Chapter 11

Educational Podcasts at University Campus Suffolk

Tim Goodchild
University Campus Suffolk, UK

Sam Chenery-Morris
University Campus Suffolk, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore the introduction and development of podcasts at University Campus Suffolk (UCS). The podcasts discussed in this chapter have all been developed in relation to pre-registration health and social care courses within the Faculty of Health at UCS. UCS is a relatively new university, and has a wide range of professional courses including nursing, midwifery, radiography, operating department practice and social work. The chapter will begin with a discussion of where podcasts sit in the paradigm of mobile learning and then a brief history of podcasting. The introduction of podcasts at UCS has been ad-hoc and mostly in response to ideas for developing the wider student learning experience. This ad-hoc approach has led to the development of a model for their educational use. Three case studies will be outlined, followed by presentation of the model. These case studies will show how podcasts came to be utilised, and the progression of our thoughts and experiences which have informed their current and future development at UCS. Small scale evaluations throughout the developmental period, and informal student feedback have helped inform the progression of podcasting at UCS. These evaluations have driven the increased use of podcasts at UCS, with students enjoying the experience of using podcasts, and also the ability to digest the podcasts at a time of their choosing. However, it should be noted that because of the nature of the developmental process, full scale evaluative research is only now being undertaken.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61692-849-0.ch011
INTRODUCTION

Podcasts are audio or video files that can be ‘subscribed to’ and then delivered to a computer or compatible handheld device such as an iPod or mobile phone. They have been used at UCS since 2007 as an educational tool for a variety of courses. The development of podcasts at UCS was not planned as part of a large scale implementation of podcast development, or as a pedagogical solution for mobile learning, but was rather as an idea to meet a perceived need for students wanting to get access to learning material when and where they needed to.

Podcasts are considered part of mobile learning, although there seems to be no widely agreed learning theory for ‘mobile learning’, and consequently, how podcasts are viewed within this theory. Instinctively, mobile learning may mean ‘learning whilst mobile’ or ‘learning via mobile or handheld devices’. However, it is also apparent via even a cursory glance through educational literature, that there are many divergent views as to what mobile learning truly represents.

The term “mobile learning” can simply be viewed primarily as an extension of e-learning (Shuler, 2009). Indeed, early theories put forward focus on this idea of a further dimension to e-learning (Traxler 2005). This approach has also been coined as a “technocentric” approach—where the focus resides with the technology itself, such as a mobile phone handset or an iPod, rather than with the learner or the learning taking place. It could be argued that this use of the term ‘mobile learning’ is just an alternative version of the term ‘open and distance learning’. Perhaps “handheld learning” is more cogent with this technocentric view of mobile learning, where handheld technology is central.

The technocentric view of mobile learning as an extension of e-learning, or a focus on handheld technology does not take into account the unique nature of mobility and learning, and rather absorbs it within the existing e-learning or distance learning spectrum. It also posits mobile learning as attached to a current iteration of technology, and consideration should be placed on the underlying educational experience which takes place, perhaps via the technology. The rapid rate of technological advancement, especially in the mobile arena, deters a concrete association between any iteration of technology and educational theory.

Podcasting fits in with the technocentric view of mobile learning, as podcasts can be delivered and played on mobile devices. However, they are not solely for handheld devices and are easily accessible on computers as well, and as the longevity of podcasts and their ability to evolve have demonstrated, they are not tied to a particular iteration of technology.

There seems to be a widening acceptance for the view that mobile learning should refer to learning whilst mobile, or learning that takes place away from the traditional sites of education such as a classroom, library or in a study/office (Pachler 2007). In this view the focus is not on the devices, but rather on the mobility of the learner. O’Malley et al (2007) states that mobile learning is:

“any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies.”

Podcasts are ‘mobile learning’ in this respect, as they are delivered to the learner’s devices, and therefore, to wherever the learner may be. It may be that the podcasts are listened to on a computer at home, but they may also be listened to in the car, the bus, whilst undertaking leisure activities, or even at work. Podcasts promote the idea of mobility of learning because they can become intrinsic to a handheld device, and free the learner to participate in learning wherever and whenever they choose.

In September 2007, prior to commencing podcast use in education a small survey was
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