

Educational Podcasts: Enabling “anytime, anywhere” learning

LTG Case Study



Dr. Emma Smith, Faculty of English, Fellow and Senior Tutor in Early English Literature at Hertford College, Oxford University

Podcasting at Oxford

In October 2008, Oxford University launched a podcasting site on iTunes U. The initiative was immediately a success with 168,000 visitors in the first week alone. By August 2009 one million podcasts had been downloaded, and a year on, this number has tripled.

Podcasts have been created on highly diverse topics by academics across all divisions. As of September 1st 2010, a total of 1921 items are available for download.

An increasing number of Oxford produced podcasts are published under creative commons licenses, making them available for reuse for educational purposes across the globe.

Emma Smith began podcasting her lectures on Early English Literature in Michaelmas 2009 for two reasons: to enable her students' flexible “anytime, anywhere” learning, and to maximise the outcome of the effort that went into designing and preparing her lecture series. Through this educational technology, she has reached a diverse global audience on iTunes U, and developed new digital skills.

Educational context and challenge

For 12 years, Dr. Smith has been lecturing undergraduates and graduates on Shakespeare and early modern literature at the Faculty of English. Faculty members are free to lecture on any aspects of the syllabus they wish, and as such the lectures run independently of tutorials. Consequently, students may find that lectures offered do not always align with the specific content of their weekly tutorials. In addition, students may be hindered from attending lectures if these collide with other obligations. To address this challenge, Dr. Smith decided to experiment with recording her lectures and making them available on WebLearn for her students to download at their convenience.

Pedagogical Motivation and Outcome

Dr. Smith's motivation for producing podcasts were twofold: firstly, she was concerned with supporting her students in becoming autonomous learners, secondly, she wanted to ensure that her lectures reached the largest number of English students possible.

“Creative commons and free licenses should be promoted and accepted more widely in the academic community.”

- Dr. Smith



students to have access to information and lectures when it's good for them. Pedagogically, it's obvious that students know their own intellectual schedule better than I do.”

- Dr. Smith

“I think it's much better for students to have access to information and lectures when it's good for them.” Educational podcasts enable “anytime, anywhere” learning: as learning objects, they are downloadable to mobile phones, laptops or other personal devices, and students can listen to the content at a time that best suits their learning preferences.

Dr. Smith's second motivation had to do with her experience of a mismatch between the workload invested in designing a lecture series and the actual audience of the lectures given. She spends a lot of time and effort on preparation and by producing podcasts, she began to reach a larger student audience within Oxford: students not following her course have emailed her saying her podcasts have been helpful for exam revision. In terms of reaching an outside-Oxford audience, Dr. Smith found herself vastly exceeding expectations when she published her lectures on Oxford University's iTunes U site.

Ideological motivation for publishing on iTunes U

Dr. Smith decided to make her podcasts available on iTunes U under a creative commons license because she supports 'free culture movements': she favors free sharing of knowledge. By offering the world at large her lecture series as open educational resources, Dr. Emma Smith seeks to promote alternative methods of distributing scholarly knowledge. A large number of listeners have emailed Dr. Emma Smith to express their gratitude for her willingness to share the lectures, making it a personally rewarding and meaningful experience – here a snippet from one of her listeners: “What bliss to find your six “Not Shakespeare” lectures (...) Your readings of the early modern playwrights are brilliantly entertaining; I want more!”

Practical aspects of production

Dr. Smith does not consider herself a tech wiz, and online learning has not played a central role in her teaching. Before taking up podcasting, she mainly made reading lists available online. Nevertheless she has found it remarkably easy to produce podcasts: she bought a £20 microphone, used her iPod for recording the lectures, transferred the files to her computer, and uploaded them to WebLearn. Everything else related to the delivery and preparation of her lectures has remained the same.

