

Reflections on using podcasting for student feedback

Derek France¹ and Anne Wheeler²

1. Department of Geography and Development Studies, University of Chester

2. Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Enabling Achievement within a Diverse Student Body, University of Wolverhampton

Abstract

As part of a year three module, at the University of Chester (University) assignment feedback was delivered by podcasting technology. This offered a novel approach to feedback that had the potential to be timely, constructive and individualised. This paper focuses on student perceptions and attitudes to podcasting assignment feedback (PAF) using data gathered from a pre- and post-podcasting questionnaire survey and a focus group discussion. The results suggested that the use of PAF provided enhanced opportunities to deliver both generic and individualised feedback to students, and an improved student learning experience. Less obvious 'side-effects' included the importance of the tone of oral delivery of the podcast, and the less superficial nature with which podcast feedback was apparently treated by students.

Introduction

Many students arrive at University with some form of technological gadgetry, which may include a mobile phone, MP3 player or laptop. They form part of the modern day 'net generation' of students (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005), who bring with them a wealth of online experience and skills that can be utilised by today's Higher Education practitioners, and, therefore, incorporated into student learning activities.

Technology, has been used in education for many years with developments in computer technology in particular, creating new frontiers in geography education (Nellis, 1994). A recent UK strategy document *Harnessing technology transforming learning and children's services*, commented positively on the role of technology, stating that "a greater focus on technology will produce real benefits for all" (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p.2). However, HEFCE (2005, p.6) more cautiously states that, "focus should be on student learning rather than on developments in technology *per se*, enabling students to learn through, and be

supported, by technology." The institutional framework in the UK is therefore supportive, provided that the technology is applied in a pedagogically-sensitive context.

This short article presents the interim findings of a study to explore some of the initial student evaluations of podcasting assignment feedback, and will identify the positive and negative attitudes of using podcasts. In this article, 'podcasting' refers to the process of downloading audio files to computers. These files can be automatically loaded onto portable devices, such as iPods, that are virtually universally available to students. Podcasting has been used before to enhance learning and teaching activities, including lectures (Brittain *et al.*, 2006) and more informally to enhance the student learning experience (Edirisingha, P and Salmon, G., *in press*). The opportunity offered by podcasting is to harness the technology to improve feedback to students, as demonstrated in Race (1999, p. 27), who stated "feedback quantity and quality are probably the most important factors in enhancing students' learning".

Rationale and methods

Providing students with effective feedback is a perennially challenging issue with staff and students alike, and is a vital component of their ongoing learning. Podcasting offers a novel approach to feedback that has the potential to be timely, constructive, and individualised. It also provides an opportunity to support a range of learner styles and increase student engagement through reflection. In contrast, contemporary opportunities for feedback using standard University proforma can be perceived as brief, mechanical and one-way. By using podcasting, there is a potentially significant opening for student-practitioner dialogue, enabling the students to communicate their own questions and responses to the initial feedback given through an invitation to reply at the end of the podcast.

Podcasts were recorded directly into a hand held iPod with a microphone attachment. The audio files, around two to three minutes in duration, were automatically downloaded and compiled into a podcast. Each enhanced podcast (with supplementary images) consisted of two sections. Firstly, generic group feedback on the assignment, and secondly, more specific, individual feedback. Podcast assignment feedback (PAF) was created after each assessment point. In total, 76 podcasts (each no more than 2Mb in size) were uploaded onto the University's homegrown Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Internet Based Information System (IBIS), and were situated within each student's personal development portfolio (PDP) and made available to download. The PAF could be played online or transferred to a MP3 player. Students without a suitable MP3 player were able to borrow an iPod from the Department. An automated email was sent to each student communicating that feedback was available.

This paper draws on the experiences and attitudes of a group of 26 students (10 males and 12 females aged 20-25, and four females aged over 30) who studied a Level 3, Semester 1 module (15 credits) 'Climate Change and Natural Hazard Management'. The module was assessed through an individual e-postcard (33%),



Photo Caption: Students Naomi Taylor (left) and Jennifer Snelson (right) check out the feedback from their latest assignment on an i-pod.

