



LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE

CASE STUDY

Increasing student engagement using podcasts

Featuring: Dr Ray Randall, University of Leicester



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Context

- 55 part-time distance learning students from around the world participating in the [MSc in Occupational Psychology](#) and the [MSc in Psychology of Work](#)

Description

- All students are off-campus and never meet each other or the teacher face-to-face
- Students were provided with audio podcasts that were used to supplement the learning materials within their fully online learning environment

Technology

- [Mp3](#) audio files recorded using the software [Audacity](#), and delivered via the [Blackboard](#) learning management system (LMS)

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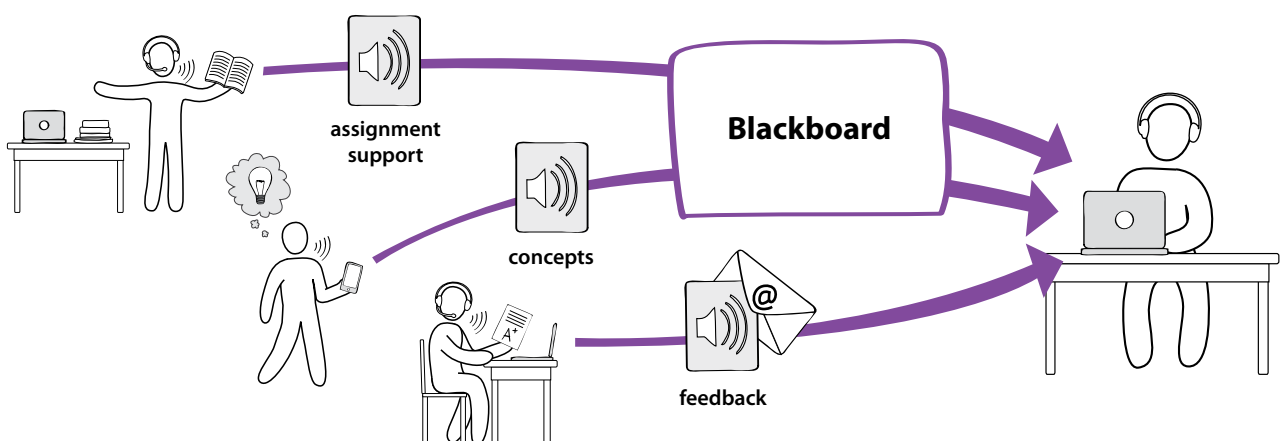
Aims and overview

This case study examines the use of simple audio podcasts in a fully online distance education class, as part of the [DUCKLING research project](#) conducted by the Beyond Distance Research Alliance at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom. It discusses the benefits of using podcasts as part of an integrated online learning strategy in a distance learning context, and gives an overview of how podcasts were used to introduce concepts, provide support for assignments, and to give students direct feedback on their work.

What is a podcast?

The advent of digital broadcasting using podcasts has enabled a large number of individuals, companies and educational institutions to develop and distribute content to broad audiences by publishing online.

A podcast is a downloadable digital file (typically audio, video or PDF), that is broadcast or delivered over the Internet. They are designed to be downloaded to local devices for playback, including computers, [smartphones](#) and [mp3 players](#). In many cases, podcasts are episode based, allowing users to subscribe to a web feed that will alert them to, and automatically download new content. Podcasts can be distributed publicly through distribution channels such as those available on [iTunes U](#), or access can be restricted to smaller more specific groups of people - as is the case with the podcasts in this case study, that are delivered via a password protected learning management system.



In this case study, podcasts are used within two fully online masters degrees to provide support for assignments, introduce and explain key concepts throughout the class, and to provide students with feedback on their dissertations at different stages of development. Podcasts are recorded by different teachers within the programs, and delivered via the online class websites hosted in Blackboard, except for private feedback which is sent directly to the students via email.

