Have podcasts lived up to expectations?

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In the 21st century learning environment emerging technologies such as lecture podcasts have been made widely available to tertiary students. However, few studies have looked at how students are using these tools and whether or not they are improving learning. This two-semester investigation examines podcast uptake by undergraduate students enrolled in two very different cognitively challenging subjects in the second year of the Nursing program and in the first year of a Business program. Regardless of the semester, the different content being studied and the statistically significant demographic differences between the Nursing and Business cohorts, strikingly similar study behaviours emerged.

Despite the flexibility and mobile learning opportunities afforded by podcasts significant numbers of students did not use them. The greatest uptake was in the week following the introduction of podcasts. However, once the novelty value wore off, many students returned to their previous study behaviours. While many students claimed to like the fact that podcasts were available as back up they exhibited a strong preference for face-to-face learning environments and accessed the podcasts infrequently. In addition, podcasts did not appear to live up to their "mobile" potential with most students who used them preferring to do so on a computer in their regular study environments. Contrary to expectations, students engaged in longer hours of paid work used podcasts least. Comments indicated that they did not represent an efficient or necessary use of their limited study time. Thus podcasts have not been as effective an addition to the learning environment as anticipated.

Keywords: podcasts, lectures, mobile learning, flexible learning, technology uptake

Introduction

Universities in industrialised societies have moved rapidly to incorporate new technological and information sharing advances into education without full consideration of the implications of these advances on student learning. In many instances eLearning has not achieved its promised impact (Reeves, 2009) and there is currently little documented evidence about how effectively students are using new technologies.

Educational usage of audio files in higher education has focused on "lecturecasting" so that students can listen to lectures whenever they wish (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007). Podcasts have been promoted as a "bypass technology" (Dearman and Galloway, 2005) to enable students with multiple commitments to skip lectures and use their time as they wish (McLoughlin and Lee 2007) and an as asset for auditory learners and students whose language background in not English (Dearman and

Galloway, 2005). This action research study explored the uptake of podcasts by very diverse cohorts of Nursing and Business students at both city and suburban campuses of a metropolitan university.

Method

Demographic and podcast usage information was collected from the selected cohorts of second year Nursing students enrolled in a core Neurology unit and first year Business students enrolled in a mandatory Statistics unit using an anonymous survey-based instrument. Demographic questions related to gender, age group, language background, and the length of time living in Australia. Data relating to hours in paid external work, access to technology (MP3/4 player, home computer and internet access), study habits and use of the lecture recordings was also collected and contingency table analyses were conducted to establish the presence of significant relationships. Podcast download data was obtained from the learning management system,

