Trend: Podcasting in Academic and Corporate Learning

This article continues a series on technology trends and their applications in the learning arena. For others, see this [Trends](#) page.

Podcasting. You may have heard the term and wondered what it meant. Or you may already be listening to podcasts and pondering how they might be used with learners. This article will provide a basic explanation of podcasting, highlight some uses in learning, offer a Q+A from a corporate supplier, and then provide links to more information.

The term *podcasting* is an amalgamation of two other words: *iPod*, the popular digital music player from Apple, and *broadcasting*. But the *pod* is a bit of a misnomer. Podcasts, digital audio programs that can be subscribed to and downloaded by listeners via [RSS](#) (Really Simple Syndication), can be accessed on a variety of digital audio devices, including a desktop computer.

So what's the big deal? Why is podcasting becoming such a hot trend? As blogger Dave Jennings [wrote](#), it's doing for audio what blogs did for text. The [MP3](#) files generated by podcasters are relatively easy to create and don't require high-priced equipment, allowing amateurs to record a program without a large investment of time or money. In addition, the RSS technology that downloads new blog entries automatically to an aggregator program, keeping readers from having to visit each individual site, enables automatic download of new podcasts as well (once listeners have subscribed to the "feed" source). Then the podcasts can be listened to on a computer or, more frequently, transferred to a portable digital audio player, Pocket PC, or mobile phone that can play audio files.

The portability and on-demand nature of podcasting are key components that allow listeners to catch up on audio content—whether entertainment, news, learning, or so forth—without having to sit at a computer and while completing other tasks. In that sense, podcasting can be viewed as another variant of [mobile learning](#). [Vodcasting](#), the video equivalent of podcasting, is an up-and-coming trend with few practitioners but future mobile learning potential.

(A note on semantics: Simply posting recorded audio files on websites is not technically considered podcasting—the term indicates the use of RSS for automatic download of new files. However, in this article we've included examples without the RSS component when they demonstrate an important use of digital audio in learning and the RSS component could be easily added.)

Implications for learning

Listening to digital audio content won't replace reading, listening to live presentations, or the multitude of other ways learners take in information, but it can augment those methods. The following are ways that podcasting can contribute to the learning process.

Assist auditory learners. Proponents of podcasting point out that the medium is perfect for learners who prefer to take in information aurally. Margaret Maag, an assistant professor at the University of San Francisco's School of Nursing, has recorded her classroom lectures and posted them on a secure website since learning about podcasting from an Educause webinar in March 2005. She explains to students that the purpose is to help audio learners retain the information covered. Even though critics initially said students would stop

attending classes, Maag found that attendance did not in fact decline, because students "didn't want to miss what was going on."

Provide another channel for material review. Listeners with other types of learning styles can benefit from podcasts as well. When material is delivered orally, as in university lectures, classroom-based training, or in-person presentations, podcasting can ease learner worries that they missed key information in their note-taking. The audio files can be reviewed at their leisure for understanding or before testing. In Maag's end-of-course survey, this was a main reason students rated the recorded lectures as a strength of the course.

Assist non-native speakers. Learners who aren't yet proficient in the language may struggle to keep up with lectures or presentations. Being able to review recordings of those events as many times as necessary for understanding can be of great benefit. Podcasting can also be an excellent technology for learning a language, not only for listening to speech and pronunciation but also, in combination with a recording device, for capturing a learner's own speech for review by themselves or a teacher. (See Englishcaster, podcast lessons and radio-style shows for English-language learners.)

Provide feedback to learners. In addition to recording her lectures, Margaret Maag uses her MP3 player to record feedback on her students' group presentations, creating a 3- to 4-minute file for upload. She says, "I think a professor's voice adds to the feedback and it saved me a lot of time at the end of the semester." This use can apply not only to instructors but also to learners, who could record and podcast peer feedback.

Enable instructors to review training or lectures. Another benefit of recording her lectures, Margaret Maag says, is that she can "critique them as a method of improving my teaching style." Archived online learning events already provide this benefit to instructors. Now podcasting can offer the same advantages for classroom-based teaching and training. In addition, managers who want to review their staffs' instruction could subscribe to the podcasts as well.

