Hello, and welcome to the show: Applying radio's 'explaining voice' to educational podcasting

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Educational podcasting takes many forms, from lecture recordings to student-produced discussions of study topics. This paper describes a pilot project that aims to consider the significance that adopting a particular presentational 'voice' may have on how understanding of that content is shaped. It is based on Gardner Campbell's (2005) notion of the 'explaining voice' of radio as a model for effective educational podcasting, drawing on the nuances of broadcasting style to enhance understanding of the content. The project draws on the production resources and training opportunities available due to the presence of an on-campus community radio station. The paper then outlines preliminary research into the potential benefits of developing a radio-like stylistic approach to podcasting in a university setting.

Keywords: podcasting, radio, explaining voice, broadcasting, education, presentation style

The 'explaining voice' of radio

> The explaining voice doesn't just convey information; it shapes, out of a shared atmosphere, an intimate drama of cognitive action in time. (Campbell 2005, p. 42)

This paper describes a project that aims to explore the potential benefits of adopting a distinctive radio-based presentation style, which Campbell calls the 'explaining voice', for educational audio materials at Charles Sturt University. This is based on the notion that educational audio recorded in other contexts, for example a lecture, often lack the nuances and intimacy of forms designed specifically for more personal listening. Radio broadcasting has developed effective techniques to convey meaning both through presentation style and content. A key aim of this project is to explore whether adopting a more radio-like approach to the presentation style of audio learning material such as a podcast has an impact on its acceptance and effectiveness as a learning and teaching tool.

Early research on the use of MP3 players and other similar media devices in university settings has tended to focus on the advantages of portability and convenience for the learner (Duke 2005; Joly 2006). Van Heekeren (2007) notes that early research into the adoption of podcasting as an educational tool points to benefits to students such as convenience, mobility, reinforcement and control over the time and place of learning. Much of this audio content has initially taken the form of recorded lectures or classroom content, providing a useful tool for note taking and revision (Brittan et al 2006). In some cases, universities have explored automated processes for recording and streaming lecture content as an integrated part of their virtual learning environments (Williams & Fardon 2005). Harris and Park (2008, p. 550) offer a useful taxonomy of podcasting at UK universities that considers teaching-driven, service-driven, marketing-driven and technology-driven groupings of use within that educational setting.

This paper is concerned not with the forms and affordances of educational podcasting, but the significance that adopting a particular 'voice' for podcasting delivery might have on how understanding of the content is shaped. Campbell (2005) notes that the enduring power of radio comes from the historical development in broadcasting of what he terms the explaining voice, which conveys not just content but understanding. He argues that therefore a key to the success of podcasting as a form is that it is based on the *idea* of radio, with its reliance on "the magic in the human voice, the magic of shared awareness" (2005, 40) such that:

> the explaining voice conveys microcues of hesitation, pacing and inflection that demonstrate both cognition and metacognition. When we hear someone read with understanding, we participate in that understanding, almost as if the voice is enacting our own comprehension. (Campbell 2005, p. 42)

Campbell makes reference to the notion of radio as 'theatre of the mind' and situates his explaining voice concept within this frame. It is the degree of richer understanding that is shared between broadcaster and audience that makes the explaining voice such a critical element in the effectiveness of podcasting as an audio learning tool, and a hypothesis to be examined within this project.

Pilot project rationale

Richardson describes podcasting as "basically the creation and distribution of amateur radio, pure and simple" (2006, p. 122). This project will evaluate the potential contributions to educational podcasts at CSU afforded by radio station 2MCE-FM. Based on the Bathurst campus, the radio station broadcasts to the Bathurst and Orange districts, and is now also available to a CSU-wide audience via an online streaming audio service. CSU has held the broadcasting license on behalf of the community for more than 30 years.

2MCE-FM has always held a strong relationship with the School of Communication on CSU's Bathurst campus, particularly the BA (Communication) program. Staff and students have provided a range of programs, including a well-established local news and current affairs service provided by undergraduate broadcast journalism students. Learning and teaching relationships with other fields or disciplines have been more ad hoc, and poorly documented over the years.

This pilot project primarily aims to evaluate:

1. the extent and effectiveness of any previous or current use of 2MCE-FM's airtime and resources for learning and teaching;
2. the benefits of adopting a distinctive and effective CSU 'sound' for forms such as podcasting, based on the explaining voice (Campbell 2005) style of presentation closely associated with radio broadcasting; and
3. the potential for and implications of any increase in demands for 2MCE-FM resources associated with the production of educational audio materials.

Figure 1: Undergraduate Communication students working in radio station 2MCE-FM

Despite more than 30 years of support for 2MCE-FM, the University has limited and largely anecdotal knowledge of the role, or potential role, of the radio station in the development of learning and teaching support. This potential is made more significant by the emergence of digital technology such as real-time audio streaming and podcasting, which could expand 2MCE-FM's broadcast and content creation capacities beyond the current terrestrial broadcasting boundaries of the Bathurst and Orange regions.

