

Podcasting:
Deriving the Benefits
at
Peninsula College

A research project on the benefits of incorporating
podcasting into programs at Peninsula College

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Incorporating Podcasting at Peninsula College

Returning to school after 35 years in business was a daunting prospect. Yet in the fall of 2005, I enrolled in classes at Peninsula College. My schedule that first quarter included an English composition course as a home-based video course. The video material was on VHS tape, appearing to have been created about 20 years prior. While the tapes may have been covering in some sense the same material as our textbook, it was very difficult to link the two in an active, meaningful way. I found the disconnect from the instructor and other students hard to deal with and the video material very disappointing. Yet again in the summer of 2006, my schedule required another on-line class. I can appreciate the difficulty of teaching an on-line class, but I feel and live the difficulty of completing the class as a student.

It soon became apparent that most of the classes I had enrolled in would have an “on-line component”. This curriculum ingredient as an addendum to the face-to-face sessions, has made these classes very enjoyable and rewarding. For winter quarter of 2007, it appeared that I would again be required to take an on-line course as part of my scheduled Program of Study. At this point I was more seasoned and better able to evaluate the various components which constitute class materials offered to the students. I loved my classes, had a great desire to succeed at them, but felt there may be another, very beneficial, mode available to present class material to on-line students.

The method that I propose is a more modern approach than VHS tapes, closer to real-time lectures and feedback, and is as portable as a cell phone. The focal point of this treatise is that Peninsula College students would benefit from the inclusion of podcasting into the methods of delivering class materials.

The information gathered to support this comes not only from my personal experience as a student here at Peninsula College, but includes interviews with College and University administration and staff, a survey of both high school and college students, as well as Internet research. Before delving into the reasons behind this assertion, let me clarify the term “podcasting” and define how it will be used throughout this document.

Podcasting is a generic term (from Ipod and broadcasting) to describe digital media files that can be downloaded over the Internet. These audio or video files are syndicated or “broadcast” on special channels or RSS feeds. By subscribing to this feed, the user can automatically be notified of new content or have it downloaded to their computer. From there, these music, photo, or video files can be transferred to portable media devices like the Ipod.

While “podcasts” are usually just audio files, “vidcasts” are video files. The most common audio file format is the mp3. The most common file formats for vidcasts are .wmv for Windows machines and .mpg4 for Apple products, like the Ipod. For simplicity, I will use the term “podcast” to mean both digital audio files as well as digital video files, unless specified in context.

As stated earlier, it is my declaration that Peninsula College students can derive benefits from having a podcasting component included as a means of delivering class materials. So how would these benefits be manifest? The first major aspect I would like to focus on is:

On-line students are less successful than their face-to-face counterparts in completing their class requirements.

A second dimension in the realm of benefits is one discovered during the course of my research and was not a part of the impetus originally:

There is an increasing interest on the part of PC students and faculty to present their work to the public in this format.

A third aspect that I will touch on is important because it deals with the factor relating to potential success or failure of including a podcasting component:

There is a digital media generation gap which could affect the success of implementing a podcasting class component.

At this point I would like to introduce a survey which I conducted to help me better gauge the current technological status of both high school and college students. The survey and its analysis, while non-scientific, is insightful and helps illustrate the popularity of portable digital media devices. It also reveals

some interesting aspects of students attitudes toward on-line classes. This survey, titled “Podcast Research Survey” was administered primarily by myself to the Peninsula College students and by Shana Scott to the high school students at the North Olympic Peninsula Skills Center. Be sure to download a copy of the survey and a short data compilation sheet of the most pertinent questions to best comprehend the concepts set forth.

It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest that podcasting will automatically cure all problematic issues faced by on-line students. In discussing this with a number of educators, I understand that people learn in different ways. However, speaking from personal experience as well as reviewing the findings of this research project, it’s clear that it is less likely that on-line PC students will complete the course or do as well as if they were in the face-to-face group. Detailing the myriad of possible reasons for this is beyond the scope of this paper. But I believe the final conclusion still stands, on-line students do not do as well. A very telling aspect of this was revealed by 3 responders to question # 11 of the Podcast Research Survey.

11. Have you ever taken any classes on-line?

The survey indicates that more than 75 % of the college level student responders had take on-line classes. While the expected answer is a simple Yes or No checkbox, in three instances the answer included hand written comments; more than 10 % of the 26 students annotated their response. No other question solicited this kind of reaction.

