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Students as Agents for Change in Learning and Teaching

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Case study 3 – University of Exeter Business School: Podcasts

Introduction

This project involved a dyslexic student who became involved in attempting to increase provision for on-demand content after appreciating the value of such materials in his own studies. In addition to commercial and broadcasting content, audio podcast provision has experienced increasing use in the Higher Education sector, and has been the subject of academic study in relation to improved achievement outcomes. At Exeter, the School of Psychology has led the way in this innovation – and was itself a subject of a *Students as Change Agents* project in 2008-9 with compelling results for expanded provision.

There was also concern that Echo360 provision – enabling video-capture and streaming of lectures – was most focused on first-year modules. Students often expressed desires for increased provision of on-demand content in other years at SSLC meetings, and whilst an expanded Echo360 programme is being investigated within the Business School, this would only see implementation in the medium term. There was also the challenge that video hardware was tied to specific lecture theatres and that not all Business School modules took place in Business School premises due to timetabling restraints. With these issues in mind, audio podcasts were identified by students as offering good geographic flexibility and well as excellent value for money. In collaboration with many members of staff, this project firstly sought to identify student perspectives towards podcast provision, and secondly to identify possible processes that could lead to improved podcast availability in second and third year modules.

Methods of data collection

With the support of Business School staff, a set of student-designed questions were investigated with a module cohort of third year undergraduates who had experienced some podcast provision in their module. Questions focused on the usefulness of this additional learning material to students as well as enquiring about increased provision across the School and student attitudes to on demand content in their non-academic lives. The questions were completed by around 60 students and collected using the Turning Point audience response pads. Secondary research has also been taken into account.

Analysis of data

Questionnaire results: Podcasts in an academic context

The vast majority (90%) of students from the initial sample of 60 agreed that making podcasts available for guest speakers throughout the course had been a good idea.

Overall, almost 80% of the final year students surveyed said being able to obtain audio recordings of lectures would have helped their studies.

- Use of recordings

One obvious disadvantage of audio-only recordings is that visual content (powerpoint/OHP slides, etc) are omitted. It has been suggested that students might listen to podcasts with the aid of associated content downloaded from the VLE. Students were also asked 'how important' they rated audio and visual content. Results are shown in table 1.

In your lectures, how important are the slides and associated visual content?

The visual content is very important to me	31.67%
The visual content is slightly more important to me	20%
Both visual and audio content have about the same weighting	31.67%
The audio content is slightly more important to me	11.67%
The audio content is very important to me	5%

Table 1: Value of audio/visual content

With visual elements rating highly, this suggests care must be taken in ensuring easy access to visual as well as audio content. Previous *Students as Change Agents* studies, as well as academic research, has shown students are willing to consult (normally paper) copies of slides etc, although sometimes it is difficult to locate particular slides during the presentation. Suggested remedies include training participating speakers to vocally identify specific slides during the lecture (for example, *"...turning to slide n"*). Other students suggested that they did not find it difficult to identify specific slides during the sample podcasts from this course – even without vocal prompts.

Questionnaire results: Podcasts in a non-academic context

Anecdotal evidence suggests increasing use of on-demand content in students' lives outside the university. To examine this further, students were asked how often they downloaded and listened to audio-only podcasts of any genre (radio broadcasts/ interviews/ comedy/ academic content were all suggested as examples). Almost 80% reported using audio-only podcasts, with 50% doing so on at least on a monthly basis.

Students were also asked where they obtained on-demand content more generally (audio or video). Both BBC iPlayer and Youtube appeared to be the most popular with almost universal use amongst the surveyed group. Use of open educational resource portals such as iTunes U (audio podcasts) and YouTube Edu (video content) was significantly lower, as shown by table 2.

Table 2: Do you use any of the following on-demand content providers?

	Percentage of students agreeing
BBC iPlayer	89%
iTunes	71%
iTunes U	10%
Youtube	97%
Youtube Edu	11%
4oD	65%
Other	52%

The data also suggests students are technologically adept at finding, streaming (in the case of iPlayer, YouTube etc), downloading (iTunes) and consuming content. Interestingly, it seems that use of educational content (iTunes U and YouTube Edu) is much lower than non-academic material (others). There could be many explanations for this, arguably most likely is lack of knowledge that such services exist as potential resources for their current studies.

Secondary Research

Overall, there is growing evidence that podcasts are a hugely important part of learning in leading higher education institutions today. Educational studies show that students who use lecture podcasts as well as attending do 24% better in assessments (McKinney, 2009), with previous *Students as Change Agents* research (Whybra, 2009) showing 88% of students surveyed believed that podcasts have a positive effect on exam performance, whilst only 5% stated they were less likely to attend lectures. The possible effects of podcast provision on physical attendance are commonly raised amongst interested lecturers, and although previous studies question the validity of these concerns, it will be important to monitor outcomes (intended and/or otherwise) of this project in order to effectively evaluate provision.

