Podcast Solutions Pilot – exploring teaching and learning through mobile technologies

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It is commonly acknowledged that today's students juggle multiple roles and responsibilities along with their studies and that they make use of mobile technologies for a variety of reasons. Mobile phones have become almost the 'tools of the trade' for students to keep in touch, access information and generally organise busy lives. Our diverse student population therefore continues to present opportunities for us to explore new approaches to meeting their learning needs while taking account of their often hectic lifestyles. Students are increasingly involved in work-based and practical learning activities rather than traditional classroom-based taught classes and as the face and pace of technology continues to change there is a growing need to consider teaching and learning practices that make the best and most effective use of mobile technologies. While we think of the students and their needs, it is important not to dismiss or exclude the learning needs of the academic staff who might wish to produce new, or indeed revise existing, learning materials that are suitable for mobile technologies. This paper provides an overview of work in progress at Leeds Metropolitan University on a university-wide Podcast Solutions Pilot. The pilot project is supported by CETL ALiC , a collaborative Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning: Active Learning in Computing, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Background

Leeds Metropolitan University is one of a handful of UK universities involved in a collaborative project partnership with Apple Europe to explore the use of podcasts in a teaching and learning environment. The partnership offers the opportunity to pioneer the sharing of good practice nationally, fostering engagement of staff and students across a range of levels.

Podcasts are of interest to the University to promote innovation in activities ranging from teaching and learning support to helping publicise corporate events. A number of small-scale trials have taken place around the University and the Podcast Solutions Pilot provides a vehicle to develop the trials into something more substantive that will be of cross-University interest and benefit. CETL ALiC, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Active Learning in Computing (based in the Innovation North Faculty of Information and Technology) is supporting the project through researching the pedagogical issues of using this type of technology in a teaching and learning environment. The JISC-funded Streamline project is also closely linked to the Podcast Solutions Pilot and will use it as an example of learning object workflow.

Outline of projects

There are currently around 30 individual projects for developing podcasts across the University. Corporate teams involved in the current production and web-streaming of functions and events are included in the pilot and every faculty is represented. The range of projects includes:
- induction podcasts for students using library services
- virtual tours for prospective students
- podcasts of lectures and Skills for Learning materials

- podcasts for distance learners to support their online learning experience and sense of academic community
- student presentations via podcasts (e.g. nutrition students explaining technical points in plain English)
- student-generated content for the Student Wiki
- staff development materials – for example: supporting staff with ICT and short 'how to' sessions on a range of topics (including how to create a podcast and how to develop online learning materials)
- transfer of existing learning objects to podcast format
- Masters student project developing information for new students and a series of personal diary reflections for assessment (Metcast)
- weekly sports e-newsletter for students (Carnegie Sports News)
- use of video pitches to support students forming multi-discipline teams for final-year undergraduate projects.

The podcasts are being developed in a number of formats. Some are simple audio files or screen captures, others are video and audio together, and others demonstrate more complex combinations. There are opportunities for live lecture capture, slides with voice-over commentary, and full documentary-style presentations with external filming.

Current status

Two groups have been formed – a user group and support group – each with a clearly defined purpose in supporting the pilot in its initial phases. The support group is concerned mainly with the technical aspects of the pilot and the user experience. The user group is concerned with supporting staff to enhance existing skills and to develop skills where there is little or no experience in this type of technology at present.

Phase 1 of the pilot (April to August 2007) included the installation of the necessary server and peripherals; the creation of the user and support groups; and identification and development of the types of podcast projects that staff wished to introduce to their students during the academic year 2007/8. Phase 1 projects have been based on the limitations of using a beta version of the software that will eventually be used (released by Apple Europe in late October 2007). Staff involved in the projects began to learn how, and what, to podcast in readiness for the start of the forthcoming academic year.

Phase 2 of the pilot commenced in September 2007. Project proposals are being fine-tuned and a more rigorous skills audit is being conducted so that those staff with more experience can assist in the development of staff without. A range of podcasts has been created and made available to students via the University website and Virtual Learning Environment, X-stream. A bank of podcasts will shortly be developed by converting existing materials such as video and audio content, lecture notes and so on. Staff and students are being interviewed on the usefulness and appropriateness of podcasts as an additional method of delivering information and the analysis of this will allow us to draw some conclusions and produce supporting guidance for new podcast projects.

Some of the issues

Phases 1 and 2 of the pilot have produced some interesting and unexpected results. It has become clear that the whole understanding of the purpose and content of podcasts differs greatly between individuals and that there are a number of resource implications that require careful consideration.

Users on the whole do not want to do truly live podcasting – they want to edit or review their work before releasing it to students in podcast format. This has implications for the "workflows" currently available through the Apple system and how we progress with support tools. We may for instance need to focus some attention on conversion processes and protocols. Many staff are happy to deliver streamed video content rather than actual podcasts which suggests a need for us to think about support for resource production – this may be as an institution and not necessarily through the Podcast Solutions Pilot.

Persistence is a key issue as some resources are time-limited and ephemeral. It is important to users to distinguish these from resources that will be more generally shared. This affects the production quality required. An example of this issue might be demonstrated through comparing podcasts of high profile corporate events and activities with those of students recording a personal reflection to be submitted for assessment instead of a report. It is clear that high quality production would be needed for outward facing podcasts whereas student work that will only be seen by their tutor can be of a lesser quality (the tutor is primarily interested in the quality of the content and not the quality of the filming techniques).

Technical issues have arisen, especially in providing really simple feeds to allow students to subscribe to a particular podcast and receive regular updates. Although this can be overcome quite easily within the pilot, it is not so easy to resolve across the University owing to browser compatibility and existing computer systems.

Evaluation

Observation and documentation of each phase of the pilot is being undertaken so that the experience of developing podcasts in a higher education context can be captured, refined and shared as good practice.

Staff and students are being asked for their opinions so that we can try to gauge their views on the usefulness of podcasts as an alternative (or complementary) method of delivering learning materials. Reports from staff about how they find the use of mobile technologies are being recorded and it is anticipated that they will provide an insight into some of the advantages and potential barriers to using them.

The project will be fully evaluated and the results used to inform institution-wide decisions about the use of podcasting in a higher education environment from a range of perspectives.

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