"Hearing the thoughts of others": Student voices and affordances of podcasting for learning

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This paper reports on a qualitative case study exploring the affordances of student-generated podcasts. Findings from online focus groups with students indicated that podcasting was useful for building technological skills and confidence, supporting multimodal ways of learning that value relational connections, student perspectives and collaborative reflection. Students valued technical support when podcasting for the first time. In terms of the conference theme, we imagine a future where teachers integrate digital literacies and pedagogies by experimenting with practice, involving students actively, and employing learning networks for sustainable support.

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

Introduction: Student-Generated Podcasting in a Tertiary Context

This paper reports on a case study of student-generated podcasts in the context of a semester long asynchronous online initial teacher education class. It is increasingly popular for tertiary learners to access podcasts in order to listen to pre-recorded lectures, or supplementary materials (Lonn & Teasley, 2009). However, Selwyn (2007) reminds us, podcasting to transmit information to students does not optimise Web2.0 capability by supporting user creation, collaboration and communication of students' ideas. The learning potential is greater still when students use podcasting to speak and listen to each other (Anzai, 2009).

Podcasting to learn is valuable for supporting learner flexibility and control, motivation and engagement, cognition and learning, and for offering novel opportunities for teaching (Dale & Povey, 2009; Riddle, 2010). Students enjoy podcasts for their novelty value and the break they represent from text-based study. Importantly, students are motivated by the opportunity to express themselves for a genuine audience, and by receiving feedback from listeners (Dlott, 2007; King & Gura, 2007). Creating and sharing podcasts can enhance reflection as learners reconsider and modify their ideas based on feedback from others, illustrating its formative potential (Campbell, 2005). This is particularly powerful when podcasting is episodic, with reflection occurring at various points in the learning process (Schmit, 2007). Podcasting suits diverse students, and caters for differentiated learning preferences, such as aural learners and those who need to move around (Lum, 2006). Students develop problem solving and technical skills associated with the recording, editing and publishing of podcasts throughout this process (McLean & White, 2009). They learn communication and presentation skills (Nicholls, 2008) and also find their voice in terms of efficacy, democracy and empowerment (Beilke, Stuve, & Williams-Hawkins, 2008).

The Research Context

Professional Practice and Inquiry is a second year undergraduate course within the Bachelor of Teaching degree for students studying online. Typically, the students are mature adults, geographically dispersed, juggling work and family commitments with flexible full-time study via Moodle and on-campus block meetings. The course is 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. In this study, the lecturer used podcasting to enhance student reflection and the sharing of their emerging understandings as teachers. The process of student-generated podcasts is consistent with and informed by constructivist and sociocultural views of learning where students are active participants in their learning (Bell, 2011). Having taught the course for several years, and having experimented with podcasting elsewhere, the lecturer had four pedagogical goals for the podcasting task: to acknowledge student voice through a podcast of their reflections, complement written modes of student learning with opportunities for oral expression, complement traditional summative assessment with a more participative approach, and empower students to undertake an active approach to learning and teaching through information and communication technology (ICT).

The open source programme, Audacity, was used for course participants to produce their podcasts, which they then shared with the class via Moodle. Each staff member (the lecturer and two tutors) initially generated a podcast in order to model the process for the students, and guide 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 unassessed but compulsory tasks. The 80 students shared their podcast episodes with their discussion groups in Moodle. 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 student perspectives of their podcasting experience in the course. The general study rationale and perspectives from staff have previously been reported elsewhere (Forbes, 2011; Forbes, Khoo & Johnson, 2012).

Research Design

The overall research question guiding the study was "To what extent could student generated podcasting afford the incorporation of student voice and support for learning?" A qualitative, interpretive methodology framed the collection and analysis of the data, which were gathered from the end of course evaluation and an online focus group (Mann & Stewart, 2000, 2004; Williams & Robson, 2004). The online focus group operated as a forum in a separate area of the Moodle class. Students entered the focus group space voluntarily to discuss and give feedback on the podcasting activities (Forbes, 2012). Forty three students (57%) in the course responded to the course evaluation while 17 students participated in the online focus group discussions. A constant comparison approach to data analysis identified emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings from the study are reported next followed by a discussion focusing on the pedagogical implications as opposed to measures of student learning outcomes. This study received formal university-level human research ethics approval and all participants participated on a strictly voluntary basis.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from the data: 1) podcasting afforded students opportunities to enhance their skills and confidence such that they were able to extend these skills to the use of new technologies, 2) podcasting offered transformative possibilities for learning, and, 3) podcasting can be technically challenging for some students but this is mitigated by the availability of technical support. These themes are explained and illustrated with representative student quotes.

