

“It gave me a much more personal connection”: Student-generated podcasting and assessment in teacher education

Dianne Forbes

Department of Professional Studies in Education
University of Waikato

Elaine Khoo

Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research
University of Waikato

Marcia Johnson

Student Learning
University of Waikato

This paper reports on a qualitative case study of an online initial teacher education class in New Zealand, exploring the potential of student-generated podcasts as a form of interactive formative assessment. Findings from interviews with teaching staff indicate that podcasting was useful for supporting multimodal learning valuing student voice and reflections. Podcasting enhanced the affective and relational connections in the online class, and empowered students to develop technical skills and confidence relevant in their teaching careers. As such, this study positions educators as future makers and as leaders in a climate of change. We suggest implications for student-generated podcasts in similar contexts.

Keywords: teacher education, podcast, student voice, online learning, tertiary education

Introduction

Web 2.0 tools such as podcasts and wikis provide new ways for students to construct, represent, develop, and report on what they understand. Drawing on a rich range of resources, in multimodal formats, students can manage their learning and express personalized understanding of concepts – using flexible and multiple formats – so that traditional concepts of space and time within the classroom are altered. This paper reports on a case study of student-generated podcasts in the context of an online initial teacher education class.

Student-generated podcasts as an approach to assessment for learning

A podcast is a digital media file that plays sound, is accessed from a website, and can be opened and/or downloaded to play on a computer or portable player (Salmon, Mobbs, Edirisingha & Dennett, 2008). While the use of audio recordings in education is not new, podcasting offers convenience and flexibility due to the relative ease of recording, editing and uploading, as well as accessing and subscribing to podcasts (Harvey, 2008). Podcasting is valuable for supporting learner flexibility and control, motivation and engagement, cognition and learning, and novel opportunities for teaching (Salmon & Nie, 2008).

Current trends in podcasting report on its use for lecture capture or course-casting (King & Gura, 2007), as a supplementary lecturer-initiated course resource, and its evaluation via traditional pencil and paper assessments (Hodges, Stackpole-Hodges & Cox, 2008). Such approaches tend to perpetuate a transmissive mode of teaching where podcasting is used in superficial ways to deliver old content via a new medium (Fischer, 2003). Selwyn (2007) cautions educators against “simply importing informal Web 2.0 applications into classrooms on the presumption of transforming formal education” (p. 7). There is a critical need to examine how educators can more successfully exploit the transformative potential of technology in tertiary teaching to in turn prepare students to learn, teach and lead within technology-enhanced environments.

A recent approach to enhancing class interactivity and maximising the potential of podcasts involves students developing their own podcasts as part of class assignments (Anzai, 2009). This approach increased student engagement with course content and understanding of ideas as opposed to regular text-based assignments (Royer, 2009). There are reports that students initially struggle with the time commitment involved in producing podcasts but eventually grow to be more comfortable with successive attempts (Crow, 2009).

The research context

This research used podcasts to enhance student reflection and to empower students to express and share their emerging understandings as teachers. The process of student-generated podcasts for assessment and learning is consistent with and informed by constructivist and sociocultural views of learning where students are active participants in their learning (Bell, 2011).

Professional Practice and Inquiry is a second year undergraduate course designed to provide students with an overview of educational psychology as a foundation for effective pedagogy. Students engage with key learning theories and themes of motivation, management, and assessment as integral to effective pedagogy. The class was offered online through Moodle and supplemented with two compulsory face-to-face on-campus sessions.

The lecturer hypothesized that podcasting could encourage reflection and articulation of understanding and had trialled the approach in a small ICT option class in 2009. Course participants used the open source programme, Audacity, to produce their podcasts, which they then shared with the class via Moodle. In 2010, the lecturer refined her pedagogical approach in order to implement the podcasting exercise on a larger scale in a core compulsory online class, with 80 students and two tutors, and added a second podcasting task to enhance students' reflective and formative experience. The lecturer had four purposes for the podcasting task: to acknowledge student voice, complement written modes of student learning with an oral presentation, complement traditional summative assessment with a participative approach, and empower students to actively engage in learning and teaching through ICT.

The power is in the student voice and when students are podcasting. That's why I wanted to do this with our students podcasting, its not very much a leap for them to see that children can podcast too and that Audacity is easily usable by a child and it's the child's voice that can be out there (lecturer).

Each staff member (the lecturer and two tutors) initially generated a podcast in order to model the process for the students, and then guided them to produce two podcast episodes (three minutes each) for the purpose of "podcast-mediated reflective learning" (Ng'ambi, 2008, p. 133). The first episode related to students' observations of assessment approaches during a six-week teaching practicum, and the second episode entailed a synthesis of the students' emergent teaching philosophy.

The student-generated podcasts were compulsory but not graded tasks. Having generated the podcasts, students shared them with the class in Moodle. Students were asked to listen to at least two of their peers' podcasts within their groups, and to respond to their peers' ideas in the Moodle discussion forum. The staff participated likewise.

The staff and students received technical support from the university e-learning staff. Students were provided with detailed instructions and an online help forum within Moodle. This paper reports on the perspectives of the three staff, who co-taught the class. Student perspectives have previously been reported elsewhere (Forbes, 2011).

