

Podcasting in Education

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Podcasting is an internet based distribution mechanism for digital media files. Although digital audio and video files have been available on web sites for many years, what makes podcasting new is the subscription based model. Rather than visiting a web site to download an audio file, listeners use a special program called an aggregator to subscribe to a feed. This free subscription lets the aggregator automatically download new episodes as they become available. The episodes appear automatically in the listener's playlist. If the listener has a portable media player, such as Apple's iPod, it can synchronize with the aggregator and ensure the new episodes are ready for listening on the move.

Although the term podcasting has its origins in Apple's iPod, no iPod is necessary. Audio files can be played on the listener's computer, or on any of the other portable media players on the market. In addition, many mobile phones now boast the ability to play audio files. Apple's iTunes music program is the most popular aggregator and Apple has integrated a directory of podcasts in to its online iTunes Music Store. This is the best way to find and subscribe to podcasts. Although used primarily for audio files, podcasts can also deliver video, images, and PDF files.

Radio and TV stations, with their large inventories of audio and video content, are using podcasting to deliver their programming to new audiences in new ways. The BBC is leading the charge and many of

its programs have listeners in locations that previously could not be reached. BBC Radio 5 film reviewer Mark Kermode has a large fan based on US colleges. Because podcasts are not live and are typically downloaded overnight, they are not ideally suited to news programming. But topical programs, like RTE's Playback, The Last Word with Matt Cooper and Ian Dempsey's Breakfast Show from Today FM are among the most popular podcasts in Ireland.

However what makes podcasting exciting is that it opens up radio to amateurs, in the same way that the internet first brought cheap and instant publishing to the masses. Excited and energetic young people around the world are now making radio programs in their living rooms and bedrooms.

Podcasting has a variety of applications to Higher Education and presents educators and their employers with a number of opportunities and challenges. Podcasting can play significant role in how colleges and universities interact with their distance students, their day students, and the wider community.

As semi-skilled jobs migrate to low-cost centres in developing countries, European workers will have to move up the value chain by securing new skills. Because it is difficult for such workers to quit their jobs and take up full time education, distance learning or blended learning may provide the best opportunity for them to meet their training and education needs. Lectures and discussions can be delivered to students as podcasts. Once the student has subscribed to the podcast, all new classes and notes will be downloaded automatically. From there they can be copied portable devices if the student

wants to study on the go. The ability to access learning materials on a cheap player may also have an impact on access to distance education by poorer students.

Distance learning courses are expensive to produce however and few colleges in Europe can afford to spend money developing courses specifically for on-line delivery.

Authoring-on-the-fly is a cheaper method of production that relies on lecturers digitally capturing the classes they are already giving anyway. Many lecturers already use applications like PowerPoint to design slides for their classes. If a recording device is added to the class room then the lecturer's voice can be captured too. Once in digital form these classes can be uploaded and made available on the internet. This approach lets lectures carry on doing what they know best. Arguably they will not be as good as well planned interactive learning applications custom designed for on-line learning. But their relatively low cost means that they might be available to students much sooner. Authoring-on-the-fly also allows colleges to dip their toes in the distance learning pool and migrate time and resources gradually as demand dictates.

The podcast course currently being piloted at CIT delivers lectures to evening students. However the students meet with the lecturer frequently to sort out any problems they may be having. This works well because all of the students have to attend the campus once a week for their other classes, in any event. Both the ability to meet the lecturer face-to-face when needed and peer support are important for the students taking the course. It is not clear if totally online course would be as successful.

Podcasting can be useful for full-time students too. Podcasting is ideal for language learning. Students can put lessons on their music players and listen to them wherever they like, as often as they like. If learning materials are provided online, students need not be so concerned with note taking. This can make them more relaxed and more engaged with the material, the lecturer, and the other students. If classes are captured and stored online students who miss a class can easily catch up. Evidence from Cork Institute of Technology, which has had some class recordings online since 2001, suggests that even students who attend a class appreciate being able to listen to it again. In addition, the availability of classes online had no impact on attendance – a common concern among lecturers.

Students access podcast lectures and play them using the same applications and technology they use to listen to music and watch videos. They are very comfortable with the technology and it is part of their lifestyle. Many students are permanently tethered to their digital media players. Once a student has subscribed to a class the lectures will turn up on their media players automatically. At a time when student retention is low, it is vital that educators engage with students in whatever domains they inhabit and podcasting allows lecturers to do just that. Any college classroom in the developed world is now likely to have as many iPods as it does textbooks. And the number of textbooks is going down. If podcasts are prepared in advance of lectures then it may be possible to dispense with lectures all together. Bradford University students were surprised this year to learn that their lecturer, Dr. Bill Ashraf, was not offering any lectures at all. Instead

students subscribed to a podcast and listened to their lectures in their own time. Developments such as this mark a shift in the role of lecturers from content distributors towards a learning support function. Dr. Ahsraf felt his time was best spent working with students in small tutorial groups answering questions and solving problems. Podcasting can play an important role in how an higher education institution engages with the wider community. Once a lecturer has overcome the initial discomfort associated with putting classes online for students, it is not such a big step to make the classes available to anyone on the internet. Allowing potential students to attend some classes virtually can help them make more informed choices about the courses they should take, or even the colleges they attend. There is also a significant audience, however, of people who are not and never will be students. Giving this sector of the population access to the resources and expertise that has been developed in colleges can provide important added value for the society and the economy. Institutions that get the bulk of their funding from public sources might do well to let taxpayers see what they are getting for their money.

Experimental techniques, like podcasting, present challenges as well as opportunities. If students are to successfully learn outside of the traditional classroom they have to be disciplined and take responsibility for their own learning. This is not easy for students used to merely turning up for class. New teaching techniques present challenges for lecturers and administrators too. Current systems for measuring lecturers' work are based on contact hours during which the lecturer are standing in front of a classroom. And lecturers might reasonably fear that

courses without lectures could become courses without lecturers.

Innovations like podcasting challenge the way we think about higher education. It is likely that in the future higher education institutions will become more virtual than they are now. Banks were once housed in large impressive buildings, but now conduct much of their business is conducted online. Although full time attendance on campus will be the preferred method of study for the majority of young people, universities will use various internet technologies to allow more learning online. Podcasting is just one technology that will form part of the digital campus. Students will comfortably navigate through a terrain of blogs, wikis, instant messaging, mobile phones, and VOIP. If educators are to provide relevant and engaging instruction, they will have to carve out a space on that digital landscape too.