Yes I tried and dropped out

Yes but it was not a good experience

Yes I did not like it

I take the fact that these were hand written in a form with no space for such comments as very strong opinions of the responders. While not surprised by the attitude expressed by those students, I really wanted to know if this negative feeling was based on fact or just bad personal experiences. In February, 2007, I had the opportunity to interview Mary O’Neil Garret, Dean of Instruction at Peninsula College. I

posed the question “Does the school monitor satisfaction or success with on-line classes? Do you see a difference between the success rate of face-to-face students compared to on-line students?” While not disclosing exact figures, she indicated that there is a notable difference in the drop-out rate between the two groups. That fact came as no surprise to me but it was a little difficult to reconcile with the findings in an article titled “The Engaged E-Learner”, from the Inside Higher Ed Web site.

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/11/13/nsse>

David Aldrich, Classroom Support Services at the University of Washington, had pointed me to that article during an interview for this project. To sum it up briefly, this study of over 250,000 college students concluded that:

“provocative new data suggesting that e-learners report higher levels of engagement, satisfaction and academic challenge than their on-campus peers.”

Discussing this article briefly with Ms. O’Neil-Garrent, we both recognized the difficulty accepting the notion that on-line (e-learner) students can be both more engaged and satisfied and at the same time succeed less often in completing their classes. I... we, are engaged in our e-learning experience, it is very challenging, but we are not succeeding as often as face-to-face students. It was at this juncture that I proposed adding an additional medium for the on-line students, “Podcasting”. Ms. O’Neil-Garrent expressed both a familiarity with the subject and a willingness to perhaps take another look at the subject of providing some form of podcast implementation. As Dean of Instruction, she noted her responsibility to oversee that Peninsula College programs are matched with community interests, meet industry standards, and will work within the overall operating budget.

With confirmation from an administrative level that on-line students drop out of class more often than their face-to-face counterparts, I would like to return to the Podcast Research Survey and elaborate on how and why podcasting could help change those statistics.

#1. Do you own or plan to purchase some type of portable media device?

The composite high school / college figures show that nearly 90% of students from either group answered Yes to this question. In addition, I queried Sequim High School instructors Stewart Marcy and Jim Heintz, “What percentage of your students have some type of portable media device?” Both responded that perhaps 75% or more of their students already had these devices.

Podcasting class materials could potentially benefit Peninsula College students because of the very high percentage of students who already carry the delivery mode on their person in the form of portable media devices. While the implementation of podcasting would require some additional involvement on the part of the students, according to my survey, more than half of them are already participate in a similar media experience. More than half of the responders indicated that they had in the past downloaded files from the Internet Web sites (74% composite) and then transferred them to a portable media device (57% composite), as per questions #3 and #4. A slightly higher percentage of high school students than college students (81% compared to 73%) expect the use of portable media devices to increase a lot in the future (question #5). Since the user saturation (question #1) is already nearly 90%, this group of students expects the methods of communicating via these ubiquitous portable media devices to increase a lot. Podcasting class materials could very well be one of the means by which this use will increase. Students expect to use their portable media devices in new ways. This expectation could be built upon to the benefit of Peninsula College students by including podcasting as a means of disseminating class materials.

Podcasting has the potential to benefit on-line students by bringing the class instructor face to face (as in a vidcast) with the student, or at least mouth to ear (as with audio podcasting). I contend that this was the missing ingredient that made my on-line experience a negative one. Simply reading the class materials may work for some students but others, like myself, prefer to have some form of human contact, even if that contact is in the form of digital voice or images. There is a very high percentage of the student population that could be reached by portable media devices and receive that person to person communication. Students already expect to use their portable media devices in new ways, receiving podcast class materials should be one of them.

It was my original intention to elaborate on the benefits to PC students by illustrating a one-way conduit for the delivery of information to the student. As a result of this research project I now envision this channel to be bi-directional. I was surprised to find a number of staff and faculty already working toward or expressing interest in podcasting. But the approach was from a different perspective than mine. There is an increasing interest on the part of PC students and faculty to present their work to fellow students, industry professionals, and the general public in the digital media format. Providing access to podcasting capabilities for these students would benefit them by requiring them to improve their communication skills, providing more widespread peer review, and involve learning about and understanding modern digital communication technology.

