as possible. Typically, individual module support took the form of: edited lecture notes; e-learning links; prompts to follow up on lecture themes via online reading; links to instructive audio and video files; and encouragement to participate on the module discussion board forum. Despite a well-signposted and structured virtual learning environment (VLE), however, I felt that most students did not use the support materials as effectively as I had hoped. This came through especially in assignment submissions characterised by sometimes misunderstood concepts, uncontextualised regurgitation of bullet points and a failure to undertake independent reading.

To tackle the issues identified above, I turned to the potential of podcasting to more effectively 'steer' students through one VLE for a final-year module on contemporary geopolitics, and this became the project for my CELT module on learning technologies. The project set out to augment learning for my students by providing: a summative podcast on each week's lectures; guidance on the module bibliography, filmography and e-learning links; direction on term assignments; feedback on submitted work; and advice on exam preparation. Finally, a key part of the project involved an evaluative process comprising of qualitative student feedback via e-mail at the end of semester.

2. Podcasting as enabling technology

Podcasting commonly refers to "any software and hardware combination that permits automatic downloading of audio files (most commonly in MP3 format) for listening at the user's convenience" (Gormley and Tooher, 2009: 4). In the university context, podcasting has been increasingly used by academics seeking to apply its applications to a variety of teaching and learning contexts

since the latter half of the last decade (Salmon and Edirisingha, 2008). Many sceptics, including initially myself, tended to see podcasting as a "somewhat 'techie' approach to playing music" (Salmon *et al*, 2008: vii); but I want to argue here, on the contrary, for its important potential for teaching and learning in third-level higher education. As Gormley and Tooher (2009: 3) note, podcasting "affords opportunities to facilitate communication, collaboration and student-centred activities in novel and exciting ways".[1]

So, what are the technological requirements? In short, they are few. They effectively amount to a laptop/desktop, a microphone, some sound recording and editing software such as Audacity (freely available online) and a VLE.[2] The technical steps of creating podcasts are well covered by a variety of useful publications, including Salmon *et al*'s excellent *How to Create Podcasts for Education*, published by the Open University, and so I do not wish to rehearse them further here. However, it is perhaps useful to note that actually producing podcasts is far more straightforward than certainly I had envisaged, and the time and effort invested are, I want to argue, well worth it.

Podcasting's ease of use and minimal technical requirements for both lecturer and student means that it is a learning technology of "high value" yet "low cost" (Salmon *et al*, 2008: vii). And, from a student perspective, the 'portability' of podcasts "offers the potential for students to access easy-to-use academic content and support from [multiple] locations" (Salmon *et al*, 2008: 11). For a diverse student body, many of whom have external family and work commitments, this is hugely important (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Podcasts equally enhance studying at home or at work (or indeed having a coffee) as much as studying in the library, the laboratory or out in the field.

3. Podcasting as teaching aid

The key questions, of course, regarding podcasts are what can they do above and beyond the lecture environment and how do they compare with other VLE content media? To begin with, I think it is important to underline that I do not

believe podcasting can effectively function as a substitute for lectures, and, in my experience, students fully appreciate this. Nor do I think podcasts should be used to simply regurgitate materials from the lectures. I do think, however, that they can be enormously useful in the following three areas:

1) prompting independent 'deep learning';
2) enabling 'constructive alignment' of learning outcomes; and
3) giving effective 'student feedback'.