Results and discussion

Nursing and Business students were demographically significantly different. However, the time respondents spent in paid work and studying, including listening to podcasts was similar, suggesting a common behaviour of the 21st century student. There were no statistically significant differences between male and female or mature age and younger students with regards to podcast usage. While there was a trend for those from non-English backgrounds to make more use of podcasts this was not statistically significant. The proportion of respondents who worked more than 3 days per week and made use of podcasts was significantly less than expected (χ^2= 6.134, df =2, n=149, p<0.05). Results indicated that students who worked more listened less.
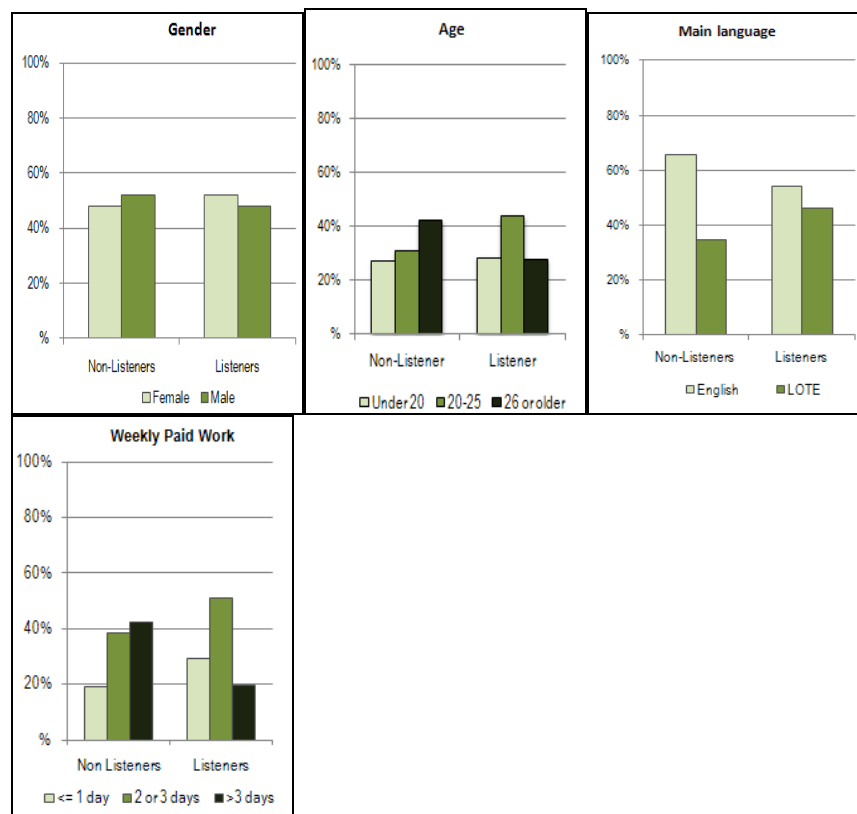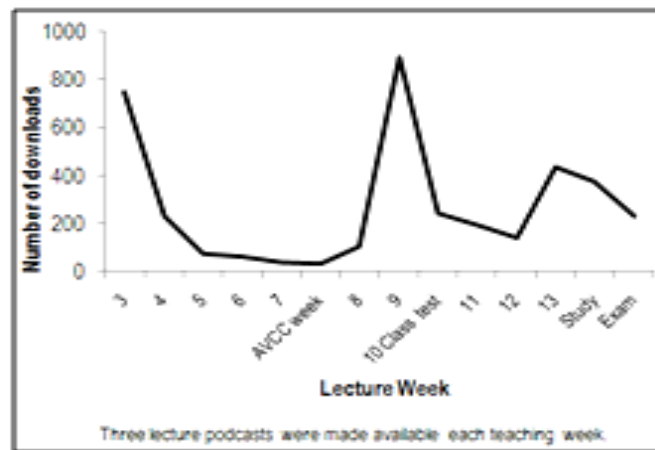

Figure 1: Gender, age, language background, time in paid work and podcast usage

Figure 2: Pattern of Nursing student podcast usage

Overall, the use of podcasts was far less than anticipated and students who did use them did so infrequently. High uptake occurred in the week following the introduction of podcasts and in the week preceding mid semester assessments. However, once the novelty value wore off, many students returned to their previous study behaviours and did not utilise podcasts very much before their final examinations.

Students cited many reasons for their non-use of lecture podcasts:

> "No time"; "No need"; "Because I rather prefer to watch and listen my lectures. Podcasts are not my starting point."; "I can't learn things on my own, I need to attend the lectures to learn anything."

From these comments and other studies (Walls et al 2009) it is becoming increasingly apparent that students may not be as ready or as eager as expected for educational podcasting. Students who used podcasts did not unleash their mobile potential preferring to use them on their computers in their familiar study environment, adding to the growing body of research that suggests that most students reject the mobile potential of podcasting in favour of traditional study space (Sutton-Brady et al., 2009).

Podcasts are not perceived by students as allowing for the most effective use of their time. Many students find the isolated listening experience boring, choosing instead the face –to-face learning opportunities afforded by lectures Careful consideration is therefore needed before podcasts become more widely used and start to replace lectures.

References

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Please cite as: Robinson, K. & Kazlauskas, A. (2010). Have podcasts lived up to expectations? In C.H. Steel, M.J. Keppell, P. Gerbic & S. Housego (Eds.), *Curriculum, technology & transformation for an unknown future. Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2010* (pp.808-811). http://ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney10/procs/Robinson-poster.pdf