Unintended consequences of Dr. Emma Smith's podcasting activities

Taking up podcasting has had positive unforeseen outcomes and consequences: The podcasts turned out to serve as PR/outreach material the Hertford College: administrators have reported a number of 'open days'-visitors commenting on Dr. Smith's podcasts. Additionally, the experience of creating podcasts brought with it new digital competences – Dr. Smith has begun exploring editing software, become familiar with the different creative commons licenses, developed new practices for finding images through online image databases offering legally re-usable materials for use in hand outs, and created iTunes U album covers. Emma is planning to create a podcast guiding virtual visitors of Stratford-upon-Avon through Shakespeare's universe. Also, she intends to produce podcast summaries of future published books.

Dr Emma Smith was awarded the OxTalent 2010 prize for best academic podcast.





Illustration by Flickr user Colleen AF Venable
[<http://www.flickr.com/photos/abletover/3223086466/>]

Podcasts: Educational potential in HE

Themes addressed in scholarly literature

What is the evidence?

In recent years, podcasts have become popular components of technology-enhanced teaching strategies, and educational researchers have investigated the effect of employment of podcasts on academic performance of students (e.g. Apt & Berry, 2007; Baker et al., 2008; Evans, 2008). In Heilesen's (2010) extensive review of evidence of the efficacy of academic podcasts, it is concluded that 'softer' effects can be rightly warranted; for example it seems that podcasts have "positive impacts on the academic environment" and that students are incorporating podcasts effectively in their studying habits and activities.

Likely positive outcomes

A range of other likely positive outcomes of using podcasting for teaching and learning are put forward in the literature: as Dr. Smith observed, from a student perspective, podcasts enhance flexibility and accessibility to learning materials (Frydenberg, 2006; McGarr, 2009; Lau et al, 2010). In addition, podcasts enable learning through multiple senses, as supported by proponents of 'cognitive load theories' (Scutter et al., 2010). The technology has also been reported to increase students' motivation by increasing the feeling of communication and interaction with lecturers (Fernandez et al., 2009). For lecturers, creating podcasts can be a way of steering students' foci towards the most important and relevant concepts (Harris & Park, 2008), and has also been found to serve as a means of strengthening reflexive teaching practices (Larkin, 2010). Institutions can benefit as well by using podcasts as "communication enablers", attracting new audiences, and offering lifelong learning materials to alumni (Harris & Park, 2008:551).

Ways to approach and use podcasts in teaching

If you are new to podcasting, it can be useful to consider what type of podcasting would suit your teaching best. Carvalho et al. (2009) have developed a podcast taxonomy taking six dimensions into account: type, medium, length, author, style and purpose. As a starting point, deciding which podcast type you want to make use of can be helpful. Carvalho et al. operate with 4 different types: 1) Informative – presenting concepts, lectures, analysis. 2) Feedback – using podcasts to deliver comments on student's work. 3) Guidelines – e.g. to fieldwork, study recommendations, and 4) Authentic materials – e.g. interview data, news, or radio. In addition to these types, student generated content should be added; arguably one of the most promising aspect of podcasting lies in its ability to encourage and disseminate such content (Lee & Tynan, 2008).

Want to know more?



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Podcast courses offered by the OUCS

- On OUCS' website you can sign up for ITLP different courses on educational podcasts. You can read more – and book your place – here: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/itlp/>

Guides and practice case studies

- The LTG has developed a range of materials and guides to podcasting. Here you will find information that can help you get started, tell you how to publish your podcasts online: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/podcasts/>

The Learning Technologies Group (LTG) at OUCS is committed to the following objectives:

- Providing and developing a central Virtual Learning Environment (VLE);
- Carrying out and disseminating influential research into the use of C&IT ;
- Providing training in IT literacy skills and effective use of C&IT
- Promoting the use of C&IT in teaching at Oxford via our user communities, websites, news publications, workshops and events;
- Providing well equipped teaching and training spaces;
- Promoting and supporting the use of online multimedia for learning and teaching via projects and services;
- Developing learning packages and project websites;
- Recognizing and celebrating innovation and good practice in use of C&IT in teaching at Oxford;
- Ensuring that our practice is inclusive, up to date and in line with user needs.