Implementation: How might podcast creation work in practice?

An important aspect of this project has been to engage with key members of staff in designing a workable and sustainable structure for podcast provision. Before commencing on this project, the student had engaged with the University's web innovation team on development of an entirely student-led upload/download service. Whilst there is broad consensus that increased use of technology will continue to be imperative in adding value in an increasingly innovative marketplace, this particular proposal received little enthusiasm owing to recording quality and intellectual property concerns where students would be uploading academic content without explicit permission of the lecturers involved.

Following on from this, and with support from the *Students as Change Agents* initiative, the student engaged with key members of Business School and Integrate staff to redesign a system from scratch that would both address the concerns that were raised, whilst remaining a student led project given existing pressures on staff time during the academic year. After many discussions, the student proposed a system achieving these aims which has already received both support and enthusiasm from senior Business School staff and is described in diagrammatic form below.
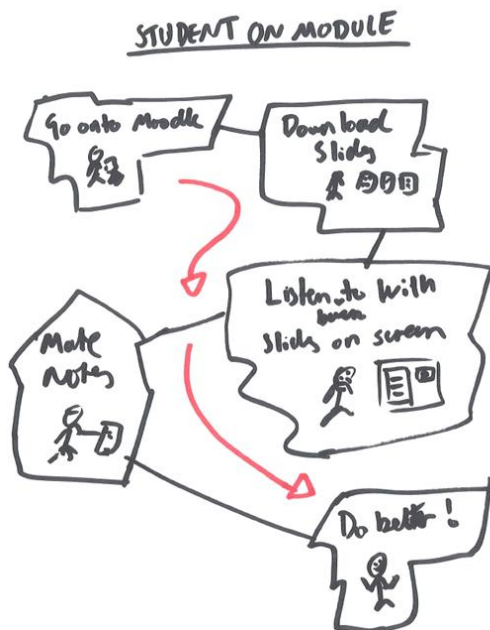
Student on Module

Lecturer

Student Uploader

Administrator

The philosophy underpinning this proposal is the creation of streamlined and stress-free processes that are straightforward to administer, simple for lecturers to create content, and strikingly easy for learners to access and use.

The system proposed involves recruiting interested lecturers, with selected students working as 'technology champions' within teaching modules. Such students will be assigned with inexpensive audio voice recorders and clip on microphones. In agreement with lecturers, students would mic-up lectures in the lecture theatre before they begin their normal delivery. After collecting the recorder/microphone at the end of the session, students are responsible for uploading material to an internal platform which is seamlessly linked to the Exeter Learning Environment (a new Moodle-based VLE to be launched for the 2010-11 academic year). Technology champions would also check audio recording equipment is in working order, charge batteries etc, and the process repeats for their next lecture cycle.

With video Echo360 provision concentrated on level 1 Business School modules, it was thought that podcast creation and dissemination should be focused on 2nd/3rd year Business School modules with the aim of continuing on-demand content provision beyond the pilot phase of video services. The increased flexibility, as well as cost-effectiveness, of audio-only provision lends itself to the greater number of available modules in later levels and also the diversity of teaching spaces (i.e. much 2nd/3rd year teaching takes place outside Business School premises).

As previously mentioned, current proposals have gained support of key stakeholders – including a first batch of lecturers – and it has been agreed further development of podcast provision will form part of the JISC-funded Integrative Technologies project with a view to rolling out the system in the 2010-11 academic year.

Recommendations/Solutions

Throughout this project, primary and secondary research has also shown both the appetite and importance to students of this emerging area of technology provision as an invaluable support to their learning. Investigation of possible provision has been a sometimes challenging, yet ultimately dynamic and innovative project, with the project student showing significant personal leadership in driving his vision forward. Indeed overall, this project has been an excellent example of how *Students as Change Agents* can coordinate student creativity, energy and passion in exploring the positive changes which, in this case, will clearly be valued by students.

In order to pilot a podcast system in the Business School over the 2010-11 academic year, it is important that work continues with the Integrative Technologies Project, as well as representatives from the Business School and University central IT services. The School of Psychology have also been approached with a view to gaining insights into their experiences of podcast provision. The foundations created by this project have the potential to deliver positive payoffs, both academic and otherwise - care must be taken in maintaining relationships, monitoring outcomes and adapting ideas, where necessary, in order to adequately achieve this vision.

Dale Potter
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References:
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