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Facilitating blended learning by means of vidcasting

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Abstract

This poster describes the principles governing the production and use of vidcasts at Roskilde University, Denmark. Vidcast usage is discussed from a practitioner's perspective, and some examples are given of creative applications of vidcast productions in on-campus teaching situations.

Keywords

Blended learning, learning object, podcasting, vidcasting, video.

In higher education, the pervasive use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in all aspects of academic life is turning most forms of conventional teaching into blended learning. In line with these changes, a challenge for educators is to identify uses of technology that may enhance the learning experience rather than just remediate conventional teaching. As yet, evidence is inconclusive that podcasting (in a broad sense, including vidcasts, i.e. video productions) does have a demonstrable, positive effect on learning outcomes (Heilesen, 2009). However, there are many indications that podcasting 1) is being readily adopted by students as a supplementary study tool, notably for reviewing for exams and for making presentations; 2) generally is considered by students to help improve the study environment: both allowing for catching up on classes missed, and facilitating repeated listening to difficult or hastily introduced subjects; and 3) challenges faculty to reflect on and perhaps reconsider their teaching routines. As to faculty use, we have observed that simply trying out the technology seems to foster creative ideas.

To give a couple of recent examples: One professor decided to replace his long and information-laden lecture on research methods with a series of short, thematic vidcasts, so that in-class work could be dedicated to discussing and exemplifying lecture content, thus activating the students and at the same time testing comprehension. Improving on the original idea, these particular vidcasts were later used for distributed assignments: Small groups of students were assigned to watch and discuss the various vidcasts constituting the lecture, and later each group was requested to present the key points of their vidcast discussion to the entire class. The process of negotiating meaning and selecting and rephrasing in their own words the key elements of each vidcast, and presenting them in plenum created an awareness of significant concepts and gave the students a deeper understanding of the subject matter simply by the necessity to use their own wording.

Another professor chose to replace the conventional, time-consuming and rather tiring in-class presentations of student group project proposals with short vidcasts recorded by each group, and made available in the learning management system to instructors and fellow students. Not only was valuable time saved to be used for other and more crucial teaching activities, but the student presentations, well-prepared and thoroughly rehearsed before recording, proved to be better structured, more to the point, and more reflected than typical in-class presentations. One by-product of this exercise, incidentally, was effective training in oral presentation, a skill that is becoming increasingly important to academics.

To-day, anyone with a minimum of technical skills can produce podcasts by means of screen recording or camcorders. However, faculty in general tend not to be on the cutting edge of technology. And there are, or should be, considerations of quality if the university is to be identified with the faculty vidcast productions. Therefore, it is a challenge for university administrators to support the development of new services and teaching forms by making available easy-to-use, efficient and cost-effective ICT-tools. Making sure that needs and not technology will be the driving force in this innovative process is an act of balance.

At Roskilde University, policies and practices have now been developed for augmenting academic activities on to the net by means of video podcasts (vidcasts). The three principles underlying this development are:

1. Teaching and research communication in general are being viewed as two closely related aspects of audio-visual communication. Simplifying existing podcast taxonomies (Vogele & Gard, 2006; McGarr, 2009) we distinguish between *administrative* vidcasts (general information, guides, course catalogue entries) and *academic* vidcasts (produced by either faculty or students). The latter may be targeted differently at students, colleagues or the general public. But in many cases, usage is a function of context, and no matter what the purpose, they contribute to developing skills in audio-visual presentation.

2. Adoption of net based audio-visual communication and the use of vidcasting learning objects should be voluntary. Voluntary adoption is so deeply rooted in the academic culture of Roskilde University that the only feasible way of promoting audio-visual communication is by way of example (Heilesen, 2010). Thus early productions have focused partly on areas where there is a general want of information (administrative vidcasts), partly on areas where the relevance of audio-visual communication is obvious (e.g. language programmes), and partly on creative uses by students (presentations, visualisations) – hoping that student use will inspire their teachers.

3. Production of vidcasts should be inexpensive and readily available. Following experiments at recording lectures and presentations in situ all over campus, it has been decided to simplify vidcasting by doing most productions in a studio where technical quality and a fair measure of uniformity in visual expression can be guaranteed. The idea is that technical aspects with regard to production, post-production and publishing should not interfere with the presenter's focus on delivering content. This is important for relieving the presenters of some of the tension arising from performing in an unknown environment. The studio at Roskilde University is an easy setup with a rather low-tech approach, fostering quick productions in an intimate and friendly ambience. Technically, the Roskilde University vidcast studio is based on single software product (BoinxTVtm, <http://www.boinx.com/boinxtv/overview/>) that merges sources from a camera (typically capturing the presenter) and a computer (running a PowerPoint slideshow or a video) on a chroma-keyed background on the fly. There's no post-production and the process of transcoding and publishing videos is to be highly automated which is part of keeping cost and production time to a minimum.

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