

WHY PODCASTING IN OPEN HIGHER DISTANCE LEARNING?

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history children have been taught by means of stories told by their parents, and for many centuries this was the primary method of transferring knowledge and information. As time progressed, we spent less and less time listening to stories, although to this day storytelling is still being used as an education methodology. People of our modern century are accustomed to receiving information in an audio format. It is natural for us to absorb information through an auditory medium, and since such information transfer takes place on such a personal level, we tend to form a personal relationship with radio presenters. They become like family members who visit every time one turns on the radio. Podcasting has grown over the past year and is seen as a major leap forward in mobile learning, or as we like to call it, "learning-on-the-go". The learner is able to download lectures or information to his or her iPod or any other MP3 player, and no matter where he is or what he is doing, he will be able to gain knowledge. Whether the learner is working out at the gym or driving a car, the lecturer is always there with him, allowing the learner to constantly absorb information as it is presented in an amazingly personal way. When lectures are presented in this way, it of course remains the learner's responsibility to absorb the information made available to him. The whole idea of self-regulated learning comes to the fore and learners actually take responsibility for what they learn and the pace at which they learn. Lecturers are advised to record their lectures and make them available online as an essential tool in the education process. Language lecturers in particular should use podcasting as the main feature of their courses. Providing learners with a podcast of information on the next face-to-face lecture and having them prepare according to what they have been told in the podcast will truly enhance learning in the lecture room and stimulate discussion. The main aim of all lecturers should be to have their learners prepare to such a degree that all face-to-face sessions become discussion sessions. The iPod and podcasting have changed the face of open higher distance education as we know it. All we need to do is jump aboard and make the most of the amazing opportunities this paradigm shift is offering.

Keywords: podcasting, distance learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The past several years have seen little change in education and the methods used to educate. One of the most natural and acceptable methods of education audio conveyance has been with us always, and although we tend to take it for granted and forget about it all too easily, all that is set to change (cf. Baird, 2006). Throughout history children have been taught by means of stories told by their parents, and for many centuries this was the primary method of transferring knowledge and information. As time progressed, we started spending less and less time listening to these stories, although to this day storytelling is used as an educational tool.

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The value of audio recordings in education has been known for years, yet for some reason it has been neglected as we have all become more computer literate. The year 2003 saw the development of a new technology known as Really Simple Syndication or RSS (Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS>).

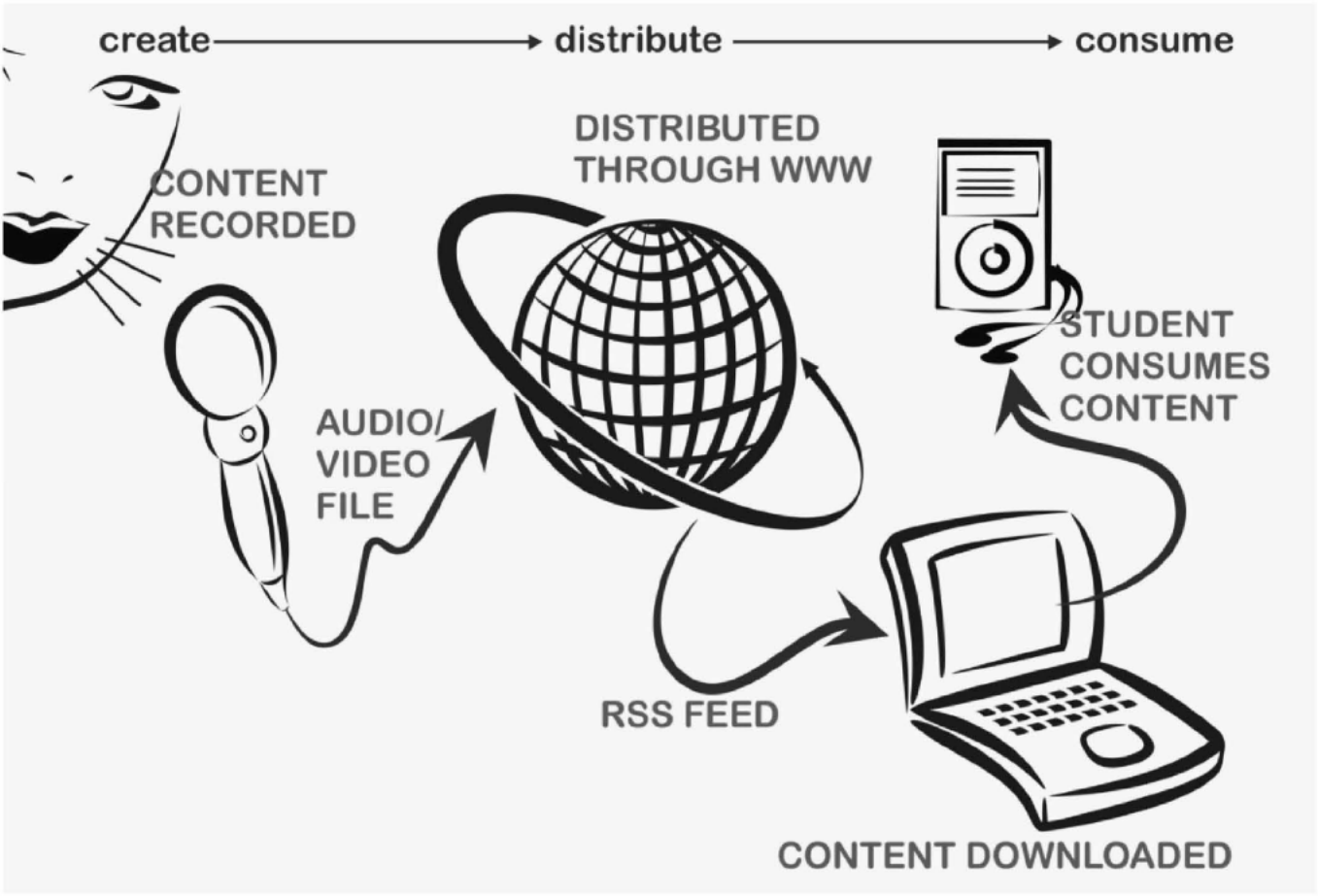
Through this technology the user could subscribe to a feed that would enable him/her to receive information that was added to that specific feed automatically. This made accessing the worldwide web and sharing information significantly easier, because if one were subscribed to the feed of a specific website one would automatically receive all updates to that website in a freely available feed aggregator. (A feed aggregator is a software program that can mostly be downloaded free of charge.) The feed information would then be entered into the aggregator to allow the user to subscribe to that specific feed.