Case study outcomes quick summary

Key benefits

- Teachers reported greater levels of student engagement with learning materials. Feedback from students was positive, particularly relating to teachers using podcasts to give feedback on their dissertations
- Since students hear their teachers' voices, content is more personalised, allowing for a more 'human' connection between the distance learner, their teacher and learning content
- Retention of information, and the quality of the final student dissertations improved compared with previous years before the use of podcasts
- When podcasts were used to contextualise and explain assignments and key concepts, the amount of confusion or questions from students was reduced
- Podcasts offer increased flexibility and mobility for students. Downloaded podcasts can be listened to anywhere, any time
- Making a podcast can save the teacher a lot of time compared to preparing the same amount of material in written form
- Podcasts can be re-used from class to class, and updated relatively easily - saving time and money
- The use of podcasts has reduced the amount of printed materials required for the class

Key issues to consider

- It can take a little time to get used to the technology involved in creating and publishing podcasts (uploading to the Internet for distribution)
- Always have a plan for each podcast. Preparing a structure that outlines the introduction, key objectives and conclusion of the podcast will make it easier to record the material
- Keep podcasts short, interesting and to the point. 5 to 10 minutes maximum was found to be effective
- Be mindful of file size when making podcasts. Students may not all have fast broadband. Keeping the duration short, and saving the files in mp3 format will help keep the file size manageable
- Varying the format over a series of podcasts can be a way to keep students interested. For example lecture style, conversational, question and answer, different speakers, etc
- Practice recording your voice before making a podcast to ensure your voice is clear and the message comes across concisely
- The final result does not have to be perfect. Students reportedly engaged more when hearing a more informal, natural tone rather than a carefully scripted recording
- Be sure to thoroughly test your online delivery system to ensure students have good access.
- The LMS that was used to deliver the podcasts could not support [RSS feeds](#), students could not be alerted about new podcasts as they became available. Because of this limitation, students had to log into the LMS to find and listen to or download the files

Motivation for adopting podcasts

The following considerations were factors in the decision to adopt podcasts into the curricula of both masters degrees involved in this case study:

- *Both degrees are distance based. Students are located in several countries around the world and never meet each other, or their teachers face-to-face. The use of podcasts could lessen the feeling of isolation in students by enabling them to hear their teachers' voices*
- *To help students engage more readily with the class material*
- *Students in the programs are typically time poor, and offering learning materials in a more portable format could help students work more efficiently*
- *The introduction of podcasts to the classes was deemed to be a worthwhile investment for the teachers. Class structure and content did not require major revision, and the time taken to translate some of the content into audio format was comparably small compared to creating content in text format.*

Planning

Dr Ray Randall emphasised that effective planning is critical in the production of educational podcasts. The following should be considered when considering the use of podcasts:

- *Take time to look for the added value of using podcasts before you begin. Will podcasts benefit students and teachers? What advantages will they offer to the learning process?*
- *It is important not to adopt podcasting simply to 'play' with technology for technology's sake. Use the technology only in a way that directly supports student learning and enhances the learning experience*
- *Get advice from your institution's Learning and Teaching, IT departments and experienced colleagues about creating and using podcasts effectively. Time is precious for teachers and it is beneficial to not 're-invent the wheel' if you don't have to*
- *Break down the structure of the content into smaller sections that align with the key objectives of the podcast, and also review how it fits into the bigger context of the curriculum as a whole*
- *Sketch out the structure of the podcast on a piece of paper and keep this with you while recording. A planning grid outlining key topics, with rough timings for each section can help you stay on track and leaves you with a record of the content structure to make editing or updating easier if required at a later date*
- *Ensure that any podcasts that are created have a purpose and that their content directly support the class learning outcomes*
- *Length was limited to 10 minutes maximum. Shorter podcasts retain student interest, and are therefore more effective for learning. Recording succinct podcasts also forces teachers to focus on the most important and relevant information*
- *Teachers should not worry about podcasts being absolutely perfect. Students respond well to a more natural sounding voice that is not overly scripted*
- *For more information on how the podcasts in this case study were planned, please see the example illustrated in 'Table 3: The planning tool applied to a Research Methods podcast', in the University of Leicester's [DUCKLING Final Report](#).*

