Chapter 8

Audio Active: Discovering Mobile Learner-Gatherers from Across the Formal–Informal Continuum

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the dominant perception evident in the literature that mobile podcasting is primarily a medium for knowledge transmission. It describes why and how mobile audio learning can be facilitative, active and integrated, and how it can involve diverse voices, including those of students, in ways that usefully disrupt didactic pedagogy. Audio is described as an active learning environment, capable of supporting connection to the real world around education in which students are able to act as autonomous learner-gatherers. The paper responds to concerns raised by Ciussi, Rosner, and Augier (2009) that some students are disinterested in podcasting and uses a scenario-based design methodology (Carroll, 2000) to describe and evaluate six innovative applications. It concludes that mobile audio can be understood as an active medium capable of richly and meaningfully engaging learners.

INTRODUCTION

Ciussi, Rosner, and Augier (2009) in their study of students’ interest in using podcasting on their mobile devices identify two myths in the literature: firstly, those students who have grown up with the Internet are uncomfortable with, or unaware of, podcasting; secondly, that the much vaunted idea of “learning anytime anywhere” is...something of a myth” (Ciussi, Rosner, & Augier, 2009, p. 95). Importantly, they question whether these findings would be true in situations where podcasts are integrated into an active, learner-centred pedagogy. Building upon this, this paper presents a view of
mobile educational audio that is designed to be learner-centred, active and integrated, and challenges approaches to educational podcasting that see it as a technical extension to existing learning environments, suited to information transmission.

This paper describes the use of educational audio in terms of its capacity to change modes of engagement across the formal-informal learning continuum, especially in ways that heighten activity, authenticity and learner-centredness. Ciussi et al. (2009) suggest that knowledge construction and knowledge sharing offer two contexts for effective learning with mobile audio. This suggestion is explored using a scenario-based design methodology (Carroll, 2000), a method that allows the curriculum designer to imagine, describe and evaluate pedagogy.

BACKGROUND

General academic access to digital audio production is relatively recent. Its use, therefore, should promote innovation, especially in addressing the needs and expectations of learners in the Digital Age, and society in general. Areas of audio innovation include the user-generation of content, the growing appreciation of mobile learning and exploration of less formal methods of learner engagement. These ideas are explored here to provide background to the evaluation of a set of six mobile audio scenarios.

Looking Back to the Future

Consideration of audio and podcasting by learners, teachers and their institutions is inevitably obscured by previous experiences of education. McLuhan and Fiore (1967, pp. 74-75) describe this problem with evaluating the potential of technology as looking “at the present through the rear-view mirror”; recognising that it can be difficult to think creatively beyond the paradigm that we know and expect.

‘Dead-time learning’ (Learn Out Loud, 2005) is a concept that seems to make sense to those interested in understanding the potential of educational audio: learning can be delivered at times that would otherwise be unproductive to the commuting or otherwise displaced student through the introduction of mobile technology. It recognises the complex student demographics of the twenty first century and the busy lives that many students lead as they work and study. However, Middleton (2009) discusses how filling these cognitive voids with knowledge delivered in the form of recorded lectures via podcast feeds is at odds with the drive for learner-centred pedagogy in the higher education sector.

There are other problems with this ‘common sense’ view of podcasting. Firstly, amongst the minority of students that understand the idea of podcasting subscription, most use a PC rather than a portable MP3 player to listen to media (Atkinson, Buntine, & McCrohan, 2007; Evans, 2008; Lane, 2006; Lee & Chan, 2007; Malan, 2007; Morganteen, 2006; Walls, Kucsera, Walker, Acee, & McVaugh, 2010). Furthermore, Rothwell (2008) and Sutton-Brady, Scott, Taylor, Carabetta, and Clark (2009) specifically highlight students’ preference for listening in the informal setting of home. Secondly, though some commentators such as Cebeci and Tekdal (2006) have highlighted the benefits of listening and learning on the move anywhere or anytime, Salmon and Nie (2008) have noticed how students find it difficult to concentrate whilst mobile. Bell, Cockburn, Wingkvist, and Green (2007) show some frustration with the limited vision for how educational podcasting can be used and suggest several ideas of their own including audio announcements, FAQs, hands-free instruction, and feedback to students, as well as involving people from beyond the classroom to reinforce material.

Several authors, including Parsons, Reddy, Wood, and Senior (2009) and Copley (2007), have noted the limited value of recorded lectures as a teaching method. The value of the
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