First, in relation to 'deep learning', podcasts can be used especially effectively to encourage students to take on the responsibility of additional reading and thinking to tease out key concepts introduced in the lectures. Prompting independent self-learning at third level is vital, of course, and is precisely the kind of 'enhanced learning' higher education providers everywhere have long endeavoured to secure (Biggs, 1999). Secondly, efforts to adhere to a 'constructively aligned' module structure are also further enabled via podcasts that can neatly provide a touchstone to key learning outcomes and thereby provide the loop-back to overarching module concerns – literally steering the learning environment (Barnett and Coate, 2005). The personalised and contextualised nature of podcasting gives the medium an edge, I think, in terms of other more static and uncontextualised VLE media content. Students appeared to especially value this, as I discuss later. Finally, one of the great practical roles podcasting can play is in efficiently providing effective 'student feedback', particularly covering generic assignment shortcomings of content, style and presentation. As I outline later, my students found assignment feedback podcasts especially helpful, and the import of student feedback on submitted work has long been underlined in higher education research (Rust, 2007). Finally, an additional point perhaps worth making here is that in very large classes where tutorial support may not be available or possible, owing to room demands or diminishing departmental budgets, podcasting can offer a crucial source of teaching and learning support.

Generating podcasts can be both pedagogically fulfilling and enjoyable. In my own case, I certainly enjoy the relaxed context of recapping in my own time key module concepts and critical concerns. Podcasts can be especially useful, I think, if the lecturer communicates in a broadly scripted, slightly conversational manner, and not overly constrained by a set of notes – which are perhaps best used as a guide. Before I podcast each week, I simply set out my lecture notes for that week on my desk, underline five or six key issues, and take note of material that I felt could be reinforced a little more. I tend to be both summative and reflective, with ultimately the endgame being to get students to engage with core material at the heart of the module's concerns and extend learning beyond the lecture environment. Additional reading and VLE engagement are prompted, learning outcomes are reinforced, and key concepts and themes illustrated and underlined anew.

The specific podcasts I do for my final-year module on geopolitics are:

- twelve podcasts of 8-10 minutes covering the key theoretical and thematic material covered in each week's lectures in a 12-week semester;
- one podcast of 8-10 minutes for the term assignment explaining terminology and outlining reading requirements to engage with;
- one podcast of 8-10 minutes for assignment feedback detailing in particular common absences, writing errors and limited aspects of analysis; and finally
- one podcast of 8-10 minutes directing exam preparation.

Each of the fifteen podcasts in total involves a prompting to engage with the various VLE support provided – especially readings, documentaries and e-learning links. In essence, they are all ultimately constructed as 'learning outcome' touchstones.

