

Podcasts as a conversational pedagogy

Sara Archard

The University of Waikato

Hamilton, New Zealand

Email: Sarchard@waikato.ac.nz

Rosina Merry

The University of Waikato

Hamilton, New Zealand

Email: Rosinam@waikato.ac.nz

Abstract

The use of technology such as podcasts, social networking sites, wikis, and Google docs for communicating information which supports teaching and learning in tertiary institutions is well documented (Bates, 2005). These tools have been shown to enhance traditional lectures and tutorials (Salmon, 2007). Little attention, however, has been given to the use of conversational approaches when using these tools and their potential in developing alternative pedagogical approaches to teaching. This article examines the use of a conversational style podcast in an online pre-service early childhood teacher education programme. The podcasts were initially used to disseminate information and respond to the students' needs, however, their conversational use revealed a number of unexpected outcomes. Analysis of the podcast conversations that occurred between the two lecturers, and the student feedback to these, were used to identify unexpected outcomes for students enrolled in the programme. These included the 'humanising' of the e-learning environment and the sense of community that emerged. This paper argues that the affordance of conversational podcasts personalises the e-learning environment, enhances students' and lecturers' motivation, and engenders a greater connectedness with the university context.

Introduction

From the early days of correspondence schools through to the e-learning platforms of today, there have been many changes in the pedagogy and technologies used in distance learning (Bates, 2005). Podcasting is one such technology that is now commonly being used by tertiary institutions for the purpose of teaching and learning. Much of the current research focuses on the technological aspects of podcasting, or documents the use of podcasts as a tool for capturing traditional, formal styles of lectures; a transmission process of content *to* learners. Whilst these traditional styles of podcasting are still of value, this paper argues that there is a place for a different style and pedagogical approach to podcasting, particularly in informal, casual, and conversational styles. The use of conversational podcasts is considered in this paper through an analysis of three podcast conversations between two lecturers in a fully online pre-service early childhood teacher education programme, and feedback from the students involved in this programme.

Online learning communities

Online communities are social networks that require interaction, communication, and an identity so that they can develop and be sustained. This can be achieved through the careful selection of the relevant tools and associated activities (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Joyes, 2008; Kirkup, 2001). However, the use of technological tools in e-teaching can generate impersonal and uninviting virtual learning environments. This can be due to a poor design or pedagogy with too much emphasis on the procedural nature of the technological tools (Allan & Lawless, 2003). It is imperative, therefore, that online teachers have a strong social presence in the e-learning environment. Social presence does not appear to have a single definition, but the literature suggests that it is to do with the degree to which a person is thought to be 'real' through the interactions that they have with others (Aragon, 2003; Lowenthal, 2009, Mackay & Freyberg, 2010). This 'realness' includes the person's history, humour, emotion and personality (Kehrwald, 2008). In educational contexts, this notion is supported by Garrison and Anderson (2004) who defined social presence "as the ability of participants in a

Community of Inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used” (p. 29).

A community of learners is a group of people who share important key characteristics and who work collaboratively (Campbell & Yates, 2005). Interestingly, online communities are not restricted by location or time. Communities of learners do not just happen – they need to be developed and sustained. Relationships need to be established so that feelings of belonging and trust can be cultivated (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Jonassen, Howland, Moore & Marra, 2003; Lai, 1999; McGrath, 2003). Students involved in e-learning programmes need to have an understanding and connection with the social as well as academic aspects of an online community (McInnery & Roberts, 2004; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2003). Indeed, Aragon (2003) cautions that not having a social element within an e-community can be detrimental to students’ learning. Kirkland-Harvey (2006) argues that a sense of community contributes to students’ development of identity in an online setting. However, unlike face-to-face communities, the online development of identity can be hampered, and even manipulated, as computer mediated communication (CMC) can limit and distort our true selves, as we can choose what to share, or even change our non-virtual identities. The limitations of CMC influence the aspects of one’s identity that might be shared. This is not only true for e-learners but also relevant to the e-teachers. Kirkland-Harvey (2006) suggests that online identity is constructed by “the textual, the visual and the behaviour” (p. 9) in the online environment, through the use of appropriate tools and a supportive teacher attitude.

