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January 22, 2009

Tech Fellowship 2008 Study and Findings Report: Podcasting as a Learning Tool

Overview

My project for the 2008 Tech Fellowship at Columbia College Chicago explored a new medium, podcasting, as a learning tool. I have found that podcasting is, indeed, an excellent medium with ever-evolving potential for the physical and virtual classrooms.

I researched podcasting in two distinct phases. Phase One allowed me to make two podcasts of my own, one as a way to learn podcasting methods in order to teach them to others, and the other a “How to Make a Podcast” podcast that explains the process step-by-step. Phase Two culled research questionnaires about my Phase One work, focusing on students’ familiarity with the tools used to create podcasts.

Definition of Podcasting

The term “podcasting” itself is often misunderstood in the quickly changing lexicon of technology. According to Oxford University Press, a podcast is “a recording that you can download and play back on your computer or MP3 player” (http://www.oup.com/elt/catalogue/teachersites/oald7/wotm/wotm_archive/podcast?cc=global). Podcasts can be audio format or video format, and the medium’s capabilities are expanding as rapidly as digital technology itself.

Though the word itself originated as a portmanteau combining “iPod” and “broadcast,” it is not necessary to have an iPod or other MP3 player to create, download, or listen to podcasts.

A key difference in podcasting – versus live streaming or other types of content that the user looks for and downloads herself – is that special software can automatically find and download podcasts as soon as they are available. Alternatively, podcasts are easily viewed on YouTube and other sites.

Podcasting in Education

Because the majority of current college students are already familiar with the technology used in their personal computers and MP3 players, podcasting can be a great tool to “broaden educational options in a nonthreatening and easily accessible manner,”

according to Educause, a leading site dedicated to the intersections of education and information technologies (<http://connect.educause.edu/Library/ELI/7ThingsYouShouldKnowAbout/393800>).

At the point of writing, podcasting has been used in two main lines for educational purposes: recording classroom events and creating supplemental materials. Either of these categories can be used in the “traditional” podcasting sense – as “episodes” which are downloaded automatically– or in a “single-use” setting via iTunes U and YouTube (with specific episodes being downloaded by the user).

Many colleges and universities are using podcasting methods to record classroom lectures and post them on iTunes U to allow students to view or review class discussions and important information. While I did not create a podcast of this genre for this research, my two student-generated podcasts are, in fact, recordings of this nature. Recording classroom activities and other events pertinent to course materials (lectures, concerts, etc.) will continue to have broad implications for studying methods in years to come.

Increasing numbers of academics are also using podcasting as a medium to create supplemental materials for their courses, as podcasts which may be viewed together as a class or at home at the user’s convenience. The proliferation of do-it-yourself media making programs, especially GarageBand, iMovie, Windows MediaMaker, and Audacity, allow texts to be created which combine visual images and audio, opening up a whole new world of learning materials.

One of the greatest strengths of these podcasts is the ability to use both original and source materials; for example, a film professor may create a podcast using film clips and her own voiceover, which would have been extremely difficult before current recording equipment was widely available. A music history professor may create a podcast combining audio clips of, say, Django Rinehart and his influences, with original material analyzing the guitarist’s importance today.

These professors can then post their podcasts to iTunes U and/or YouTube as supplemental materials for their students and colleagues to enjoy.

Phase One: Part One

Because Center for Instructional Technology (CIT) Director Rebecca Courington approached me about this project, I had not written a proposal detailing my plan and goals. In a meeting between she, I, and Wojciech Lorenc, she described her vision of the project: I was to make a podcast about how to make a podcast, as well as a podcast about the topic of my choice.

I worked for two months on creating my first podcast for this project, plenty of time in which to work out some of the methods and pratfalls of podcast creation. Though I had made both audio and video podcasts prior to this grant, they were more “for fun” and music/culture centered, so this was my first opportunity to explore podcasting through an academic lens.

After much time researching and changing topics, I decided on creating my podcasting about “The Anti-Hero,” an archetype found in many contemporary American stories. This focus allowed me to use different types of media in my podcast – including film clips, television clips, websites, still photographs, and my own voiceover narration.

I centered the material on two sources: the student favorite cult film “The Boondock Saints” and the first season of serial-killer-serial “Dexter.” I spent a large amount of time experimenting with getting the clips into a workable format so that I could use them in my podcast, which involved using the Screenflow application as well as YouTube.

Screenflow recorded what was playing on the screen of my MacBook, thereby allowing me to get the clips that the DVD player would not allow me to have due to copyright laws; I then copied them into iMovie and edited them accordingly, grateful that I was not breaking copyright laws as my work was for educational purposes. This was extremely time consuming, though the resulting quality of the clips was quite high.