This technology has been the driving force behind the emergence of weblogs (blogs) and also the development and growth of podcasting. Podcasting has not yet moved to the forefront in South Africa due to various broadband issues and costs that will not be discussed in this paper; but if the trends in other countries are anything to go by, it will become highly popular in a very short period of time.

2. HOW DOES IT WORK?

A podcast is at its very core nothing more than a simple audio file. The file is then placed on a server, and anyone subscribing to the feed receives this file automatically.

The graphic below depicts the podcasting process from recording to delivery, and use by the subscriber.



Graphic 1 : As depicted on <http://digitalmedia.oreilly.com>

3. PODCASTING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Most tertiary institutions are faced with basic problems they must solve or requirements they must meet, including:

- Student instruction
- Marketing
- Staff development
- Communication from management
- Research development
- Community training and development (short courses and other projects)

This paper concentrates on student instruction through the use of podcasting. (Cf. <http://www.apple.com/education/podcasting/>).

With the expansion and wider accessibility of the internet, students are exposed to a vast amount of information on a daily basis. This has been the case for a number of years now, and students have adapted to be more tech savvy than we tend to think. Lecturers are often still trapped in the notion that the classroom is the place where students gain access to knowledge. The whole “sage on stage” mentality has not yet disappeared. Through the use of podcasting, lectures can be made available to students prior to the classroom phase of the learning experience. The student listens to the lecture before the class and is therefore prepared for class. The class now transforms into a student-centred discussion session and the lecturer into a guide helping the students work through all the knowledge that has been gained and in some cases not quite understood as yet. The work is discussed and if at the end of the lecture the student has not yet made the new knowledge his/her own, the lecture can always be reviewed again after class. In other words, the “sage on stage” becomes a “guide on the side”. (Cf: http://educational.blogs.com/instructional_technology_/2004/10/podcastin_g_for_.html)

Because audio devices players have become part of our daily lives, whether in the form of mp3 players, iPods, or in many cases cellphones with these features built in, we are moving towards a mobile learning (mlearning) setup. In the mlearning world students can access education anywhere. It is pure learning on the go or learning on demand. Whenever a student has time to gain knowledge, the source is always at hand be it at the gym while busy with a workout or while lounging by the pool. Students can now study and acquire knowledge on their terms and therefore tend to devote more time to their studies (Cf: <http://www.edupodder.com/>).

Due to the automatic nature of the content being delivered to students, notes on tests and discussions before tests can easily be distributed to students a few days before the test or even the examination.

In the period leading up to tests and examinations, lecturers are often overwhelmed by students who for one reason or another are still experiencing problems with certain parts of their courses. This is extremely time-consuming and often the result is that the lecturer has to explain the same work to several students, one student at a time. One solution is to divide the class into groups of about eight or ten students and to ask each of these groups to compile a list of questions they would like the lecturer to answer or explain (Cf. Baird, 2006). One person from each group then presents these questions to the lecturer and, through a process of elimination, students can start answering one another's questions, thereby stimulating truly effective group discussion. The students will probably discuss most of the problems and solve them in the group. After this discussion the nominated student makes an appointment with the lecturer and asks all the questions as formulated by the group. This conversation is recorded and at the end of the session is placed online for all members of the class to listen to. As with all other recorded lectures, this file would also be downloaded to the students' computers automatically. Each student would receive all the sessions from all the participating groups, and it is quite possible that problems not discussed in group context would also be effectively addressed.