Personalisation of e-learning

E-learning environments that use CMC have the potential to be cold and uninviting, as solely text-based mediums lack the traditional face-to-face cues of interaction. Impersonal e-learning environments can lead to feelings of isolation and a feeling of disconnectedness for students (Allan & Lawless, 2003). However, the appropriate pedagogical use of some technological tools can contribute to the ‘personalisation’ of an e-community. Personalisation, in this context, refers to the humanising of the e-learning

environment through the use of tools and procedures (Weiss, 2000). This personalisation of the e-learning environment contributes to the strengthening and development of an online community where students' learning is enhanced by the development of meaningful relationships with those who participate within such a community (Jonassen, Howland, Moore & Marra, 2003). In addition, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2004) affirm that students who have a high level of engagement and interaction within a programme have higher levels of motivation and learner satisfaction.

The use of a variety of technological tools, such as podcasting, blogs, web 2, discussion forums, feedback, collaborative assessment, and virtual social cafés, influence how social interactions are established and maintained. In this paper we argue that conversational podcasts create opportunities for rich interaction and communication, academically and socially, for all participants in an e-learning community.

Exploring conversational podcasts as an alternative pedagogical strategy: Our story

The Graduate Diploma of Teaching – Early Childhood is a relatively new programme, and at the time of writing is in its third year. Apart from a three-day orientation, the programme is completed fully online, using Moodle as its e-learning platform. It is an intensive, interactive programme that runs from mid-January to mid-December, with a maximum of 100 students undertaking nine papers and three blocks of practicum experience within this time. Students are located throughout New Zealand and communicate in the programme solely through information and communication technology (ICT).

As colleagues and co-lecturers in a university context, the notion of not having physical classroom was a real challenge. This was the first time that we had taught in a fully online programme, and in a programme that was to be the first of its kind offered by a university in New Zealand. We had a sense that a welcoming virtual campus would be a key starting place, and that the use of 'voice', as well as 'text', might help students gain

a sense of warmth and presence. To this end, we explored the use of conversational podcasts.

Conversational podcasts involve at least two lecturers engaged in a conversation around content and pedagogy, which is recorded and then shared with the students. These podcasts are integrated in all papers and are used to support weekly topics and content throughout the duration of the one-year programme. The podcasts are unedited and include unplanned conversational jokes, pauses as we wait for the other person to contribute, asides, commentary about what is also happening in the office, and so on. We did not edit them from the outset, as we did not have time to make them 'perfect'. We now believe that this has become an important element within the podcasts themselves. When we first began to use podcasts in this way, the main focus was to share information that was relevant to the paper, in a time efficient manner. As our conversational style podcasts developed, it became clear we had not fully anticipated the way in which they could engender a 'human touch' into our e-learning environment, as some unexpected outcomes emerged.

In order to explore the impact of the conversational podcasts, data was collected, with student consent, from within the communication spaces in the learning management system. These non-solicited contributions occurred in general discussions and were only accessible to the lecturers and students who were involved in the programme. Data was coded against the themes that arose within the data, and to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in reporting of the data.

Findings

Unexpected outcome: The 'glue' that holds the programme together

We began to use conversational-style podcasts as a tool to support students within the programme, encouraging them to feel comfortable with contributing and participating in the paper. Although we used a range of other technologies to help build a sense of community, we found that as the conversational podcasts developed, they began to form

the metaphoric ‘glue’ that holds the programme together. We found that this style of podcasting is a valuable teaching tool, and its authentic, casual, warts-and-all approach has been received well by students.

Feedback from students indicates that this non-edited approach makes the podcasts personally meaningful. For example, one student commented, “I enjoy the podcasts. It’s great to hear you laugh and keeps me sane” (Student A, online forum, September, 2009). This is further supported by another student’s comment,

I heard your podcast ... yesterday and I felt like I was again in Hamilton [at the three-day face-to-face meeting with the staff and students to start the programme]. Both of you ... create through the podcasts a really warm atmosphere for distant students (Student B, online forum, August, 2009).

An unexpected benefit of the conversational podcasts was also highlighted by a student who communicated that there were “friendly, supportive lecturers who make you feel like you are in their classroom by using podcasts and making personal one-to-one chat spaces available on the website” (Student C, online forum, September, 2009).