Chatting with a fellow student one day in the parking lot, I discovered the first of several “podcast interest groups” that already existed on the campus of Peninsula College. This student put me in contact with Dr. Dwight Barry, Ph.D., Director of Environmental Science and Resource Management at the Center of Excellence on the Peninsula College campus. Several of his students had already created digital presentations that were available as file downloads over the Internet. Dr. Barry expressed much interest in podcasting as a means of having students present their work to their peers and the public. He shared a video file relating to student research on the Elwa dam removal and an audio file detailing another student’s passion for working with nature. While technically not podcasts, both were digital media files that could be downloaded to portable media devices. I will elaborate on these not so apparent differences later. It was clear from the student presentations that much thought and effort had gone into their work. These students had edited and prepared for publication, short dissertation that with all likelihood, were being delivered by an entirely new medium for them, digital media. Within moments of making these accessible on the Internet, their work could have been downloaded, reviewed, and critiqued by fellow students around the globe. It is by way of this new, vast worldwide network that the communication skills of PC students will be measured, and I believe in the end, will improve and derive benefit.

Realizing that there may already be other groups interested in broadcasting their message via the “podcast conduit”, in mid April, I contacted Bruce Hattendorf (English Dept., Literature, Festival of Short Films) for help in making contact. Bruce was very supportive of the idea and offered a number of potential contacts. Rich Riski, who teaches Journalism at PC was one who responded to my inquiries. He also was very supportive of the idea of making podcasting capabilities available to PC students. Mr. Riski mentioned that podcasting is topic covered in his JOURN 101 Mass Media & Society class.

In discussing this topic with Mr. Steve Baxter, Director of Information Technology Services at Peninsula College, Mr. Baxter mentioned that Rick Ross of the PC Athletic Dept. had expressed interest in broadcasting games and athletic events. Later I had the chance to chat with Mr. Ross about this. While his goal was to do more of a complete live broadcast, he too expressed interest in how this venture into podcasting might turn out. The technical chasm between podcasting and live broadcasting a full athletic event is too great to marry the two objectives for now.

It is clear that a number of PC staff and faculty members agree that having podcasting capabilities for their students would serve to benefit the students by providing a means of broadcasting examples of their class work and activities out to their peers and the public in general.

As a student pursuing a degree in Multimedia Communications, I was a little surprised that there was not more interest and knowledge on the subject of podcasting, vidcasting, and RSS feeds within my own associates in the Multimedia program. On the other hand, this presents a great opportunity for collaboration between students. Environmental Science and Journalism students want to present their work to the World. Multimedia Communication students are engaged in learning how to present digital media to the World. Peninsula College students can profit from learning how to collaborate with others in an effort to showcase work of fellow students. This will often mirror real world work scenarios. One group is specialists in gathering the information while another group specializes in the technology of presentation.

It is in this technological area that I believe Peninsula College students can also receive a benefit from including podcasting as a course component. But in this case, not being on the receiving end, but from being on the delivery end of the pipe, sending out digital messages to the World. Among my fellow Multimedia Communication students here at PC, there are few students who understands how to create an RSS feed and serve up podcasts. Had I not been so driven to improve the success of on-line students like myself, neither would I. Thanks to a lot of input from veteran IT and podcasting people, I was able to create a simple Web site which features an RSS feed and a number of podcasts (audio files) as well as vidcasts (video files).

http://pcstudent.ctc.edu/lynnjohnson/podcast_files/vidcast_lead.in.htm

My point here being that it is a benefit to the students at PC to learn about new technology, which could be brought about by including a podcasting segment in class instruction. During my interview with Ms. O'Neil Garret, she indicated that podcasting would very likely be incorporated into some Multimedia classes in the future. Mia Boster, my Multimedia advisor, is working on plans to present the technical aspects of podcasting as part of her course-work. I see this as an affirmation that including podcasting in course offerings will benefit Peninsula College students.

