Podcasting Innovations in an English/Language Arts Methods Course

Peggy F. Hopper, PhD
Associate Professor
Mississippi State University
Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education
Mississippi State, MS

Abstract

In an effort to prepare pre-service teachers for the renewed focus on technology integration represented in the Common Core State Standards, technology innovations for teaching were introduced to a cohort of secondary English education students enrolled in a teacher preparation program (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). A podcasting project was initiated by the university to support innovative methods for using podcasting in classrooms. Students in courses chosen for this project were administered a survey to determine technology use. Two required levels of secondary English/language arts methods courses were chosen to be included in the project. Podcasting innovations were deemed successful based on pre-service teachers' responses that broadened their definition of technology use and focused on an increase in confidence to integrate technology in their future classrooms.

Keywords: podcasting, secondary education, technology

With the advent of the Common Core State Standards, there is an increased need for teachers to understand how to fully integrate technology in their teaching strategies (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). In an effort to introduce pre-service teachers enrolled in secondary English/language arts methods courses to technology that could be used for instructional purposes, the professor in a teacher preparation program at a southern university attempted to infuse the course with technologically advanced innovations. Innovations focused on using podcasting technology creatively for self-analysis of developing teaching styles. Audio podcasting was used in the first level of the two course series of methods courses English/language arts education students are required to take approximately their sophomore year, and video podcasting was used in the second level of the course pre-service teachers take the semester before their teaching internship.

Audio Podcasting in the English/Language Arts Methods Course

A cohort of eight female pre-service English teachers were introduced to the use of podcasting and iPods for recording, reviewing, and reflecting on their budding teaching abilities through the use of grammar based mini-lessons in the first level of methods class. The form of mini-lesson was chosen because of time constraints involved with students presenting lengthier lessons. As one pre-service teacher wrote about the mini-lesson, "As a teacher, I learned a lot about making lessons and that a student may have trouble with some parts of it and that is the point of the mini-lesson." Or as another one observed:

> In planning this lesson, I became aware of the importance of using instructional time wisely. Mini-lessons are not very long with good reason. If students are struggling with a concept, mini-lessons should be able to correct the mistakes in student understanding in a fairly short amount of time. If understanding is not accomplished, further instructional time is needed to teach students correctly.

Podcasting in Higher Education

As podcasting became more mainstream and successful in K-12 classes, it was only a matter of time before podcasting and mp3/mp4 technology was adapted for higher education (Heilesen, 2010; Hew, 2009; Chester, Buntine, Hammond, & Atkinson, 2011; Niemuth, 2010; Walls, et al., 2010). Now institutions of higher education have embraced this technology for a myriad of purposes, but the main use has focused on providing students access to course instruction via podcasting (Gribbins, 2007; Lee, McLoughlin, & Chan, 2008; Lum, 2006). The main use for students has been to use podcasts to review lectures they have often attended, not as a source of supplemental information (Lonn & Teasley, 2009; Walls et al., 2010).

Uses for graduate students have been developed for podcasting technology as well as for online students (Lonn & Teasley, 2009; Luna & Cullen, 2011). As with other new technologies, the ability to podcast has become easier as the technology has been used and improved upon (Chester et al., 2011; Niemuth, 2010). Although podcasting has been well documented in most disciplines, there is little evidence that podcasting is being currently used with pre-service teachers or being used as an opportunity for predicting their use of this technology later in their own classrooms (Chester et al., 2011).

As a result of the interest in podcasting technology for use in higher education, the university where this study was conducted initiated a podcasting project to explore ways to use podcasting on campus. The university's podcasting project was designed to promote classroom based podcasting technology used in innovative ways. Initially, four courses from different colleges across the university were chosen to participate in the project based on technology needs. The number of students within the courses ranged from 5 to 131. The English/language arts methods class was chosen to participate in this project to introduce pre-service teachers to an affordable technology that is also classroom applicable. The professor of the course further decided to try podcasting as a

tool for self-reflection. The methods course was the only course chosen for the university project that had the intention of students doing the podcasting rather than the professor. One reason the class was chosen was that it was small—8 students—and as a result the technology involved could be experimented with to determine what could be used for a larger numbered class. To get the project started, the class was provided with an audio recorder for recording mp3 files. The recorder was small and portable, and had a range of sound well suited for the classroom. Pre-service teachers in the course soon discovered that if they whispered in the back of the class even when the recorder was at the front, their voices could be picked up and recorded. The recorder was usually placed midway into the classroom when recording a mini-lesson, allowing for each pre-service teacher as presenter to walk and be mobile when the lesson dictated.