There is clearly a direct and historical relationship between the radio station and authentic situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991) opportunities for BA (Communication) students. However, there has been little scholarly exploration to date of the role 2MCE-FM might play in broader learning and teaching objectives for the University, particularly regarding its contribution to the Virtual Learning Environment. An implementation of the open source VLE Sakai (http://sakaiproject.org/) dubbed *CSU Interact* was introduced at the start of 2008. This is a Web-based framework that integrates online subject management tools (e.g. calendar, forum, subject outline, group email, subject evaluation) with a suite of lecturer-selected online tools that can be deployed for individual subjects (e.g. wiki, blog, downloadable files, links to external Web resources). Every subject taught at CSU is now automatically supported by a *CSU Interact* workspace, and students are given access to the workspaces for the subjects they are enrolled in via a common portal.

The provision of audio learning materials to students via online services such as podcasting has been of interest for some time. As data connections have become faster, and portable digital audio players (such as Apple's iPods) have become popular consumer items, educators have considered the benefits of making audio support material available to students for revision, or to listen to in their own time away from the classroom. CSU-based research has shown a significant increase in MP3 player ownership and usage among students over the past three years (Cameron 2005; 2007).

Methodology

This project combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a triangulated approach to the study. Primary data collection methods will include surveys (using online forms), interviews, and focus groups. Secondary methods will include archival and documentary analysis.

A starting point for this pilot study is existing survey research of first-year BA (Communication) students and their relationship with technology. Since 2005 the study has tracked a number of variables of relevance to this project, such as student ownership of portable digital audio players, and their use of online media such as podcasts. The data set is available for this project, including information about the 2008 cohort's ownership and prior experiences with relevant technology in both educational and non-educational settings.

The project has started with an audit of the amount of 2MCE-FM airtime and resources previously and currently used for learning and teaching purposes. Non-confidential radio station documents available to the project team include the broadcast schedule, studio booking sheets, equipment-borrowing records, staff position descriptions, reports to the 2MCE-FM Board of Management, and CSU subject materials. Having determined the nature and extent of past and current usage, the project team will interview selected individuals about their use of 2MCE-FM for learning and teaching purposes to gather more in-depth information about the nature and effectiveness of current approaches.

Another aspect of this audit is to consider factors such as 2MCE-FM's capacity to support learning and teaching projects such as scheduling of educational airtime, podcasting production, interviewing and recording facilities, staff development and training, and real-time audio streaming. Skill sets related to radio production and presentation will be identified in the context of possible staff development or production support. Additional stakeholders will be interviewed at this time, including CSU staff already utilising podcasting or audio streaming, IT and technical staff, and learning and teaching support staff in production and learning design roles (e.g. Educational Designers). The audit will document existing relationships and the potential development of 2MCE-FM's contribution to learning and teaching at CSU. It will contribute to the development of proposals for developing 2MCE-FM's role in learning and teaching across all campuses of the University, exploiting emerging technology such as streaming and podcasting. The audit will provide deeper understanding of the skill sets required to enhance audio learning materials such as podcasting using a radio broadcast model, and provide background to proposals for development of staff training and support in this area.

During Spring Session (July – November) 2008, supporting audio material will be offered to students in the subject COM115 Media Audiences and Public Opinion. This is a compulsory subject for all first-year BA (Communication) students. Subject enrolment is 164 students in 2008. This subject is normally delivered in a conventional fashion with a weekly lecture and then tutorial mode discussions about weekly topics supported by a set of readings. The main assessment items are two in-class examinations.

The supporting audio material will consist of MP3 files which the students can download from within the *CSU Interact* online environment. These file will contain recorded commentary from the subject lecturer,

based upon the topic of the lecture delivered to the students in a large theatre each week during the trial. The content will be offered to the COM115 students in different presentation styles that progress from a direct lecture recording through to more radio-like 'programs' closer to Campbell's notion of the explaining voice that comes with an awareness of delivering information in a one-to-one rather than one-to-many context. The proposed pattern will be:

1. the conventional weekly lecture (30-50 minutes), as delivered in the lecture theatre;
2. an abridged (15 minute), scripted version of the weekly lecture recorded in a non-radio space (e.g office);
3. a scripted radio-like presentation monologue (15 minutes) based on the weekly lecture topic, recorded in a radio studio; and
4. an interview with a subject matter expert on the weekly lecture topic, recorded in a radio studio.

It is important to note that the investigators for this project are experienced radio producers and presenters, with professional backgrounds in broadcasting and training. Working with a community radio station, and drawing upon techniques and resources developed in that broadcasting sector, situates the project in a training environment highly supportive of non-professional and often relatively inexperienced broadcasters. The COM115 lecturer/presenter will be progressively coached through the process of developing a radio presentation style, drawing upon examples of content and radio training materials. The intention is not to turn lecturers into radio broadcasters, but rather to engage them with well-tested radio presentation techniques that may be appropriate and effective in the context of podcasting and similar contexts.

At the end of Session, the COM115 students will be surveyed about their engagement with the audio materials. A smaller cross-section of COM115 students (four focus groups of eight students, representing more than 10% of the cohort) will be questioned in focus group sessions to explore their engagement with the various formats in greater depth. Transcripts from these sessions will form the basis for content analysis using the *Leximancer* software tool (http://www.leximancer.com/). Key concepts are identified in the text based on the frequency of and connections between words, assisting a qualitative analysis of the themes and concepts that emerge from the data.

The trial and evaluation will firstly identify the differences in student responses to the various formats, and then attempt to ascertain the potential benefits of developing a unique and effective stylistic approach to educational podcasting (in all forms) based on the concept of the 'explaining voice'.

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