Replace full classroom or online sessions when content simply requires delivery. In many cases, learning requires interaction, questioning, practice, and so forth. But when what's required is simple delivery of information, a full-fledged in-person or online course may not be necessary. Podcasting can alert learners that there is new material to be accessed and then allow them to access it whenever, wherever they want.

Provide supplementary content or be part of a blended solution. When a full course *is* necessary, there may be occasions when supplementary material would be helpful to learners. Subject-matter-expert interviews are just one example of this type of content. The material could be available for access on a voluntary basis, or it could be a required component of a classroom or online course in a blended solution. In any case, the RSS technology allows instructors to make the material easily accessible to learners and to alert them when new content is in the pipeline.

iPods at Duke

In 2004, Duke University gave all first-year students iPods along with voice recorders as part of an initiative "to encourage creative uses of technology in education." Faculty were encouraged to submit proposals for academic iPod projects. In total, 15 fall courses and 33 spring courses incorporated the technology in some fashion.

The Duke iPod First-Year Experience, as the program was called, was [evaluated](#) by the university's Center for Instructional Technology, which released a report in June of this year. The report found the iPods were used in the following ways:

- course content dissemination tool: portable access to content such as lectures, songs, historical speeches, and foreign language content distributed in various ways, including podcasting
- classroom recording tool: capturing lectures, class discussions, guest speakers, and verbal feedback
- field recording tool: capturing field notes, interviews, environmental sounds, and audio data
- study support tool: repeated listening and repetition of audio content.

Among the benefits of the iPod use that the report listed were the convenience of portable digital content, reduced dependence on physical materials and lab or library locations and hours, greater student engagement and interest, and enhanced support for individual learning preferences and needs.

There are many other possible uses for podcasting, and, eventually, vodcasting in learning. The ones listed in this article are just a beginning. As blogger Dave Jennings wrote, "When podcasting will get really interesting as a media form is when it breaks out of traditional…models and finds the unique things to which it's suited."

Q+A: Podcasting in the Corporate Arena

While many of the academic uses of podcasting highlighted in this article can be transferred to the corporate world, there are certain needs and benefits specific to corporate learning. For instance, as the interview below points out, the lecture format that is still a standard delivery practice in the university setting may not be as effective in corporate training. The following Q+A aims to shed more light on using podcasting with a corporate audience.

Anders Gronstedt is president of Gronstedt Group, a training and consulting company that develops and delivers customized solutions to help organizations improve sales, service, and frontline performance. For years Grondstedt Group has developed CD audio recordings to enable clients' employees to learn while driving, walking the dog, riding the subway, and so forth. Recently the company has added podcasting to its arsenal of delivery methods.

For one client, Gronstedt Group developed radio-style audio files to train a global sales and service force on a new product launch. The five-part series is modeled after a talk show and includes humorous commercials, running themes and jokes, spoofs, and cliffhangers to engage listeners.

How does podcasting improve on previous audio training?

Podcasting eliminates the sometimes exorbitant costs of burning and delivering audio CDs to a worldwide employee population. Audio programs can now become part of ongoing training by allowing personal computers to zap them to portable MP3 players. The iPod/MP3 craze has changed the culture of listening to music or books. Just go to your gym and count

the number of people who are *not* listening to their iPod, or go to any European city and count the number of cell phones that are *not* sold with a built-in MP3 player.

What are other advantages of podcasting as a training method?

It's asynchronous and mobile—you reach people when and where they are. It's a low-cost and on-demand channel straight to the ears of the employees. With bandwidth expanding as relentlessly as the proliferation and price of MP3 players are declining, the opportunities for this new channel are seemingly limitless.

But it's not a silver bullet for every training challenge. The limitations are clear: It's linear and one-way, which is why it needs to be integrated with blogs, online simulations, and other more interactive channels.

What's your advice for companies that want to get into podcasting?

I suggest starting off by just posting MP3 files on your intranet or learning portal that employees can download and listen to on their computers, zap over to their MP3 players, or burn to a CD. While just posting downloadable audio files doesn't technically qualify as a podcast, most of our clients find this to be the best way to get started.