After each class session, mini-lessons presented during the class were loaded onto the university's podcasting website created for this project directly from the recorder. Class podcasts were also interfaced with iTunes. The sites were password protected so that only class members could access the lessons. Uploading lessons was quick and seamless, so students did not have to wait any length of time to listen to their mini-lessons. Lessons could be listened to on any computer that could access the university's website, by downloading to an mp3 player off the website, or through iTunes. A survey was created and administered to get feedback concerning the technology and its ease of use. Survey answers indicated the system was easy for students to use, and as one pre-service teacher later wrote, "It was neat to hear myself over iTunes." If students did not own an mp3 player and wanted to listen to themselves on-the-go, iPods could be checked out from a classroom set and used for this purpose.

As part of the experience, pre-service teachers were required to write a self-reflection on their recorded mini-lesson. The reflection questionnaire was loosely based on a taxonomy of questions developed to encourage reflective thinking (Pultorak, 1993). These pre-service teachers will see this assessment instrument again because it is also used during their teaching internship when pre-service teachers are assessed while in the classroom under supervisory conditions. Self-reflection was included in the podcasting project because self-reflection has been shown to act as a catalyst for students to more fully embrace the use of technology as their attitudes shift to include confidence (Hur, 2010).

As the podcasting progressed, students indicated a reticence to listen to their own recorded voices. As one pre-service teacher indicated, the privacy with which this could be done helped alleviate this issue. "I enjoyed listening to my mini-lesson. I could critique myself in my apartment without having to worry of what people think of me." Students also learned that how you sound may be important for other reasons. For example, one student wrote, "I might also have gone a bit heavier on the diction aspect of it [my lesson], but diction could be a unit lesson in and of itself."

Although pre-service teachers' reflections were based on audio only at this stage of the project, students agreed that it was amazing how much could be determined by just listening to the lessons. Since the recorder was so sensitive, classroom participation could be determined by level of discussion that was due to other class members not participating in the lesson. After listening to this level of distraction one class member wrote:

I learned that feedback is important and a long period of time in which I am not giving instruction can be awkward if the students are not engaged in a learning activity. Bottom line: down time is usually not a good thing for students while they are in the classroom.

Classroom levels of ease and enthusiasm were clear as well. This was well stated by one student, ". . . conditions that were important were the enthusiasm that was shown. The students fed off my enthusiasm." Specifically concerning the grammar base for this assignment, one pre-service teacher wrote:

I really enjoyed doing the pod-casted mini-lesson. During my educational path, I have purposely avoided doing any lessons on grammar. I think this is because it is the area in which I am least confident and my university does not offer any course specifically targeted at learning grammar inside and out in order to be able to teach it effectively. This assignment forced me to conduct a mini-lesson, and I found out that it is not as hard as I have been thinking.

Students' Use of Technology

One reason newer technology was introduced to the methods class of pre-service teachers was that most of these students thought too narrowly concerning technology. When pre-service teachers were asked to introduce a technology component in most classroom assignments during both levels of methods courses, it was infrequent that any type of technology other than the computer was considered, and often this meant presenting a short PowerPoint or Prezi presentation. Although these types of presentations can often be effective, they are certainly not the only technology pre-service teachers could consider using in their future classrooms.