Up to this point I have been striving to accentuate the positive aspects of podcasting. While I stand by those assertions, it is not without recognizing the difficulties implementing these strategies may involve. This includes both a financial impact (cost verses benefits) as well as student and faculty acceptance and involvement. Podcasting is a relatively new phenomenon and to be effectively implemented will require a serious commitment on the serving end as well as the receiving. While a simple podcasting test site can be set up with very little time and money, serving an entire campus could eventually cost in the tens of thousands of dollars. As mentioned earlier, PC students could derive benefits from a podcasting program in many different ways; but would that benefit be as wide spread among face-to-face students as among the on-line students? My research would indicate that the split is not as much an issue of whether or not the student is sitting in the classroom, but rather the age of the student. More pointedly, I believe there is a

digital media generation gap which could affect the success of implementing podcasting at Peninsula College. By this I mean that it may more difficult to convince students who are older (say...35 years old and up) that podcasting can be beneficial for them.

This trend first became apparent while administering the Podcast Research Survey. The younger college students took the time to put down their cell phones, pull the Ipod earphones out, and talk with me.

Several older students on the other hand, were borderline hostile toward the subject and only grudgingly completed the survey.

While over 75% of responders had downloaded files from the Internet to their computers, podcasting takes this process one step farther. Podcasts are usually delivered to the end user by mean of a “news feed”. Commonly referred to as an RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary) feed, it is a Web document listing the latest information made available by a particular Web site. For example, Peninsula College may make daily announcements available as audio files (podcasting). This document would list the announcements in chronological order and provide a link to download the actual file. It is this “RSS Feed” document that makes this process different from simply visiting a Web site and downloading an audio file. News readers and newer Web browsers will automatically check for updated information displayed on this feed document, without the user actually having to visit the site and search around for the updated material. That is the core purpose of this type of broadcasting feed.

Using a computer to automatically collect information from the Internet and download it is not new technology. Using a news reader to aggregate information from an RSS feed, while not new, is not yet all that common. Referring back to the survey question #10:

10 Do you subscribe to any podcasts or vidcasts?

More than 80% answered “No” when both the high school and college groups were combined. In sending out links to my pilot podcast site for review, it became apparent very quickly that few of the reviewers had news readers or browsers that could render the XML feed document. Hence, the programming code was displayed and not the chronological list of audio and video files as I had intended. Actively

implementing a podcast program from Peninsula College would require the end user have an updated Web browser or newsreader.

There may be more willingness on the part of the younger students to adapt to this new technology. About 25% of the high school age students indicated that they had subscribed to some form of podcasts, while only 15% of the PC college students (of mixed ages) had.

Another perhaps more telling indication of a digital media generation gap is revealed in the answers to survey question # 14:

#14. How would you like to receive on-line class information such as announcements, assignments, lectures? (more than one choice was allowed)

The college students (of mixed ages) preferred printed information nearly 80% of the time, while the high school students preferred printed material at only half that rate or 38%. The flip side was that the younger high school age students preferred information in the form of audio or video files more than 70% of the time contrasted with 24% for the older college age students.

Acknowledging a digital media generation gap does not mean that older students cannot or will not adapt and make use of new technology. As examples of this I point to the migration from older operating systems like Windows 95 and Windows 98 to XP and Vista, from dial-up Internet connections to high speed cable, and the replacement of 800 X 600 monitors with 1024 X 768 or larger flat panel displays. The implementation of a podcast component into an older student's regiment may just require a little more time than that of a younger student. A simple orientation program, similar to one used to initiate a student into the use of BlackBoard or WebDav would clear up most issues. Understanding that this generation gap exists could provide the impetus to build the bridge reaching the older student population. Text books, class lectures, lab time, and personal instruction are just a few of the many tools the faculty at Peninsula College may use to infuse knowledge into their students. It is not the purpose of this paper to repudiate in any way, those tried and true methods. The objective is to suggest and encourage the use of a new tool, podcasting.

The use of this new tool could help bring the success ratio between on-line and face-to-face students closer together. For most of these students, portable media devices are already a part of their daily life. This student population is expecting to use these devices in new and exciting ways in the future.

Podcasting as a conduit for class instruction should be one of them.

This avenue is not just a one-way street. There is a growing interest on the part of the faculty and students in communicating on a broader scope with their peers, with industry professionals, and with the general public via the Internet. Implementing a podcasting program at Peninsula College could provide the means of accomplishing this to the benefit of the students.

As with learning to use any new tool, podcasting would require some orientation and instruction in the proper use and potential benefits. Understanding some of the issues involved, such as the digital media generation gap, will help construct the proper type of bridge required to span the gap. With that in place, the benefits of podcasting would reach the greatest number of students.

Contributors:

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