“the generic feedback helps to improve my confidence, especially knowing that others may be struggling with the same things”.

group presentation (17%), and an individual report (50%). PAF was provided to students for all three assessments. Information on the PAF was gathered through a bespoke pre- and post-podcasting questionnaire survey and a student focus group. The pre-podcasting questionnaire was designed to ascertain students' initial perceptions, experiences and attitudes to podcast feedback. The post-podcasting questionnaire reviewed the actual student learning experience compared with more traditional methods of feedback. As is common practice, these surveys were completed anonymously, although a coding system was used so that it was possible to identify how each individual student's opinions had changed. The responses to the surveys were comprehensive (pre-podcasting = 100% and post-podcasting = 69%). The comments provided in the two surveys were then used as the basis for further discussion in a focus group consisting of an independent external facilitator and a small number of self-selecting students, all of whom had completed the module. The focus group proved to be a particularly useful exercise that allowed clarification of some of the issues raised in the pre- and post-module surveys, as well as the identification of some more subtle points that were not evident in the responses to the structured questionnaires. The experiences of the focus group certainly confirm the value of using end of module discussions to gain a deeper insight into student perceptions of their learning experiences (Gold et al, 1991).

Results and discussion

The pre- and post-podcasting questionnaire data is presented thematically according to the two main themes - technology and personalised feedback.

Technology

Students were initially asked about their prior experiences of using podcast technology. Eighteen of the 26 Students (65%) who completed the pre podcasting questionnaire had never previously listened to, or watched a podcast, even though 22 students (85%) knew about podcasting. This inexperience in using the technology was clearly identifiable in the pre-podcasting questionnaire in which nine of the 26 students reported some reservations about using the technology, for example students expressed concerns about:

“The technicalities of [downloading podcasts]. I am a technophobe.”

“Not being able to use the [VLE]system.”

“[I have] never used [podcasts] before, I'm not sure how to do [download them].”

The post podcast questionnaire identified some of the technological glitches of working with this new technology, which have since been resolved, but are still important to report. The automatic e-mail to students confirming availability of podcast feedback was problematic, as some students did not receive the confirmation. The initial time lag in uploading the first PAF, due in part to local software problems, resulted in student frustration evident in the post-podcast feedback. The sound recording volume of the podcast was felt by 30% of the students to be low as it played somewhat quieter on student PCs. The initial concerns about using the technology were not fully realised with 17 of the 18 students who completed the post-podcasting questionnaire downloading more than two PAFs, and over 60% of the students confirming the ease with which the podcasts could be accessed. Only a minority of students reported problems in accessing and downloading the podcasts.

Personalised feedback.

The perception of the students was that PAF offered a more personalised form of feedback than traditional written feedback, with the additional generic feedback component offering a useful insight into the performance of the whole student cohort. A typical student response notes that *“the generic feedback helps to improve my confidence, especially knowing that others may be struggling with the same things”*. The initial concerns expressed at the start of the module focused around the perceived difficulty in listening to critical commentary of their work, rather than reading it. These concerns were not realised. Instead, the impact of the podcast feedback was perceived as being harder-hitting, in a form less easy to ignore; and the tone of voice of the feedback provided a clear context to the critical comments, that is unavailable in traditional written feedback. This is demonstrated by the following student comments:

“[The feedback was] really personal, you get the tone of voice with the words, so you could understand the importance of the different parts of the feedback”

“[The podcast format] makes you listen to all of the feedback not just the mark; because you are listening I seem to remember the comments easier than just reading them”

“[It was] more detailed and personal feedback. A clear idea of positive and negative points about my work”

The quality of PAF was deemed by virtually all students to be better than written feedback. There were no problems understanding lecturer's handwriting, the PAF appeared to be targeted to more specific points for improvement, and it provided a more accurate account of the quality of the assessed work. However, this may reflect not only the positive qualities of the PAF but the weaknesses in the current form of written assignment feedback.

