

Title:

The use of Pod-Casting to enhance students' engagement and deeper learning

Summary:

As technology progresses, new potential teaching and learning methods become available for scrutiny. One such technology that has received attention in the last two years is the use of pod-casting. Pod-casting involves the audio recording of teaching sessions which can then be hosted on the internet for remote access, providing flexible and independent learning opportunities (Bull 2005). The limited literature that has assessed the use of the medium reports 'enormous potential for providing learning experiences' (Warlick 2005) and contains discussions around the flexibility and effectiveness of such techniques (Chan & Lee 2005). For the past two years I have been experimenting with the use of pod-casting as a tool to enhance my teaching and learning practice. This statement will introduce pod-casting, reflect upon my experiences in using the medium, and present students views on the practice.

This new approach addresses both Criterion 1 and 3, introducing a new method that supports, influences, motivates and inspires students to learn while providing additional learning support to foster greater independent learning.

Statement:

The term 'pod-casting' is a portmanteau of 'playable on demand' and broadcast. Pod-casting simply involves the provision of digital media files that are distributed over the internet for playback on portable media players or personal computers at the users' convenience. This is done through recording learning sessions with the use of a digital Dictaphone and tie microphone for enhanced quality. The resulting data file is then up-loaded onto MuBu a process that really doesn't take more than a couple of minutes.

A number of studies have examined existing educational use of pod-casting, finding that it is primarily used for the dissemination of recorded lectures and discussions (Flanagan & Calandra 2005). This research has also attempted to measure the effectiveness of the purely auditory media of pod-casting versus in-class instruction, finding no significant difference in learning effectiveness, and as such provides a very productive learning and teaching method that is also very cost effective. Warlick (2005) confirms this view highlighting the great potential the media holds for providing learning experiences.

While this research suggests that auditory learning through pod-casts is just as effective as in-class tuition there are a number of additional student benefits that are also afforded. Firstly the temporal flexibility that the technology provides: students can download and listen to the material whenever

they are able to, possibly avoiding an early morning after a big night out, or arranging their own timetable around part-time work for example (Chan & Lee 2005). This temporal flexibility extends to geographic flexibility (Bull-Glen 2005). With Pod-Casts being made available through MyBu, students can access the materials from any computer enabling truly independent and flexible learning. In summary the use of Pod-Casts allows students to learn within 'their' optimal environment (Lim 2006), at a time optimal to them, and at their pace. The student is able to control the pace of playback, and pause, rewind etc. as they wish to integrate the session with their reading of supporting material, or to re-visit any particular passage a number of times if it is at first unclear.

In light of these learning benefits I was keen to try to incorporate pod-casting into my teaching practice. This has been done to compliment rather than replace existing traditional lecture sessions as discussed below. Each lecture for the past two years has been recorded and up-loaded onto MyBu for student download on request. Through tracking students' use of these files it can be seen that approximately 70% of all students download some lecture pod-casts, and approximately 50% of students download every pod-cast, however it is not possible to really interpret from this how the students are using and valuing these files. Frequently students comment positively on the use of pod-casts when completing the SUE feedback, however, again, this feedback is rather anecdotal and unstructured. While the SUE scores for the units in which pod-casts were used are high, it is not clear what contribution the pod-casts are making to this. In order to gain a full understanding of how students are using the media, and the value they place on the pod-casts, a number of focus group discussions have been conducted with the findings summarised below.

As the Pod-Casts were made available as an additional resource designed to enhance student learning, rather than in place of any other teaching method, their use was entirely optional; as such it was unsurprising that no negative feedback was voiced during the focus group discussions. No student felt that the audio recording of the lectures inhibited their contribution or their asking of questions (which of course would also be recorded). One point that I was particularly keen to explore was the impact making lectures available remotely might have had on physical student attendance. While I do not formally log attendance at lectures, through observation I had not noticed any drop-off in attendance levels. This observation was confirmed in all of the focus groups, with students commenting that they would always try to attend to get the overview of the subject and have the opportunity to ask question and interact. However they felt the pod-cast was useful in the few instances that they were not able to attend lectures, when ill for example, or while attending the many placement interviews.

It was clear that students were using the Pod-Casts in a variety of different ways that best suited their learning style. Firstly the Pod-Casts were thought to provide a good revision resource when it came to exam time. Secondly Pod-Casts were used to catch up on 'physically' missed sessions. Thirdly, many students commented on the ability to go through the material at a time, place and pace that best suited their needs. Finally and possibly most importantly, many students routinely attend the lecture, listening and contributing actively rather than worrying about writing comprehensive notes. They would then listen to the Pod-Cast of the lecture to make extensive notes, pausing and rewinding

where necessary to make sure that each point was clear to them. This encourages the students to engage in a far deeper style of learning, really thinking about each of the points covered rather than glossing over many issues as is sometimes necessary due to the limited length of lectures.

In addition to this general feedback from students, a number of students with Additional Learning Needs have commented on its value to them, with audio learning being specifically beneficial to dyslexic students. The university provides a significant number of students with their own recording devices to enable this, however the pod-casts provided were of significantly better quality, and reliably provided enhancing this practice.

In the focus group discussions students were very keen to see pod-casting being used in addition to traditional learning methods rather than to replace them. Attendance patterns also suggest that students still enjoy (or at least see the value in!) attending physical lectures. A consequence, I believe that pod-casting should be viewed as providing a significant enhancement to students' learning rather than a means to reduce contact. Despite this I do believe that the level of additional support required from me as a lecturer has reduced, with this being specifically notable in the lead up to exams or other assessment. Where previously questions would be directed to the tutor, now with the availability of greater resources, the students are proving to be more independent, finding the answers within the extended resources on MyBu.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that through providing pod-casts I have given students the opportunity to learn in the way that best suits them as individuals, fostering a deeper learning style, and consequently effecting greater student learning and development. The practice is of benefit to all students but has particular resonance to those with additional learning needs. In the current academic environment it is important to find ways to enhance the students' learning experience that does not become onerous on us as academic staff. I am therefore very happy that this initiative delivers such benefits without taking any additional time!

References:

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