Unexpected outcome: A sense of connectedness and community

Developing a sense of connectedness within the programme appears to have been enhanced by the use of conversational style podcasts. We speculate that this is particularly important for students who are not situated within the local community and more likely to feel alone. Conversational podcasts appear to have helped students get a ‘feel’ for their online community and help them gain a sense of connectedness within this community. Through the use of conversational podcasts we have observed how an e-learning environment that establishes and nurtures a sense of connectedness can help increase students’ confidence and sense of belonging within an online programme. This is reflected by a student who said: “I have been accessing podcasts, they are great help in clarifying things for me and also making me feel like I’m connected which is great! Thanks” (Student D, online forum, September, 2009).

Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2004) asserts that the historical deficit view that CMC environments cannot support rich interaction is being replaced by understandings that the employment of appropriate tools and pedagogical aspirations enable rich interactions to be achieved. Conversational podcasts can create opportunities for rich interaction both academically and socially for participants in the learning community.

Unexpected outcome: Lecturers' identities

Conversational podcasts have allowed us to develop our identity online and, in the process, have allowed us to 'be who we are' as members of a learning community. We believe that we have been able to communicate with students in a similar manner as in the face-to-face and physical classroom. Conversational podcasts have allowed us to share many aspects of ourselves, including our sense of humour and our warmth and passion for teaching and learning, through communicating with students in an unedited manner. To be 'real people' in an online programme is a key aspect of the notion of social presence, which Garrison and Anderson (2004) consider an important element in any e-learning community. We were very mindful that while these conversational podcasts may be informal at times, they are still bound by the professional standards and guidelines of the programme. The following extracts from students' conversations within the programmes supports the view that conversational podcasts can provide a setting through which lecturers can express their personalities as 'real' people. The following excerpt occurred in one of our weekly podcasts to the students:

Sara: So Rosina, who will you be supporting this weekend, our fantastic All Blacks, or them Aussies!

Rosina: Sara, I can't think why you would ask that question? Me being an Aussie and all!

Sara: Just checking, after all you have been in New Zealand a wee while!

Rosina: Yes, but my family say that when the All Blacks are playing Australia I cheer for the winning team, and it does not matter which one that is because I have a foot in both countries. OK, now let's get focused here, what's the topic that we are wanting you [students] to unpack this week. (Lecturer A & B, online forum, September, 2009)

Also, the following excerpt from a student's conversation in the virtual coffee club space, after a podcast, illustrates how conversational podcasts provide an environment that allows lecturers to develop their online identity.

When you were talking in the podcast about the conversation you had with your grandbaby last week Rosina, it made me think about the fact you aren't just my lecturer, you have other roles as well! You are a grandma too! I didn't think we would have that type of relationship in an online program, it's very cool! (Student E, online forum, April, 2009).

Discussion

It is imperative that e-learning environments provide authentic opportunities for participants to develop and share their identities. Conversational podcasts have allowed us the space and opportunity to share a little of who we are as lecturers, which has in turn helped to establish meaningful relationships with the students in this programme. This view is supported by Joyes (2008), who stresses the need for educators to be authentic and meaningful in their interactions with students.

Conversational podcasts appear to be a useful tool for developing online relationships. While we did not initially consider this when developing this style of podcasting, we have found that conversational podcasts have contributed to relationship building within this programme, through our willingness to talk with each other in an informed but informal manner, and not put on 'another face' when communicating with the students. We are aware that podcasts do not work in isolation, but sit alongside other ways of promoting this, such as the social spaces that students use. These spaces, along with

conversational podcasts, contribute to the development of meaningful relationships between students and lecturers, and between the students themselves.

