

The Innovative Use of Podcasting to Support Under-Represented Groups

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Abstract

The changes in the type of student accessing Higher Education (HE) and the Governments desire to widen participation for non-traditional students, presents new challenges for staff. This paper examines the benefits of using podcasts to support teaching and learning. There is a clear recognition for the need to develop the ability to 'design, plan and orchestrate' learning activities that involve the use of podcasting as part of a learning session. This paper examines podcasting within a framework based on the concepts of Widening Participation in Higher Education. This paper also examines factors concerning the need to transform HE to meet the needs of diverse students. The author outlines some innovative ways of re-establishing widening access and the concept of the 'new student'

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to look at some of the positive and negative aspects of using podcasting to support teaching and learning in Higher Education. There is no doubt that the area of podcasting is an innovative practice in its own right, however the paper examines this practice against the backdrop of Widening Participation (WP), widening access and student retention.

The paper observes the developing use of technologies for learning, focusing on these to support under-represented groups. The paper outlines some innovative ways of re-establishing widening access in the contemporary political and economic context. The author provides some examples employed as innovative methods in this context. The paper concludes with some considerations for the future.

Digital skills for a changing environment

The development and promotion of Widening Participation throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century has resulted in a large increase in the number of people in the UK accessing HE (HEFCE, 2010). Study at Higher Education

Institutions (HEIs) now attracts people from a broad range of backgrounds, particularly people from low participation neighbourhoods, students from non-traditional backgrounds, Black Minority and Ethnic (BME) groups and disabled students (HEFCE 2008). Certain literatures (Cullen, 2007; Cooke, 2008; JISC, 2009 and Redecker *et al*, 2011) alluded to the importance for staff to not only develop their own digital skills but train to provide a very eclectic package of different methods of delivering learning for the broad spectrum of learners, many with different learning styles (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

Leese (2010) discussed the concept of the 'new student', one who has to juggle work commitments with full-time study. Leese claimed that her findings revealed that 70% of students were doing some paid work to support themselves whilst at University, and less than 30% of students were spending more than 15 hours per week on campus (Leese, 2010, p.244). The earlier research of Christie, Munro and Wagner (2005) provided a somewhat prophetic indication that students' entering HE from non-traditional backgrounds were spending much shorter periods of time on campus often only attending for taught sessions. Christie *et al*. (2005) suggested that work commitments, childcare and caring for relatives played a major factor in the students' attendance. Increased student fees and the current economic situation may serve to exacerbate difficulties for issues surrounding access and retention (Brooks, 2012).

More active ways of learning.

New challenges require the need to align Information and Communications Technology (ICT) with pedagogy to create participative learning environments which enable high quality learning experiences that keep learners interested and motivated (Redecker *et al*, 2011).

A major factor to consider when confronting the problems around funding for Widening Participation is the use of Information Technology (IT). HEIs will need to respond more flexibly to individual learners' needs (Cullen, 2007; Cooke, 2008; JISC, 2009). Digital technologies that help to break down traditional barriers experienced by non-traditional learners may help retain students by providing continued support throughout their time in HE. With smartphones, tablets and other forms of technology at their disposal, today's students can take advantage of a flexible approach to learning, where they can access resources or catch up on lectures at any time of the day or night (educause, 2005). HEIs need to capitalise on this paradigm shift and take advantage of the role of technology in widening access and improving the student experience at home and internationally. One could argue that the future of teaching will revolve around the provision of high quality education that fits around students' other work and life commitments. Redecker *et al*. (2011) predict that learning strategies such as podcasting will provide personalised, tailor-made and targeted; informal and flexible learning opportunities.

Cann (2007) claims that his study gave an indication that both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the use of audio podcasts in his study; collected via download statistics, module questionnaires and focus groups clearly showed that these were not popular with students. Cann (2007) claimed to have abandoned his podcast learning support model in favour of direct access to short online videos in the style of YouTube. The videos ranged in length from three to five minutes and consisted of a short "talking head" introduction and screencasts; digital recording of computer screen output with audio narration (Cann, 2007; Wakeman, 2013).

The author has used podcasting to create feedback for students and has recently created a podcast that contains an overview of the history of policing in the UK. Reflecting on this practice gives one a clear vision of how the use of podcasting can support Widening Participation. Information about HE and important facts about life at University can be disseminated to non-traditional potential applicants via schools and Further Educational Institutes using podcast, YouTube and streaming facilities. Although this paper primarily deals with Podcasting it is important to treat that particular technology as part of a menu of technologies for learning that can be used in conjunction with other technologies or as a support for face to face contact (Lazzari, 2009)

The benefits that manifested as a result using new technologies provided ideas for further improvements and the development of more complex activities. A review of the work of Gillen and Barton (2010) and Benfield *et al.* (2008) found that students preferred to study at home, many using their own laptops to get online. Once online, students most frequently engaged in activities related to accessing and reading online learning materials.

