Chapter 12
Podcasting in Distance Learning: True Pedagogical Innovation or Just More of the Same?

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explores how podcasting can be used to support and enhance the student experience, with a focus on tertiary-level distance education contexts. It begins with a review of the rationale behind the use of podcasting and digital audio for distance teaching and learning, including a consideration of the unique features and attributes of podcasting that differentiate it from older or pre-existing educational technologies. The authors then showcase a number of examples involving the use of podcasting in distance e-learning and blended learning, drawn from the exemplary practices of educators across the globe. Discussion of these exemplars centers around four major themes: increasing learner motivation and engagement; facilitating and enhancing learning outcomes; impacting on mobility and lifestyle learning; and fostering a sense of community, with the aim of contributing to the establishment of an evidence-based case about the benefits of podcasting in relation to addressing the needs of distance education students, as well as illuminating some of the problems and barriers that exist. The chapter concludes with a number of recommendations for distance educators.

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Podcasting in Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

Podcasting, alongside other Web 2.0 tools and technologies, is attracting intense interest and investment from administrators and teachers at universities and colleges worldwide. In the field of distance learning, the use of podcasting as a distribution mechanism for digital audio content is believed by educators, for example, to hold tremendous potential to assist in addressing many of the issues and challenges traditionally faced by students studying remotely from their instructors and classmates (Lee & Chan, 2007; Essex, 2006).

The main focus of this chapter is on how podcasting can be used and is being used by tertiary educators to support and enhance teaching and learning in a range of distance education and hybrid or blended contexts. Applications of the technology, as well as claims that have been made about the unique learning benefits afforded, are critically examined, while keeping in perspective other audio-based technologies and tools that have been used in distance education for several decades. The authors present a number of international exemplars from the literature involving the use of podcasting in distance and blended learning, before proposing a framework to guide the design of educational podcasts and podcast-based learning activities.

BACKGROUND: THE USE OF AUDIO TECHNOLOGIES IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Amid the current excitement and hype, Schlosser and Burmeister (2006) remind us that “The use of audio in education is not new, but is experiencing a renaissance fuelled by the ubiquity of portable audio players, broadband Internet, and software tools that allow the relatively easy creation and distribution of audio files” (sec. 2, para. 1). Research in open, flexible, and distance learning pre-dating the World Wide Web showed that “As compared with a written text, the spoken word can influence both cognition (adding clarity and meaning) and motivation (by conveying directly a sense of the person creating those words)” (Durbridge, 1984), which presents many valuable affordances for teaching at a distance. With the advent of web-based virtual learning environments (VLEs) in the 1990s, however, there appears to have been a regression into focusing on text-based modes of presentation and communication, using course web pages, email, discussion boards, and chat (Barnes, 1995).

Radio has been used in distance education for many decades, arguably since its early beginnings in mail/post-based “correspondence courses” (Bates, 1981). In combination with tutorials, print materials, local listening groups, and face-to-face meetings, it has been used to teach a wide range of subjects at various levels. Audiocassette tapes, and more recently, compact discs (CDs), have been used as a solution where the ephemeral nature and fixed transmission times characteristic of radio broadcasts (World Bank, 2000) pose a problem, where learners are geographically spread over too large an area, or where radio air time is simply not readily available. Learners see cassettes and CDs as more personal and informal than radio, and cassettes have also been found to be more appropriate than radio for controlled, didactic teaching (Power, 1990, citing Bates, 1981). Kates (1998) proposes the use of voice recordings, distributed on audiotape cassette, to provide feedback to students on their assignments, and discusses the benefits of this method over the traditional, written form.

Laaser (1986, “Introduction,” para. 1) summarizes the advantages of using audiocassettes in distance education as follows:

- they can be produced with variable duration (playing time);
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