4. Podcasting as learning aid

Students responded in an overwhelmingly positive manner to the podcasts provided for the module over the last two years (2009/2010 and 2010/2011). After the completion of the module in both years, I arranged e-mail student feedback on the use, effectiveness and shortcomings of the podcasts provided.[3] The average results of the two years are summarised in figure 1 below (each class was approximately 100 students so actual responses roughly equate to class percentages for ease of analysis). On the whole, students were hugely positive and enjoyed accessing the podcasts. Many remarked how they were "novel and nice to be able to access at leisure". Others "felt more supported and confident in understanding the module's central concepts", and almost every respondent valued the podcasts for assignment feedback and (unsurprisingly) exam preparation. Many students noted too how they felt much more engaged and even angered by the material (the subject matter for the modules was centred on critical accounts of contemporary geopolitics and the war on terror) and were grateful for the additional support, reading prompts and calls for critical thinking. This was hugely heartening to hear, and is precisely what Fraser and Bosanquet have in mind when they speak of the benefits of engaging our students from "an emancipatory interest" in urgent global issues (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006: 281; see also Doring, 2002).
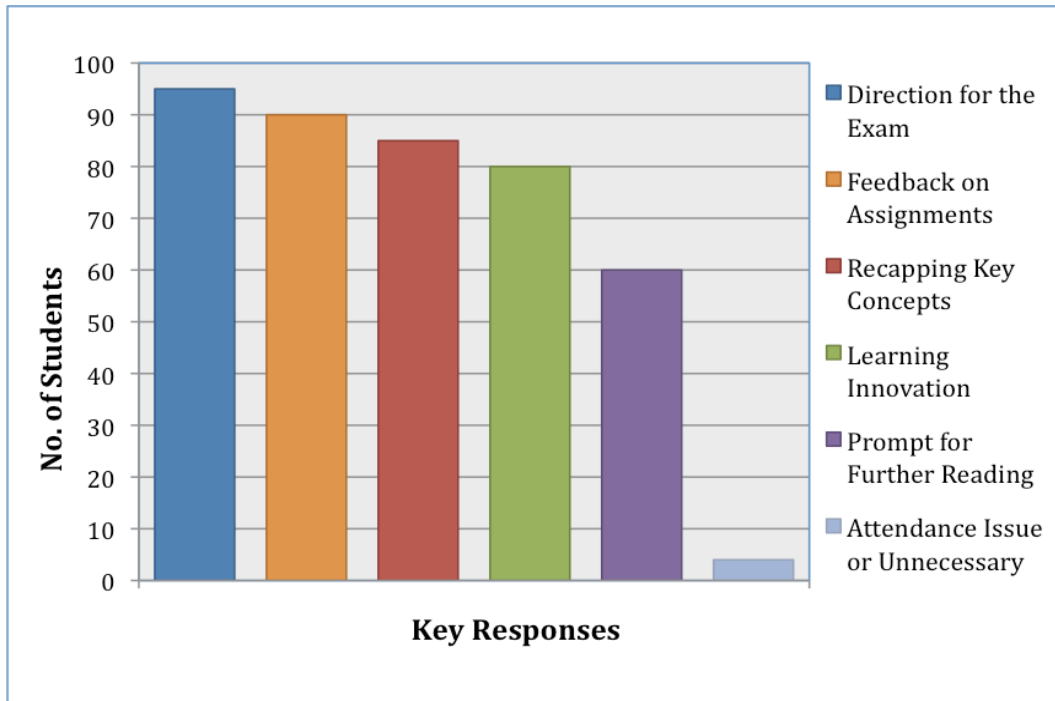
Figure 1: Student feedback on the use and effectiveness of podcasting

There were six principal issues identified by students, which were in descending order of importance:

1) direction for the exam;
2) feedback on assignments;
3) recapping key concepts;
4) learning innovation;
5) prompt for further reading; and
6) attendance issue or unnecessary.

Student feedback 1 – direction for the exam

Unsurprisingly, given how students are understandably assessment-driven in the Irish higher education sector, almost all respondents identified preparation and direction for the exam as an important use of podcasts. Though I have not presented here the VLE access statistics (see note 3), the podcast on exam preparation was the most accessed, followed by the podcasts on assignment preparation and assignment feedback.

Student feedback 2 – feedback for assignments

'Feedback for assignments' was the next most important identified use of podcasts, with many students pointing to the value of having feedback as a "reference to return to". Others underlined the importance of direction on synthesising and constructing a "coherent argument", and, finally, respondents seemed to especially appreciate how the podcast prompted the necessary follow-up "independent learning" for the exam.

Student feedback 3 – recapping key concepts

'Recapping key concepts' was also identified repeatedly as a particularly important pedagogic support. Many students, for example, remarked how "they felt much more on top of key module issues" when they were recapped, and explicated and exemplified anew. It is this capacity to provide a learning touchstone for key module concepts that is arguably most valuable in podcasting.

Student feedback 4 – learning innovation

Students evidently enjoyed using the podcasts too, with many observing the "ease of using them", while others enjoyed their novelty, pointing out that these were the first educational podcasts they had used. Being able to "externally access the podcasts via Blackboard" was also underlined as important, as was the manner in which students were "encouraged to use the podcasts in conjunction with their own independent reading".

Student feedback 5 – prompt for further reading

An encouraging 60% of the class found the repeated podcast prompts for further reading to be helpful. Some students pointed to how it was "less intimidating to access the reading list for the module when the key readings were highlighted"; others stated that they had "not fully realised the necessity of going beyond the lectures to do well in the module"; while a number of students also observed how they often found themselves "not having the necessary time to do the reading".

