Podcasting and digital audio in L&D: Time to hand over the microphone!

In the April 2007 issue of Training & Development in Australia, Kevin Lohan wrote an interesting and informative article about podcasting in L&D, and suggested a number of useful tips and guidelines for the creation of successful instructor-created podcasts.

Indeed, the use of the technology to deliver lectures is uninspiring, at best, and in many ways would appear to be a step backwards in terms of catering to the needs and characteristics of the millennial learner! However, I believe we need to go a step further.

Before diving in and adopting a new technology, it is always important to stop and ask, “What’s new?” In other words, what unique capabilities does the purportedly “new” technology offer, that other older, more mature predecessor technologies did not?

Schlosser (2006) reminds us that “[t]he use of audio in education is not new, but is experiencing a renaissance fuelled by the ubiquity of portable audio players, broadband Internet, and software tools that allow the relatively easy creation and distribution of audio files” (sec. 2, para. 1).

What are the benefits of podcasting?

The educational benefits of podcasting as evident in the literature (and the media rhetoric!) boil down to the following:

- cognitive and affective benefits of audio as a teaching and learning medium
- low-cost, low-barrier content creation and distribution, due largely to the pervasiveness of the Internet and the widespread availability of the multimedia PC
- benefits afforded by time-shifted syndication and automated downloads through RSS
- opportunities for mobile learning, thanks to the ubiquity and social acceptance of portable MP3-capable devices.

Audio-based educational technologies have been used for many decades, so the first point above is not new. Radio has been used in L&D and other areas of education and training for a variety of purposes. Audio cassette tapes, and more recently, CDs, have been used as a solution where the ephemeral nature and fixed transmission times characteristic of radio broadcasts pose a problem, where the audience is geographically distributed over too large an area, or where radio air time is not readily available.

The last point above has been the subject of much recent attention and hype, notwithstanding the fact that for many years, we have had the ability to use devices such as the Walkman and Discman for essentially what we now very loosely refer to as “mobile learning”. Perhaps due to the nature of the word “podcast”, many tend to associate podcasts with the use of portable digital music players like the iPod. These modern devices represent a technological advance over their predecessors in terms of their decreasing weights and sizes, their growing in-built storage capacities, and their ability to accommodate rich digital content. However, according to a survey by Bridge Data (cited in Dixon & Greeson, 2006) more than 80% of podcast downloads never make it to a portable player or another device – they are consumed on a PC, or perhaps never listened to!

Is mobility the driver?

In the higher education sector, research at Charles Sturt University (Lee, Chan & McLoughlin, 2006; Lee & Chan, 2007) suggests that learners prefer to listen to podcasts on their desktop/laptop computer, at home, and set aside dedicated time to do so. Similar results were obtained in a study conducted by the University of New England (Tynan & Colbran, 2006).

The third point refers to the subscription-based download of podcast media files as made possible by Really Simple Syndication (RSS) (RSS Advisory Board, 2005). Yes, this is “new” – it allows for a podcast-aware aggregator or “podcaster” application on the user’s desktop to be configured to monitor user-selected feeds (“channels”) for newly added media files, and automatically download them as they become available.

By having a computer that is continuously connected to the Internet, bandwidth-intensive content can be “dripped in” to avoid the “click and wait” situation common in streaming media (ie playing media as it downloads) (Curry, 2004), even over slow dial-up connections. RSS also is a time-saver because content can be filtered based on user-defined criteria, and can be aggregated from across multiple feeds to suit the specific needs and interests of the user.

But the devil’s advocate would ask, “In a training course or program, what’s wrong with simply emailing the files to learners, or having them download it from a website?”
And the answer is, quite simply, “Nothing.” In fact, RSS was designed to simplify the process of receiving voluminous amounts of content from numerous, sporadically updated web sources.

The time savings to be gained from setting up a podcatcher may not be worthwhile in situations like training courses, where relatively small amounts of material are released on a fairly regular (perhaps weekly) schedule, typically from a single source. Moreover, further advances in and uptake of mobile broadband technologies such as 3G, NextG and WiMAX stand to render podcasting obsolete as a mere method of distribution, as they continue to pave the way for the rise of punchcasting, in which media files are downloaded from a server on the Internet directly onto a PDA or mobile phone, without the use of a desktop or laptop computer.

The real change – giving voice to the learner

For these reasons, I believe the second point above (low-cost, low-barrier content creation and distribution) is what will have a lasting impact, far outlasting the shelf life of podcasting as a product of educational fashion. The technology makes it simple for everyone – instructors and learners alike – to author and share rich media content quickly and easily.

At a time when the value of textbooks and other “authoritative” sources of information are being questioned, and when the open source and open content movements are gaining increased momentum, I believe the true potential of digital audio technology in L&D lies not in the didactic uses of the technology, but rather in its community-building value, and its use as a vehicle for promoting learner-created content.

After all, user-generated content is what the “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005) movement, which podcasting forms part of, is all about. As instructors, it’s time for us to hand over the microphone and give our learners a chance to do the talking.

References


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