After a year or two of preparing a podcast-enhanced education model, all lectures could be given to the students at the beginning of the year. As it is such a convenient medium and students enjoy the empowerment they gain by taking control of their studies, it is quite possible that students will be preparing for lectures weeks before the scheduled class session. Students will therefore have more time to think about the work and also to make the new knowledge that was gained their own.

In almost all study fields, one will find that every year there are quite a number of conferences taking place around the world. Conferences are valuable resources, as papers relevant to the study field are presented, and usually there are many new resources and information to be gained by attending such events. Unfortunately students and lecturers do not have enough time and definitely not enough money to attend all these conferences around the world. Again this problem is solved by podcasting. Many conferences have already begun podcasting the papers presented there, thus giving listeners access to all the knowledge and experience conveyed by the presenters. Some conferences make these resources available within a week of the conference, but quite often the presentation is available within hours of the time the paper was delivered (cf. <http://www.masie.com> ; <http://www.downes.ca>).

Inviting guest speakers to institutions has become a very costly exercise. It cannot be denied that the advantages of having such a speaker or subject specialist visit the institution and share his/her knowledge far outweighs the cost, but what if such a subject specialist could be interviewed telephonically and the discussion distributed to everybody automatically?

Not only that, but any conference attendee could use an mp3 recorder to record a conversation with the subject specialist on any relevant topic and subsequently place the file online for automatic distribution to students or any other interested parties. It is not always easy to gain access to such subject specialists, but anybody who manages to do so will now have the ability to share the knowledge effectively with everybody in the field. Imagine a class where the students decide on questions that should be asked of the subject specialist, and the lecturer then has an interview with this individual telephonically or maybe even over a cup of coffee! This discussion / interview can then be distributed to all the students, and valuable knowledge can be shared. Again, this has the purpose of stimulating group discussion in that the group has to work together to decide on the questions to be asked.

One can only imagine the value of such technology if it had been available in years past when Einstein was still alive, for instance. The value of recordings of his responses to students' questions would be immense (Cf. Baird, 2006).

Often students are so busy taking notes of what the lecturer is saying in class that they may as well read through the work and make notes from the book. However, if the lecture is available before class, the students can make notes at their own pace and in their own time and then concentrate on the content and the information shared by the lecturer in class rather than trying to keep up with note-taking. The same is true if the lecture is made available after class, when note-taking can serve as a form of revision.

The assessment process can also gain from podcasting technology, especially in courses where students are at some stage or another required to hold some form of presentation. The lecturer can then record the live presentation or give an assignment whereby a group must record a short segment on a specific field of study. When presentations are recorded, students tend to make more effort when preparing, as they feel that if they are going to be recorded then they need to know the facts. The recordings of the different groups can then be reviewed and assessed by the lecturer before being distributed to all students for peer assessment. By means of this peer assessment, students are again exposed to the information and tend to listen more carefully if they are required to assess the content. A valuable course-related library of content can be built up over a few years, created by students for students.

Students are often required to do practical work as part of their courses. Usually it is necessary for lectures to be suspended during this period, as students are placed in jobs around the country and sometimes the world. Using podcasting as a method of content distribution, students can either receive the content before leaving for their practical training or, if they have access to an internet connection, can receive the lectures while on location. Free time can then be utilised more productively by reviewing lectures or listening to other course content.

As the end of the year approaches it is time for students to start reviewing their work and begin studying for examinations. Going through notes written in haste is not always the most effective way of reviewing course content, but with podcasting the student actually has the option of "attending" each and every class again. This not only renews the knowledge gained in class, but if there are still areas that the student finds unclear, he/she now has the option of reviewing the lecture a number of times or even discussing the problem with the lecturer.

These are just a few applications and advantages of using podcasting as a delivery and support mechanism for educators and students.

We want our students to be lifelong learners, and in some cases they are required to be such in terms of programmes like "continued professional development" in the medical field, where doctors have to attend a certain number of hours' worth of information sessions in their field to be able to continue practising. Consider the advantages of delivering these sessions in the form of a podcast not only would it cut down on travel expenses, but it would also be more accessible, as doctors can listen to the sessions at their own convenience.

Supplemental instruction now has a new and more effective medium of delivery. Not only can greater numbers of students gain access to such instruction, but it can also be accessed repeatedly. Sometimes, identifying students as candidates to receive supplemental instruction and informing them of this fact can do more harm than good due to the stigma attached to it. Making the resources available for all students to access and work through would make it a less-embarrassing experience for students who are in need of a little extra. Also, by adding supplemental resources that are at an advanced level, lecturers can also assist the more proficient students to gain more knowledge and not grow bored.

The possibilities and applications of podcasting are limited only by one's imagination, and even more value is added when implementing podcasting in staff development, internal/institutional communication, marketing, and the expansion of the institution's reach for the presentation of short courses and open learning into sub-Saharan Africa.

By means of podcasting, courses can be presented to thousands of students across the globe, and they have the option and ability to access these courses at their own convenience, empowering them to take control of their own learning.

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