I had been taught in my CIT course on podcasting to use Vixy.net as a sandwich step to transfer clips from YouTube into a .mov format which my iMovie could read and therefore use. While this is an extremely useful tool – many clips are not available via the DVD/Screenflow method – the copy quality varied tremendously. I found it incredibly useful to use both methods, Screenflow and Vixy, to get the video clips I wanted to use in a workable, iMovie format, and focused on this part of the process in my next meta-podcast.

In addition to using video clips, I added still photos and illustrations to the introduction of the “Anti-Heroes” piece, and recorded an original soundtrack of my narration and some music. This audio component was also extremely time-consuming; especially getting the mixing of the levels correct so that both the music and my voice could be clearly heard, but GarageBand allowed me to create something that was up to my standards.

I met my goal of keeping this podcast episode under ten minutes to that it could easily be uploaded onto YouTube. Here is the link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPKMuS5-3G4>

Phase One: Part Two

My next step was to complete the meta-podcast, AKA “How to Make a Podcast” Podcast. This proved to be more difficult than I had originally imagined. I had a huge amount of information to narrow down into ten minutes, and decided to explain the steps that I had taken in making my “Anti-Heroes” podcast – filming material from the computer’s built-in camera, using Screenflow and Vixy, and publishing the podcast onto YouTube. I selected these topics based on my own experiences and with public speaking students in mind – videorecording and posting speeches given in class is one very practical application of podcasting in the classroom. Here is the link to the meta-podcast:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBIboJxzMGE&feature=channel>

While I feel the finished product does convey these instructions effectively, upon further reflection, there are many more podcasts-about-making-podcasts that I would like to make. I had brought into our Tech Fellowship meeting a long list of podcast-making topics to explore, including the content writing process, storyboarding, audio podcasts, and specific techniques regarding sound mixing, but time and space did not allow me to delve into these subjects. I do hope to create further podcasts exploring these issues.

Phase Two: Research and Application

I distributed a research questionnaire to my three classes in the Fall 2008 semester; I taught two Oral Expression (public speaking) classes and one New Millennium Studies (NMS) course. I had designed both podcasts with these specific students in mind: the “Anti-Heroes” podcast fits nicely into the themes of humanities-based NMS, while the videorecording techniques detailed in the “How To” applies to public speaking students.

The survey asked students about their own computer use as well as their evaluation of my podcast. Here are the findings from those surveys returned to me:

- 40% female, 60% male
- 80% between 20 and 23 years old, with 10% younger (18-19) and 10% older (24-25)
- 90% had not made a podcast before, and 10% had specific podcasting experience
- Interestingly (and particular to our Columbia students), 70% of the students own a Mac; 20% own a PC; and 10% own both
- When asked if they “can use the basics” of iMovie, Windows MediaMaker, both or neither, the results were slightly surprising. 50% reported that they could use iMovie; zero reported that they could use only Windows MediaMaker, 30% reported they could use both, and 20% reported they could use neither. Therefore, 80% reported that they could use iMovie, which I find to be a high percentage, especially because these were students from general education courses and not film courses. This finding shows that my concentration on making a podcast with a Mac was statistically sound.
- Also, 100% (every single student) reported that they spend “between 1 and 5 hours per day on the computer, for any reason,” including such activities as watching YouTube videos, gaming, Internet research, word processing/writing, watching episodes of television programs, watching movies, using social networking sites, and instant messaging.
- The students gave my podcast a 84.5% average overall when asked to rate it between 1 and 10.

Two of my Oral Expression students created podcasts in November 2008 which recorded a speech that they were unable to perform in class. Each was hesitant about being on camera, but they were very pleased with the results over all. Here is the link to one student's speech; the other has already removed his speech from YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyyNZIj-EZA&feature=email>

Conclusions

While most students have yet to make podcast per se, this research demonstrates that they are proficient with the tools used to create, distribute, and view podcasts, especially iMovie and YouTube.

Putting these skills and resources to educational use will benefit students, professors, and academia. Joel Thierstein writes in a 2009 Educause article, "the rate of change in the world's knowledge base and the integration of that knowledge base into the educational space have added to the increasingly dynamic nature of the education sector" (<http://connect.educause.edu/Library/EDUCAUSE+Review/EducationintheDigitalAge/47933>), and it is these dynamic changes which are engaging students into multifaceted worlds of learning and information.

It will greatly benefit instructors and students alike to explore podcasting as an educational tool, in the recording and posting of events and the creation of learning materials. Many teachers at Columbia College Chicago, myself included, give students the option of creating a podcast to meet a variety of course requirements.

Through the utilization of videorecording and the ease of distribution, podcasting is a crucial tool in the distribution and creation of knowledge now and will continue to be in the future.