

Promoting independent learning through the use of podcasting

LSIS Research



Danny Lee

Background

Loughborough College is a further education college that caters for approximately 8,000 learners in courses ranging from level one through to level five. The college is located in Leicestershire, but attracts learners from around the east midlands area. I am new to teaching and in my first year of teaching sport in a further education environment. My study of the use of podcasting as a learning tool involved 38 learners on a level three course (BTEC National Diploma in Sport) who were learning sport psychology.

Starting point

In my experience, engaging learners after a really boring theory lesson can be a teacher's kryptonite. Typically learners say "I find it hard to concentrate when I am in a lecture" and "There is sometimes too much to take in". After discussions with colleagues and my own

experience of listening to commercial podcasts, such as those by Ricky Gervais and Scott Mills (particularly popular with the 16-24 age range) I decided to embrace the new wave of technologies that is common place in learners' lifestyles already (MP3 players, iPods, iPads, mobile phones) and make podcasts on different subject matter for learners to listen to as a learning tool and to make theoretical lessons more interesting and fun. I started by researching podcasts on iTunes and downloaded a few of the most popular podcasts from the iTunes store top 10 podcasts. A common theme in these podcasts was they had distinctive opening music to give the podcast an identity. I felt that my podcast should do this too, so I searched for royalty free music to include (see helpful links). I noticed that the podcasts also had a variety of features that broke up the information being presented, so I set out to do the same.

Teaching and learning processes

My aim with the podcasts was not to just produce a 'run of the mill' lesson audio file, but create something the learners would want to listen to and also learn from at the same time. Each podcast included certain features designed to entertain, such as:

- 'top 3' (such as top three foods, cities visited, football players, etc)
- 'what happened to?' (I researched a former celebrity such as Gareth Gates and gave an update of what the celebrity was currently up to), and
- 'joke of the day' (for example, "We call my granddad spiderman; he can't climb any walls he just can't get out of the bath").

From listening to successful podcasts (such as the Ricky Gervais Show and Scott Mills Show) as part of my research (see helpful links), I realised

that podcasts worked better when there was more than one presenter, so I always produced the podcast with another teacher and tried to use the banter between the two of us and humour to ensure the listening experience was not dull. I did not worry particularly about mistakes in the recordings, such as mispronunciations and long pauses because I felt they helped to make the podcast feel authentic.

I also aimed to break up learning into manageable chunks. For example, a podcast that examined training strategies in detail with regards to increasing or decreasing psychological demands, such as aggression, anxiety, stress, arousal levels etc., discussed goal setting, imagery, self talk, performance profiling, progressive muscular relaxation and listening to music in successive chapters. Learners had the option to jump to certain chapters, meaning they did not have to listen to the whole podcast if they felt short of time. The podcasts varied in length depending on the topic being discussed.

The podcasts were released a week after the lesson to ensure learners still attended the lessons. The learners used them to help them write their assignments, with the podcasts providing guidance about what needed to be included. The podcasts were uploaded to Soundcloud (see helpful links section). From there it is possible to embed

them onto college websites such as moodle or blackboard. I embedded the Soundcloud player podcast to the “sports psychology” page I had set up for the learners on Google blogger (follow hyperlink below) which is free and very simple to use. I emailed all the learners the link and the blog allowed the learners “to follow”, which would then automatically notify the learners if I had added a new podcast. The learners also had the option of “downloading” the podcast which they could then upload onto their iPod or MP3 player. Learners could then listen to them through their computers or iPods at home in their own time and surroundings. You can listen to the podcasts I produced here: <http://loughboroughcollegesports.blogspot.com/>

Impact

To find out the impact the podcasts were having on learners, I designed a questionnaire consisting of eight short questions that examined whether the practice was happening now and how important the practice was (see the example question below). This style of questioning

allowed me to gauge what practice was currently happening for the learner, but also possibly more importantly, whether the learner thought this was important for them.

The results indicated that the podcast was an effective learning experience and also showed what students’ felt helped to make the podcasts effective:

- 70% of the group felt podcasts were “important to very important” learning tools after the intervention and would like them to remain.
- 88% of the learners stated that it was “important to very important” for them for a podcast to have easily recognisable and accessible chapters to navigate through the podcast.
- 84% of the learners indicated that it was important to very important to have features such as random information and entertaining stories to enhance the podcast experience.

I also set up an informal small focus group of five learners who had taken part in the project to find out more about the learners’ experience of the

| | | | |
|---|-----------------|-------------|----------------|
| Question 8 | | | |
| The use of podcasts as a learning tool | | | |
| This happens in my module now | | | |
| Not true | Sometimes true | Mostly true | Always true |
| You feel this is important to you | | | |
| Not important | Quite important | Important | Very important |

podcasts and whether they had had an impact on their learning. One learner said:
“The podcast has helped me to attain higher grades as information needed for higher criteria could be replayed and broken down and played at an individual pace, which is not always practicable in lessons”.

The learners suggested that the podcasts helped their learning because they could download them and listen to them again in the comfort of their own surroundings. Learners also liked the fact that they could pause and skip back on information to fully understand theoretical approaches, which would not be possible in live lectures/lessons. One learner commented:
“It allows the learner to listen to content in another environment that I am more comfortable in. I easily switch off in lessons but the podcast allowed me to digest important information at a convenient time and place”.

The learners also found the podcasts enjoyable to listen to, as these comments show:
“The podcast was real; not only did we learn from them [the teachers] we also got to know them [the teachers] in the podcasts through their stories. The podcasts were real and funny because they [the teachers] messed up and their [the teachers] jokes were awful, but funny at the same time”.

“I love the continued banter between the teachers, they make each other laugh, which makes me laugh”.

Personally, I found the podcast a fun, innovative and exciting way of disseminating information to learners. The learners have also been very positive about the podcasts. Over 70% of the group accessed them, which shows their popularity. On reflection, the podcast has been a useful tool for enabling learners with prolonged absences to stay on track so that when they come back they have not fallen too far behind in their studies.

The project has enlightened me and fellow colleagues to a new and exciting dimension to teaching. The project has raised further research areas for me to explore such as assignment feedback and assignment submissions from learners using podcasts.

Further reading

Dale, C (2007) Strategies for Using Podcasting to Support Student Learning *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education* 6 (1) pp. 49-57

Curtis, P (2008) www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/oct/07/elearning.students

Helpful links

www.soundcloud.com – Free audio file hosting place
www.garageband.com – Free royalty music that can be used to enhance podcasts or use to make a nice jingle/introduction for your podcast
www.audacity.sourceforge.net/ - Free audio file editing programme (Can be used to cut certain aspects out of your podcast etc)
www.apple.com/itunes/podcasts/ - Search some podcasts that are currently available (e.g. Ricky Gervais, Chris Moyles, and Stephen Fry)
www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/ – Search how the BBC use podcasts to disseminate information to its users

You can read more about innovative use of ICT in Inside Evidence – the evidence bulletin for busy professionals in the learning and skills sector: www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=195275

If you are ready to carry out your own small scale enquiry, research tasters will help you plan your approach and link you to the evidence. You can find them at: www.rtweb.info/ls

Contact

This study was carried out by Danny Lee at Loughborough College. If you have any questions or comments, please email: danny.lee@loucoll.ac.uk

LSIS

Friars House, Manor House Drive
Coventry CV1 2TE
t 024 7662 7900
e enquiriescoventry@lsis.org.uk
www.lsis.org.uk

Registered in England and Wales Company no 06454450 Registered charity No 1123636 Registered office Friars House, Manor House Drive, Coventry CV1 2TE