1. Developing confidence and skills

Most students initially believed podcasting would be difficult, and felt daunted as they were not 'techies':

> I am nervy about the podcasting: I am not comfortable with the sound of my voice, I do not even like listening to my answer machine. (Student 1)

Students, however, appreciated that the dispositions developed through podcasting might in turn influence their willingness to explore new teaching possibilities involving a range of technologies in their own classrooms:

> [Podcasting is] a valuable communicative tool, which I will certainly use in my own classroom one day with any number of curriculum areas- make plays, interviews, poetry, story telling, social studies or technology research... (Student 2)

Students resorted to strategies such as scripting their ideas, typing up notes and having practice trial recordings as part of their podcasting experience whilst others found listening to the lecturer's podcast helpful for modeling expectations:

> I did have a lot of notes to read from, next time I will probably try to it in a more relaxed way, with slightly less notes. (Student 3)

> I found it was a great way to understand the task a little better and make sure I was on the right track. The lecturer's podcasts made me feel more at ease… they were not rehearsed. (Student 4)

After the initial podcasting experience, the opportunity to create a second episode empowered students to improve upon their earlier attempts. The first experience prepared them for listening to their own voice, and consequently they became more relaxed and able to enjoy the second experience:

> Once it is set up it is no problem at all, it is so easy to use and I found your confidence grows second time around. First time round I don't know how many recordings I made before I posted, this time round posted on my first attempt. (Student 5)

2. Transforming learning possibilities

The podcasting tasks enriched students' online learning experiences in three ways – it humanized the learning experience, it incorporated a multimodal dimension to the typically text-based learning environment, and it fostered student collaboration and interaction.

Podcasting humanized the online learning environment by allowing students to share the emotions and tones embedded within one another's voices. This enhanced the sense of community and fostered engagement with one another at a personal level:

> One thing that I enjoyed is that in the podcasts you can hear emotion, judge tone and understand the message from the other easier than a written article. It would be a lot harder to misinterpret a podcast than a posting. (Student 1)

Podcasting enhanced the multimodal dimensions of learning online, that is, listening to one another complemented communication via reading/writing in online discussion forums. One student indicated that the act of recording and producing podcasts helped her to evaluate and refine her thinking:

> Hearing rather than just reading gave a different element to learning, it made the paper more engaging as it was different than that of another Word document. I would definitely use it in the classroom. I can see great value in using podcasting in the classroom, especially for students who do not always show success with pen and paper activities…opens the door to many new and different options. (Student 6)

Students mentioned the value of listening to peers' podcasts as enabling the sharing of ideas, enhancing understanding of content and triggering further thinking and reflection:

> I really liked listening to other podcasts because I was able to pick up some really good ideas that are being used in the classroom in relation to assessment. (Student 7)

3. Positive experiences with podcasting were conditional on good technical support

Students appreciated technical support offered in terms of short video tutorials and clear instructions to clarify the podcasting process and troubleshoot common issues faced:

Being such a techo-phobe I was not looking forward to doing this podcast at all… However, I was delightfully surprised at how simple it was to construct and record a podcast (whoever wrote the step by step instructions about downloading etc. deserves a chocolate fish!). (Student 8)

Discussion and implications

This study sought to understand how student-generated podcasts could enhance student voice and support for learning in an online initial teacher education course. The findings indicated that student teachers developed technical skills and the confidence to try out new technologies. They experienced multimodal learning, with enhanced interpersonal relations, opportunities for reflection and formative interaction. While students are initially reliant on direct technical support, the skills and growing confidence gained from podcasting enable them to reach out to other resources for trouble-shooting assistance, so that experimentation with new pedagogies and technologies are supported. The following issues and implications emerge from this analysis of student perspectives on podcasting in professional practice:

Embedding purposeful digital challenges in learning contexts

Students thought that the podcasting reflective learning activity prompted them to extend their technical skills, take risks and 'have a go' at something they might otherwise not have tried. In the process, they developed skills and confidence and articulated their willingness to problem solve with new technologies. It is hoped that these dispositions might be extended to experimenting with other ICTs in the classroom, as teachers develop digital literacy and are able to seek out and use other available tools for pedagogical purposes.

Pedagogical design: multimodal, collaborative, formative

Our study indicates that student-generated podcasting can prompt interpersonal engagement, as students (and staff) speak and listen, and give and receive feedback. Since online study can be isolating, use of multimedia communication modes can foster students' sense of a learning community. Podcasting has a humanizing effect as students, empowered to express their ideas verbally for an authentic audience, could mutually listen to their colleagues' voices for feedback. The opportunity to produce more than one podcast episode enabled further reflection, revision and refinement of ideas as part of a formative approach. We are encouraged that student teachers promptly see the relevance of student-generated podcasts for their own classrooms, and are hopeful that elements such as multimodal, collaborative and formative pedagogies will perpetuate future classroom practice.

Sustainability of technical support

The positive experiences of podcasting were predicated on robust technical support at all stages of the process. However, we are mindful that a classroom teacher will not usually have technicians standing by to help when technical hitches occur. The pro-active use of resources derived from online support sources is transferable to the classroom, and teachers can be encouraged to make use of wider networks (including Personal Learning Networks) to problem solve through technical issues.

In concluding, our exploration of student voice and affordances of podcasting has served to remind us that student perspectives are a useful guide for future directions in teaching and learning. As we look to the future, we are hopeful that beginning teachers will have confidence to experiment with technologies and pedagogies, actively involving pupils, and building learning networks for sustainable support of their adventures in teaching and learning.

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