We are aware that having the opportunities alone, through employing various tools and spaces, does not mean that people will participate in or feel engaged by the learning community. We understand that it is people's attitudes and motivation that determine their engagement within the learning community (Wenger, 1998). We are not suggesting that conversational podcasts alone will encourage and motivate students to engage in their online learning, however, we believe when used in an informed manner they can contribute to this engagement. Our initial use of conversational podcasts as a tool for sharing information in an efficient manner has shifted to include an emphasis on engendering a human touch. We believe that the role conversational podcasts have played in humanising the environment has resulted in the development of meaningful relationships within this community of learners as described by Jonassen, Howland, Moore and Marra (2003). As a result of this unexpected affordance the podcasts have now become an intentional and regular part of the programme for strengthening relationships and fostering community

Concluding comments

This paper raised a number of possibilities and affordances of conversational podcasting that we had not previously considered before implementing them within our programme. Realising the contribution to positive experiences and learning outcomes this style of podcasting has had for the students in our programme we have continued to use them across all papers. We are aware of the importance of developing a community of learners when working in an online environment and believe that the unexpected outcomes of the conversational podcasts have created within this programme the notion of realness and sense of belonging that is suggested by Aragon (2003); Lowenthal (2009); and Mackay and Freyberg (2010) as being an essential element in the development of an online identity. We appreciate, however, that conversational style podcasts are an evolving tool and that continued exploration and research into their possibilities and affordances is required.

References

- Allan, J., & Lawless, N. (2003). Stress caused by online collaboration in e-teaching: A developing model. *Education and Training, 45*(8–9), 564–572.
- Aragon, S. R. (2003). Creating social presence in online environments. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 100*, 57–68. doi: 10.1002/ace.119
- Bates, A.W. (2005). *Technology, e-learning and distance education*. (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, N., & Yates, R. (2005). E-learning and pre-service teacher education. In K. W. Lai (Ed.), *e-Learning communities. Teaching and learning with the web* (pp. 39-49). New Zealand: Otago University Press.
- Cleveland-Innes, M., & Garrison, D. R. (2004). Critical factors in student satisfaction and success: Facilitating student role adjustment in online communities of inquiry. In J. Bourne & J. C. Moore (Eds.), *Elements of quality online education*, (pp. 29–38). Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium.
- Greyling, F., Kara, M., Makka A., & Van Niekerk, S. (2008). IT worked for us: Online strategies to facilitate learning in large (undergraduate) classes. *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning, 6*(3), 179–188. Retrieved from <http://www.ejel.org/main.html>
- Haythornthwaite, C. (2002). Building social networks via computer networks. In K. A. Renninger & W. Shumer (Eds.), *Building virtual communities: Learning and change in cyberspace* (pp.159–190). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jonassen, D., Howland, J., Moore, J., & Marra, R. (2003). *Building technology supported learning communities on the internet. Learning to solve problems with technology: A constructivist perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Joyes, G. (2008, November), *Challenging online learner identity through online learning tools*. Paper presented at the Ascilite conference, Melbourne. Retrieved from <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/melbourne08/procs/joyes.pdf>
- Kirkland-Harvey, L. (2006). ‘Are you representing’? Instructor identity in online courses. *UCFV Research Review Journal: Teaching and Learning Online, 1*(1), 1–14. Retrieved from <http://journals.ufv.ca/rr/ucfv.ca>

- Kirkup, G. (2001). Identity, community and distributed learning. In M.R. Lea & K. Nicoll (Eds.), *Distributed learning: social and cultural approaches to practice* (pp. 182–195). London, UK: Routledge Falmer.
- Lai, K. W. (1999). Teaching, learning and professional development. The teacher matters most. In K. W. Lai (Ed.), *Net-working: Teaching, learning and professional development with the internet* (pp. 7–23). Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press.
- McGrath, D. (2003, April). Developing a community of learners – What will it look like, and how will it work? *Learning and Leading with Technology*, 30(7), 42–45.
- McInnery, J.M., & Roberts, T.S. (2004). Online learning: Social interaction and the creation of a sense of community. *Educational Technology & Society*, 7(3), 73–81.
- Salmon, G. (Producer). (2007, March 29). *Learning futures: Creative, collaborative, communicative* [Podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.health.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/healthcast/hspvideo/keynote3.wmv/view>
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M & Zvacek, S. (2003). *Definitions, history and theories of distance education. Teaching and Learning at distance* (2nd ed). New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.
- Weiss, R. (2000). Humanizing the online classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 84, 47-51. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/%28ISSN%291536-0768>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This work is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 New Zealand License. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/nz/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California 94105, USA.