The use of podcasting to support a learning activity

The analysis of this particular learning activity revolved around the author's design and use of an online assessment together with an audio podcast created with Audacity containing feedback for the learner. The design was based on clearly defined learning objectives (Littlejohn and Higgison, 2003, p.16)

The most important aspect of the plan involved the identification of the intended learning objectives and outcomes (JISC, 2009, p.12) and ensured that they were aligned with the learning activity. The podcast was designed to provide detailed and immediate feedback to learners who were presented with scores and explanations of their performance immediately. Thus affording them the opportunity to experience bespoke feedback and take note of potential areas for revision.

The author created individual audio feedback on the performance of each learner in the form of a podcast using Audacity (open source multilingual audio editor and recorder software). The audio feedback allowed students to use their

technology-based entertainment systems (iPods, MP3 players) for the feedback process (educause, 2005, p.2)

In the analysis of the effectiveness of the learning activities it was important to consider why podcasting was preferable over other types of learning activity in meeting these learning outcomes. In selecting this technology the author questioned the advantages and disadvantages for using this particular method and considered what traditional methods the technology replaced. The electronic nature of assessment incorporated electronic marking and highlighted individual areas for improvement for the student. The students were then given an option of feedback either in the form of the MP3 audio feedback file, or an electronic written document such as a word document or a direct email; both posted to the student's University email account.

The audio feedback format allowed for flexibility in its production. An analysis of this activity demonstrated many advantages. Primarily the podcast provided the students with the opportunity to listen to the feedback at their convenience, listen on several occasions during which they could reflect on the contents. The podcast still provided a personal feel as it was tailored by the tutor for each student. This activity saved student's time as there was no need for them to physically attend feedback sessions (Bostock, 2010 p.3). From the tutor's perspective the use of audacity was practical and user friendly. Students were already familiar with technology. The tools to implement the activity were simple and affordable

Feedback from all the students appeared to be very positive about the new methods introduced, primarily in the sense of how quickly the results of the assessment were available and the use of the podcast. Some of the comments students' made are shown below.

"I found the podcast feedback very detailed. It seemed to feel really personal and relevant to me."

"I was impressed with how quickly I received my feedback; it was very clear with lots of advice. I played over a couple of times as well."

With this in mind the author took the approach that all elements of the activity provided savings in time, workload and adhered to the policies on environmental issues such as saving on the use of paper or the need for students having to drive in to the University unnecessarily. The planning and organisation of the activity provided development and learning opportunities for the author.

Some important factors considered included: an explanation to students why the activity and technology was being used, the students in question reported that they felt very comfortable completing online assessments and taking feedback

via an MP3 file; some students did however request and receive a face to face session.

It is interesting to reflect on different learning styles (Honey & Mumford, 2006). As a result of this activity the author was approached by two students with visual impairments who enquired into the possibility of expanding the provision of podcasts for a supplementation of lecture notes and workshop materials. The opportunities to support students with visual impairments is clear and prior to the activity in question one of the students had not declared the fact that she had a hidden impairment related to sight. Other students for whom English was not their first language commented that the ability to play the podcast over again several times had made learning easier and more convenient. Other students described listening to the podcast on UK policing while travelling and at work (Lazarri, 2009). On the reverse side is the recognition this technology is not appropriate for students with hearing disabilities will. As previously discussed, Podcasting is only one so called tool in the workbox.

It was clear from the learning activity that there were some considerations to take in to account in the preparation and dissemination of podcast. There is an obvious element of time management required for the production of the material. Staff and students need adequate training and access to the right equipment. The production of podcast lectures and workshop notes is time consuming. In the event of staff being required to produce a full package of podcasted products there should be some acknowledgement by line management of these factors.

Podcasting shouldn't be promoted as an opportunity for students not to attend lectures, tutorials and workshops. The use of technology for learning should be used to complement and support the face to face contact element.

Conclusion

This paper makes the argument that Widening Participation and widening access and student retention can be supported by technologies for teaching and learning. The advantages to students who have to work, care for others, have disabilities, need extra support is clearly obvious. Podcasting provides flexibility, support and can be tailored to groups of various sizes or to an individual student if needed. The concept of the 'new student' shows a need for staff to use a variety of innovative teaching methods to deal with the challenges of modern society. This paper has provided a flavour of how one of the methods 'podcasting' can be used as part of a package to address student diversity.

The activity used in this paper was based on providing feedback for a learning activity. Further research needs to be carried out to analyse how podcasting would be accepted more generally as a learning material. The issue of the time required to produce good quality and informative podcasts needs to be

considered. Further research could examine some of the implications of using podcasts over a period of time in case where the teaching material has not changed. It may be the case that the initial production of a podcast could be time consuming, however if the same podcast can be used on a number of occasions, over a number of semesters, there may be a long term benefit. It would be interesting to test Cann's (2007) theory about podcasting being made redundant by screen-casting and video-casting. The author intends to conduct further research in the area of podcasts for visually impaired learners in HE.

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