How important is it to include elements like humor, spoofs, and so forth that keep audiences interested?

Making it engaging and entertaining is absolutely essential. Training professionals will have to resist the impulse to turn this medium into time-shifted recordings of boring lectures. Mimicking the worst of the 1000-year old university model's tactics by reproducing lectures is a model that never worked in the classroom and will have abysmal results on the MP3 player. Instead, they need to develop an entirely new training format that is conversational, entertaining, and interesting.

We're finding that learners respond enthusiastically to the conversational nature of our fast-paced and entertaining "theater of the mind," which comes complete with field reports, exotic imaginary locales, humorous "commercials," inspirational vignettes and subtle spoofs on the competition.

Can you talk a little bit about the integration of podcasting with blogs? How do the two complement each other?

A podcast is an outgrowth of the blog. General Motors is pioneering an innovative blog and podcasts by its vice chairman, Bob Lutz, that illustrates the point. His [Fastlane Blog](#) is a regularly updated online journal of information and opinions about new car developments at GM. It features podcasts targeting opinion leaders and employees who can learn about new car models straight from the mouths of their designers.

The FastLane radio host talks to chief engineers about new car models and reports from auto shows. This form of time-shifted audio casting gives the car maker a voice to educate critical stakeholders inside and outside of the company, all at a minimal cost. Listeners to the podcast can post comments on the blog, creating a learning community and making the

podcast an interactive medium.

Podcasts enable employees to learn while commuting, walking the dog, and so forth. But detractors may say that this is just another way businesses are expecting workers to be "on" 24/7. What's your response?

Let's not kid ourselves, most training departments don't have the power to ease the workload for employees to make more time for training. They're dealing with a workforce that's already stretched to the limit with day-to-day work. Their options are to make employees stay at the office late at night to do online training or pull them out of the office to a classroom resulting in late night work to catch up. A large number of employees prefer to do the training while driving to work or running on the treadmill instead. In addition, many of our clients are sales and service organizations with reps who can listen to the programs during the work day, in the car while driving to the client, or from the computer during down-time between calls.

Can you explain why you believe podcasting might be The Next Big Thing for training?

It's the management dream: You can talk straight into the ear of all employees without taking them off productive work. It's finally a mobile learning solution that makes sense. We are where the Internet was ten years ago, when we had million of computers and someone said, let's connect them, and the Internet was born. Now we have millions of iPods that are about to become connected.

Anything else you'd like to add?

The potential for podcasts and other mobile training is even greater in Asia and Europe. [There] MP3 players are increasingly built into cell phones, and cell phone penetration rates are approaching, and in some countries exceeding, 100 percent. In addition, the 3G network is bringing high-speed connectivity to every mobile device.

> According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than 22 million American adults own iPods or MP3 players, and 29 percent of them have downloaded podcasts.

More info and resources

How to

Want to start podcasting? These resources can help you create your own programs.

● "Podcasting and Vodcasting: Definitions, Discussions, and Implications": A white paper from the University of Missouri includes how-to information on creating pod- or vodcasts and discusses learning implications.

● How to Build a 10-Minute Podcast: A good how-to covering flow and content, not the technical requirements.

● Podcasting-Education: This Yahoo Groups discussion forum focuses on podcasting in classrooms.

● iPodcast Producer and iPodcast Creator: Industrial Audio Software offers free trials of its podcasting software as well as free online tutorials.

Podcast sources

Want to listen to a podcast? Here are some places you can find educational 'casts.

● iPodder.org, educational section: This area of the podcast directory provides various offerings; the majority are for K-12 or higher education.

● LearninginHand podcasting page: This webpage provides links to educational podcasts as well as information and resources for educators.

Background info

Futher background information on podcasting can be found on these webpages.

● Podcasting for Education: Blogger and educator-on-the-forefront D'Arcy Norman blogs about uses for podcasting in education and readers offer additional comments and resources.

● "Podcasts: New Twist on Net Audio": *Wired News* offered this article on the trend in 2004.