

Perspectives: *The New York Journal of Adult Learning*

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ISSUES AND TRENDS

Moving Instructional Podcasting Beyond Coursecasting

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The current and increasing interest in podcasting on campus is a phenomenon that's following a familiar ed tech pattern. **First**, a popular technology is *adopted*, that is to say, it's appropriated from a non-educational context and made over for education. In the case of podcasts, we are observing the retooling of a medium whose first major application was as leisure or entertainment technology.

In podcasting, audio content, like the pop songs it initially carried, is uploaded to an online directory and then pushed to subscribers via RSS feeds in much the same way that e-mailed news is distributed via list serves. Once downloaded to an iPod or other portable MP3 player, the content is made extremely portable, allowing any or all of it to be listened to as often as desired, whenever, and wherever that desire presents itself.

Next, the hot technology of the moment is *adapted*, in other words it is tweaked, altered, or customized to give it a function and identity as an instructional resource. And so, 'coursecasting,' the recording and subsequent podcasting of lectures, was born.

Translating Technology into Practice

This is much the same thing that happened with digital texts. In an enthusiastic hurry to find a way to *translate* a popular technology into the academic realm, a literal, but limited and limiting practice emerged. Digital texts have been around for a while and despite a serious marketing push by their producers, have failed to ignite much of a fire in the minds of the readers they hoped would use them. Why? Well, in their haste to get digital texts to market, publishers initially simply scanned existing hard copy books, producing what amounted to little more than digital photos of standard pages. These, while lighter and easier to transport, for the most part are difficult and unsatisfying to read. Worse, yet, they established a reputation for this media category that will be hard to shake for some time to come, even though it has been developed far beyond initial versions.

Web pages, which initially weren't thought of as serious text, have demonstrated for digital text publishers how visually compelling, interactive, and effective the bells and whistles of electronic publishing can be when they are embedded with links, graphics, animations, simulations, tools, and the many other media assets that have evolved over a decade of reflective, trial-and-error visioning and experimentation. Now that digital texts have begun to follow the lead of web authoring, they are beginning to evolve into the form they were destined to be. Those who are willing to give them another look are highly

impressed with the step forward that they now represent.

Of course there is nothing inherently wrong with coursecasting, podcasting's first very literal identity in education -- nothing truly counter productive -- unless, of course, more literal mindedness amongst the education community precipitates the conclusion that this first, superficial application is the final word. Hopefully, in the hands of reflective and creative developers, like the evolution of digital texts, podcasting will continue to evolve better and better applications.

One can't help but wonder about those first developers of writing thousands of years ago. As they tinkered with clay slab and stylus and ink on papyrus in mankind's first efforts to record the communication of thought, something that had previously always been accomplished orally; had they the technology at hand to utilize sound instead of visual symbol, might not they have opted for that as the most authentic form?

Reflecting Before Scaling Up

Fast forward to 21st Century campuses and it would seem that little true reflection is taking place as universities struggle with the issues of scaling up coursecasting, instead of understanding its true potential to serve a community so involved with the many dimensions of communication. There is great effort invested in how to do more coursecasting, easier coursecasting, and even fancier coursecasting; with the embellishment of video, for instance, but little in what would be highly effective applications for podcasting.

One common approach now taken appears to be the development and usage of the *automatic* or *non hands-on* podcasting in which an instructor simply flips the switch of pre-installed, pre-set lecture hall technology or places an order with the IT department for a 'techie' to set up equipment, relieving him of any chores. Every word, cough, and paper shuffle from the start to the end of class is recorded and uploaded. The ultimate icing on the cake of this scenario is beginning to show itself as on some campuses as these instant podcasts are deposited in the instructor's section of Blackboard, WebCT, or other online content management system. Lamentably, all this reinforces the dominance of coursecasting without questioning its defining role for educational podcasting.

Beyond coursecasting is the still primarily unexplored area of planned and edited podcast content -- content that doesn't merely archive live classes, but that complements and enhances them. This type of podcasting will extend the effectiveness of face-to-face instruction, not offer a canned alternative. It behooves the higher education community to support, encourage, and highlight efforts in this direction. Podcasting holds great possibilities for teaching and learning and like today's remarkably useful interactive web technology, it must be encouraged and allowed to work its way up from early ink on papyrus applications to the realization of its true potential.