Conclusion

Student feedback suggested that the use of PAF enhanced the student experience of this module. The benefits were most tangible in terms of improved assignment feedback that incorporated both generic and student-specific feedback. However, the focus group highlighted more subtle 'side-effects', including the importance of the tone of delivery of the podcast, and the less superficial nature with which podcast feedback is apparently treated.

The student experience during this module indicated that PAF is an interesting and worthwhile way of diversifying assessment feedback. Undeniably, the inclusion of this type of feedback was labour intensive (the creation of the podcasts and upload to the VLE) but it was rewarding for tutors.

More generally, the method of communicating feedback is important to the way in which students react to it and is related to their willingness to act upon it. Further research is needed into aligning the methods of feedback to the assessment, curriculum stage, and student cohort. Podcasting can now enter that mix of feedback mechanisms.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr Steve Fletcher of the University of Bournemouth for his insightful and constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper and the students from

the University of Chester who participated in the evaluation of podcasting assignment feedback. The research on which this paper was based was a funded Small-Scale Learning and Teaching Project by the GEES Subject Centre and contributed to the University of Chester HEA/JISC e-learning Pathfinder project.

References

- Brittain, S., Glowacki, P., Van Ittersum, J., and Johnson, L. (2006) Podcasting Lectures. *Educause Quarterly*, 3 pp 24-31. Available online at <http://www.educause.edu/apps/eq/eqm06/eqm063.asp> (accessed April 12th 2007)
- Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Harnessing technology transforming learning and children's services* Available online at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/e-strategy/> (accessed 6th April 2007).
- Edirisingha, P and Salmon, G. (in press) *Pedagogical Models For Podcasts in Higher Education*. Proceedings of European Distance and E-Learning Conference, 13th -16th June 2007, Naples, Italy.
- Gold, J.R., Jenkins, A., Lee, R., Monk, J., Riley, J., Shepherd, I. & Unwin, D. (1991) *Teaching Geography in Higher Education: a manual of good practice* (Oxford, Blackwell).
- HEFCE (2005) *E-learning strategy*, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Available online at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_12/ (accessed 2nd April 2007).
- Nellis, M.D. (1994) Technology in geography education: Reflections and future directions. *Journal of Geography* 9: 37-39.
- Oblinger, D. G, and Oblinger, J. L. (2005) *Educating the Net Generation*. Educause. Available online at <http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/> (accessed 5th April 2007).
- Race, P (1999) *Enhancing Student Learning*. Special No 10. SEDA.

Informal Mobile Podcasting and Learning Adaptation 2 (IMPALA 2)

The enthusiastic uptake of podcasting by a number of GEES practitioners has prompted the GEES Subject Centre to invite the IMPALA team at the University of Leicester to carry out a project specifically for the GEES disciplines.

IMPALA 2 builds on the outcomes of IMPALA (www.impala.ac.uk) and will test and develop five pedagogical approaches to using podcasts for student learning specifically for GEES subjects.

- Audio-visual fieldwork guides: explore geomorphological features, natural habitat, landscape
- Audio-visual laboratory work guides: instruments, techniques, software, data analysis
- Radio-style: bring topical issues on the environment, sustainability and development, and informal content (local community and subject experts' voices) into the formal curriculum
- Student-created: encourage student collaboration and active learning through 'digital story telling', and recording learning for reviewing and knowledge sharing
- Extensions to lectures: summaries, further reading and research.

Research questions to be explored during the project include:

1. How can podcasting help students and staff to tackle 'troublesome knowledge' and 'threshold concepts' in GEES subjects?
2. How can podcasts help students' learning in 'multiple learning spaces' in GEES subjects?
3. What are key issues and enablers for sharing, re-using and re-purposing podcasts and exemplars across GEES disciplines?

For further information please contact Mike Sanders by email on masanders@plymouth.ac.uk or phone 01752 233533.