Student feedback 6 – attendance issue or unnecessary

Though being statistically not a major issue (4%), it is perhaps worth mentioning that interestingly some of the best performing and attending students in the class felt that the podcasts were not all necessary, were overly repetitive or ran the danger of rendering the lectures poorly attended. Perhaps this is a reminder of the important balance that needs to be struck in encouraging multiple levels of independent learning, which can support varying student abilities and levels of engagement.

5. Conclusion

Any critical examination of the higher education landscape in Ireland in today would reveal a broader academy increasingly inflected by concerns of university rankings, a more competitive global economy and more accountable and productive academic performance. Much of the above is largely defined by research productivity, of course, and though none of us would wish to denigrate the import of our research, it is perhaps more important than ever to argue for the import too of integrated research and teaching and more recognition of teaching excellence and innovation in university key performance indicators and strategic operational plans. In our increasingly multimedia world, responding to what will surely be a growing student expectancy of technology-enhanced learning will be an important challenge. If that challenge is not recognised, Irish higher education will fall behind its global competitors. In the final analysis, academics have vital pedagogic and civic roles to play in society, and it is

perhaps up to us to author the innovation, relevancy and urgency of those roles in performance measurement metrics that look set to increasingly regulate academic subjectivity in universities everywhere (Morrissey, 2012).

As academics pulled in so many different research, teaching and administration directions today, a reluctance to embrace new and additional teaching practices is entirely understandable, especially if modules are already working well. In my case, doing a teaching development module on learning technologies with a required project submission as the endgame compelled me to 'take the plunge' as it were on podcasting and realise the medium's enabling and fruitful applications in terms of technology-enhanced learning. This paper has sought to highlight the considerable potential of podcasts as effective and innovative teaching and learning supports in contemporary higher education. I believe they can fulfil a number of important pedagogic functions, from underscoring core module learning outcomes and key concepts to practically and creatively prompting follow-up reading and e-learning engagements. Moreover, they can be an especially useful tool in terms of maintaining constructive alignment in teaching, steering independent learning and giving productive student feedback.

Ultimately, knowledge, I think, matters greatly in this life, and my own teaching is driven by a passion for engaging students on key global issues of geopolitics. I believe in my students and their ability to make the world a better place by being more informed, affected and committed to critical social thinking and civic engagement. Geography as a discipline is about situated and contextualised knowledge, and I have always enjoyed the journey there with my students. Piquing student interest, encouraging engagement and inspiring critical thinking is both hugely fulfilling and rewarding, and podcasting can certainly aid in that pedagogic journey.

6. Acknowledgements

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8. Notes

1See also Salmon *et al* (2008: 5-6) for a useful outlining of 'enhanced podcasts', which are podcasts comprising built-in functions such as 'slide-shows', or 'chapters' for better navigation.

2Simply using a digital voice recorder and just uploading podcasts direct to the VLE via USB is also a straightforward mechanism, and again a variety of sound editing software can be used to revise podcasts before uploading.

3In terms of methodology, I decided to go for an open-ended questionnaire survey, which, of course, had its limitations. Although beyond the scope of this paper, following up with focus group explorations of the six identified key areas of student feedback would have added an important layer of critical analysis, and it is something I plan to do in future years (especially with a view to assessing in more detail how VLE podcasting can positively impact on student learning outcomes). Presenting the access statistics of the VLE would also have provided an additional level of evaluation that would have helped to quantify the use of the podcasts and the particular VLE elements they prompted to engage with. Though the raw access data automatically gathered by VLEs is not a straightforward representation of student engagement (for instance, many of the hits might reflect browsing rather than engagement – i.e. there is no temporal measure of how long students remain on any given resource), it would nevertheless help to build a picture of VLE usage. And given the fact that this data has already been collected (though it would have to be transcribed, of course, before module archives are removed), it is certainly something I will incorporate into any future research on podcasting and any ongoing revision of podcast provision.