Chapter 11

Screencasts:
Your Technology Professor 24/7

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ABSTRACT

Screencasts allow a learner to experience a computer-based demonstration again and again at the learner’s pace. This means students can review a complicated process or look-up which menu option was selected to get a certain window. Historically, there has been a strong reliance on paper-based support materials. Yet static screen captures don’t always tell a learner what steps were taken to get to the window that is shown. Screencasts show exactly what a learner needs to do to complete a given task. Additionally, screencasts are affordable to create and distribute. This chapter will outline the equipment necessary to create screencasts. A selection of software applications will be discussed, and practical tips will be provided to help the reader quickly begin creating screencasts.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, individuals teaching courses about technology have done their best to provide excellent instructional materials for their students. They’ve spent countless hours collecting screen captures of menus and windows then developed detailed handouts with step-by-step instructions. They’ve also devoted considerable class-time to demonstrations. In spite of all of this hard work, students still struggle once they leave the computer classroom. Why does this happen? Essentially, students learn differently. Some students are so distracted with anxiety while in a computer lab they cannot concentrate. Other students need more individualized, slower-paced instruction. Some students get back to their own computer and find the application looks different on theirs than it did in the classroom. In any case, the goal is good instruction and trying to help students learn a specific application or process.

Wouldn’t it be helpful to take classroom demonstrations and package them in a way students could keep? Some sort of package that would allow students to view the same steps over and over
again would make teachers’ lives easier and likely help their students learn the material better. This chapter is about that idea.

BACKGROUND

We’ve always struggled with printed handouts, or should we say our students have always struggled with printed handouts. We would take a great deal of time to capture the different menu options and windows a student would see when using an application. We would write incredibly detailed descriptions and steps for them, even including call outs and references to the images. Still, many students would experience problems. They would get confused on “where to click” or how we accessed a specific window. We started hearing from them, “I just can’t remember what you clicked on,” or “I wish you could have shown me that again.” Now we can show our students exactly where we clicked, over and over again.

We teach instructional technology in a university school of education. The primary course we teach introduces pre-service teacher education students to using a computer in pedagogically sound ways in classrooms. Our students complete projects using a variety of software applications and online resources. For most of our students, the content in this class is new and goes beyond their usual use of a computer. While they may be comfortable using Microsoft Office applications, checking their email, and surfing the Web, my class introduces them to new applications and resources such as digital photography, podcasting, digital video, and some web development among other things.

We have always encouraged our students to keep their printed materials stored away somewhere for use once they began their teaching career. We never expected them to remember everything covered in class and thought the detailed handouts would be a good resource for them when they wanted to use something we had covered in class with their students. However, we wanted to give them more. That’s where screencasts come in.

Screencasts allow us to capture everything happening on our screens or part of our screens while we narrate what we’re doing. Our students see the mouse movements, menu selections, typing, and hear our voice. The use of screencasts allows us to be available to our students any time and anywhere. Additionally, screencasts happen in real-time, so if something takes one minute to complete, our students see it in one minute. Think about the amount of textual descriptions and image captures that are needed to explain something that takes one minute to perform. Screencasts can be used in traditional education classrooms, training environments, distance education situations, and as supplementary materials in textbooks, just to list a few possible uses.

There are a number of great options for capturing a screen and narrating processes. Some of these options are resource intensive and rather expensive. However, there are a lot of wonderful options that are easy to use and quite affordable. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the basic hardware requirements for creating screencasts, introduce some of the software applications that can be used for screencasting, describe different delivery methods of finished screencasts, offer some helpful production tips, and address some potential challenges for those of you that want to begin screencasting. The chapter will conclude with a look to the future.

HARDWARE REQUIREMENTS

Long gone are the days of expensive audio boards. Most modern computers have all the necessary resources for screencasting. The introduction of USB microphones has made recording narration rather simple. As long as the computer used for production has adequate processing power and hard drive space, there should be no problem creating screencasts. Of course, there are always