Research Design

The overall research question guiding the study was "How could student generated podcasting enhance assessment for learning in initial teacher education?" A qualitative, interpretive methodology framed the collection and analysis of the data, gathered from staff interviews. A constant comparison approach to data analysis generated emergent themes from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The perspectives of the participants in this study represent a convenience sample and although the findings cannot be generalised to a wider population, the data are sufficiently rich to inform similar tertiary teaching contexts. The project received Human Research Ethics approval from the University and all participants contributed on a voluntary basis.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from the data. All participants perceived that the podcasting had afforded a different way of teaching and learning, enhanced affective aspects of online teaching and learning, and increased student confidence with using technology.

Different way of teaching and learning

Participants liked the fact that podcasting offered a different approach in their teaching and supporting multimodal ways of learning:

Within this online paper students do lot of text based discussion...so when lecturers are podcasting...students say 'we are feeling a sense of warmth and humanity', and they respond positively. So when we ask students to share their voices, they have an alternative means of expression, and the literature suggests and some of the students' comments support the notion that reflection is supported through the verbal as well.... They can listen to the voices and some of the passion in their peers' voices instead of just reading from a page (lecturer).

Participants also thought the podcasts enhanced student reflection in asynchronous settings:

While the power of the spoken word is generally seen in synchronous aspects, here [in this paper] reflection is encouraged because it is not synchronous, students can revisit the podcast and can carefully think about and prepare for their podcast. They are not put on the spot... We've heard good things back from the students (lecturer).

Enhanced affective aspects in online teaching and learning

Participants thought the podcasting assignment humanized the online learning environment and enhanced students' relational connectedness to one another.

They (students) did comment on how hearing the tutors' voices gave them a clearer sense of who they were and how different each of the tutors had approached their podcast. In an environment where you tend not to get to know people well enough, it gave a much more personal connection. Students liked listening to each other's voices... I personally found the online environment difficult but found this experience humanises the name on the other end of the keyboard (Tutor 2).

Podcasting also valued student diversity in the course.

It brings elements of culture to the fore, their [students] ethnic background might create a struggle, whereas when they speak their accents, they can stand proud and there is a diversity of these which come out nicely in podcasting, where it normally doesn't in texts (lecturer).

Increased student confidence with technology

Participants commented on students' increasing technical confidence and skill with generating and sharing their podcasts.

It forced a number of students and even us (tutors) to engage with the technology, tools that we otherwise might not have used (Tutor 2).

The skills involved in podcasting were valuable and relevant to students' future teaching careers, highlighting the possibilities for teachers as future makers and as leaders in a climate of change:

They (students) can use podcasting in their own teaching practice. Some have shared their students' work in their podcasts, which was really good. As the course is online media based, it only makes sense to include podcasting. They become more IT literate and confident as a result (Tutor 1).

This is not just a removed learning activity; there is a life beyond this. These are skills they [students] can use in class (lecturer).

Discussion and implications

This study sought to understand how student-generated podcasts could enhance formative assessment in an online initial teacher education course. The findings indicated that the podcasting episodes were useful in supporting multimodal teaching and learning in ways that value students' voices and reflections. They also incorporated a humanizing aspect in the online learning environment. Student empowerment and confidence to

develop digital literacy required in their future teaching careers was another finding. These challenge conventional uses of podcasting for teacher-to-student transmission of course content. It stands to reason that teachers themselves must be active and competent learners, and in turn that there is a challenge here for teacher educators. Learners, whether they be school aged pupils, tertiary students, teachers, or teacher-educators, need to develop awareness of tools for learning. This includes the ability to locate, download and use software for particular learning purposes.

Three implications for practice follow. Firstly, lecturers need to design online courses so that podcasting is not merely added-on but enhances student reflection and learning. This study illustrates that an alignment of the technology to the course goals, activities, assessment and teaching philosophy was essential to model the transformative value of podcasting. A teaching belief consistent with constructivist and sociocultural tenets recognises the importance of nurturing participation and social connections. As an element of trust is essential in an online class climate where open student sharing and collaboration is valued, student-generated podcasts can contribute by affording "relational connection" (Harms et al, 2010, p. 76). Secondly, teacher educators need to make teaching decisions transparent. As part of the pedagogy of teacher education, "the often tacit knowledge of teaching needs to be made explicit in order to enhance teaching about teaching" (Loughran, 2006, p. 9). By valuing students' voice in the learning process, student teachers are encouraged to unpack teaching by explaining and sharing their own pedagogy. This openness about learning and teaching invites feedback, from peers as well as from teachers, which can lead to deeper thinking through formative assessment (Bell & Cowie, 2001). Finally, by being creative and adopting a problem-solving approach to the use of Web 2.0 technologies for teaching, learning and assessment, teacher educators can move beyond transmissive approaches. We can invigorate our own teaching and inspire students to learn and teach creatively using ICTs as part of their developing identity as teachers of the future, who in turn are preparing their pupils to be leaders of future change. This study has gone some way towards addressing these issues and informing other practitioners interested in adopting student-generated podcasts in similar contexts.

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Author contact details:

Dianne Forbes, diforbes@waikato.ac.nz

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