Making podcasts

Initially, some teachers reported feeling a little intimidated by the technology involved in making podcasts, however the process is quite simple:

- *Use a good microphone you can connect to your computer to improve audio quality*
- *A free piece of audio editing software called [Audacity](#) was used to record and edit the podcast*
- *Teachers used their planning grids (as previously discussed), and ensured that they introduced themselves and the topic that was to be discussed. Objectives for the session were outlined, and then the content was discussed, followed by a recap of important points during the conclusion*
- *The recording was then saved as an mp3 file*
- *The mp3 file was uploaded to the class blackboard learning management system as a podcast,*
- *For more information about this process, please see the [Using audio feedback](#) case study.*

Teaching

100 podcasts were created across 6 categories within both the [MSc in Occupational Psychology](#) and the [MSc in Psychology of Work](#). These were used in 6 distinct ways: giving an overview of the class, describing research methods, support for assignments, explaining key concepts, help with the dissertation process, and student feedback. The following were found to be important considerations in teaching using podcasts:

- *To orient students to the use of a new technology, it is important at the beginning of a class to clearly outline how podcasts fit into their program of study, how many they can expect, how you expect them to be used, and what benefits can be expected*
- *Podcasts can effectively signpost important parts of the class curriculum, introducing concepts of content, and outlining its importance, and relevance for the students' learning*
- *Direct feedback was given to individual students for their dissertation drafts by privately emailing them podcasts of their teacher's comments. This offered the students privacy, while giving them a great depth of feedback*
- *Be careful not to overwhelm students with too many podcasts. Careful thought was given to how the use of podcasting would integrate effectively with the rest of the online class delivery*

Conclusion

This case study examines the use of podcasts in a private, class-based scenario. Podcasts are also widely used as Open Educational Resources (OERs), which are freely available to anyone and disseminated for free. A large collection of such podcasts can be found through a variety of dissemination channels such as [iTunes U](#) or [Merlot](#). We hope that the information presented here will inspire you to try podcasting in your own classes. For more information about podcasting in education, please refer to the additional information and additional reading sections below.

Additional information

University of Leicester Duckling project

www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/projects/duckling

University of Leicester Case Study: Podcasting in Occupational Psychology

<http://bit.ly/hM3L7j>

University of Leicester Case Study: Podcasting in Education

<http://bit.ly/i8MIOV>

The IMPALA Podcasting Development Model: A useful resource to help plan podcasts

<http://bit.ly/dLziFN>

University of Leicester Education and Psychology podcasts Open Educational Resources (OERs)

<http://bit.ly/fQXXcy>

Additional reading*

Harris, H., & Park, S. (2008). [Educational usages of podcasting](#). *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39(3), 548-551.

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Salmon, G., & Edirisingha, P. (2008). [Podcasting for Learning in Universities](#). New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Salmon, G., Edirisingha, P., Mobbs, M., Mobbs, R., & Dennett, C. (2010). *How to Create Podcasts for Education* (ebook) Available from <http://itunes.apple.com/au/app/how-to-create-podcasts-for/id360080466?mt=8>

van Zanten, R. (2008). [The value of lecture podcasting for distance and on-campus students](#). Paper presented at the Conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education, Deakin University, Victoria.

Walls, S. M., Kucsera, J. V., Walker, J. D., Acee, T. W., McVaugh, N. K., & Robinson, D. H. (2010). [Podcasting in education: Are students as ready and eager as we think they are?](#) *Computers & Education*, 54(2), 371-378.

**Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access*

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Dr Alejandro Armellini

Senior Learning Designer, Beyond Distance Research Alliance

For more Learning to Teach Online, visit the COFA Online Gateway



To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.

www.online.cofa.unsw.edu.au

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About the project

The [Learning to Teach Online](#) project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

Australian Learning and Teaching Council



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