To better understand this trend, surveys were administered to students in the four courses participating in the podcasting project university wide to determine what technology these specific students used and how frequently they used it; 104 students responded. Predictably, cell phones led the technology ownership category with 91.3% owning a cell phone. Digital camera and laptop ownership came in second at 66.3%, and finally, mp3 players at 43.3%. Although students think of mp3 players as being ubiquitous, 48.1% of the survey respondents claimed to not own an mp3 player of any brand citing cost as the main factor. And of those who did own an mp3 player, 25% claimed to have received it as a gift. Since national surveys claim as high as 80% of students own mp3 players, this lower percentage may reflect the lower economic status of the state (Lum, 2006).

To further extend the use of mp3 technology in the classroom, a class membership on Audible.com was purchased. Audible.com is one of the most frequently used websites for downloading and streaming audio books with over 80,000 programs to choose from. According to a press release concerning the acquisition of Audible.com by Amazon, "Audible.com is the leading online provider of premium digital spoken word audio

content, specializing in digital audio editions of books, newspapers and magazines, television and radio programs and original programming" (Parkin, 2008, para. 2).

Audio productions that can be found on Audible.com include unabridged novels of all genres, classic and new, speeches, plays, poems, radio broadcasts, podcasted magazines and newspapers, and nonfiction books. VangoNotes, audio study notes, are also offered through Audible.com for *The Little, Brown Handbook,* 10th edition (Fowler & Aaron, 2009). Pre-service teachers were able to catch up on reading books they may one day be responsible for teaching by listening to them via a classroom iPod or their own mp3 device. As a classroom experience, excerpts from novels and *The Little, Brown Handbook* were modeled for inclusion in lessons and unit plans as an alternate way to have their future students "read" a lesson or study grammar. Students were encouraged to suggest books found on Audible.com to download, listen to, and then include in assignments for designing lessons within unit plans developed for other course assignments. As a result of the success of this experience, movies were purchased as the next step for media inclusion.

At the conclusion of audio podcasting, pre-service teachers were surveyed as to whether or not their perceptions of technology use in the classroom changed as a result of the project so far. Although some respondents indicated their perceptions had not changed, most indicated that they had. When asked about the recorded lessons in general, students responded that it was a "great way to learn from other students" and to "evaluate myself." One pre-service teacher wrote, "It opened my eyes to how we can use technology for education purposes and how students all over the world can access education through the Internet." Other comments included, "I plan to use more podcasted lessons for my classroom." And finally, "I never thought of using podcasting for teaching."

As a self-reflection tool, one pre-service teacher responded by saying, "Podcasting lessons/presentations is a new way to allow students to reflect on their work." Another student wrote, "It is a good way to observe yourself in front of a group." "Technology is a great self-evaluating tool," according to one student. And finally, the type of comment the exercise was designed to illicit, "I found that technology is easier to incorporate than I thought."

One unexpected result of being recorded was attributed to students' discomfort at listening to their own recorded voices. Discussion in the methods class following the process of reviewing their audio podcast focused on the unconscious use of dialect and the southern accent, both of which came through in the podcasted lessons to varying degrees. As a result, pre-service teachers decided to concentrate on discussing and teaching about language use in their own future classrooms. Most of the pre-service teachers saw this as a methodology to help their students become more aware of word choices and how they sound to enable them to work on making their speech clearer and more grammatically correct.

Video Podcasting

As a natural consequence of mp3 technology (audio) leading into the development of affordable and accessible mp4 technology (adding visual), pre-service
teachers in the next level of the methods course video recorded a mini-lesson for reflection, called "vodcasts" to reflect the visual nature of the podcasts (Meng, 2005). Since these students move through the methods courses successively as a cohort, they were ready for this next step due to their former podcasting experience. An added component was a peer review of each lesson. Once again, pre-service teachers were recorded presenting grammar-based mini-lessons. Some students expanded and perfected their first audio podcasted lesson since the requirement was greater in scope for this next more advanced level of methods course. The mini-lesson was required to be longer, for example, and handouts with evidence of a follow-up, supplementary lesson were required.

A video recorder set on a tri-pod was used as the recording device to provide the ability to swivel and stay focused on the presenter. Pre-service teachers in the class took turns operating the camera. The same uploading method was used as in the audio podcasts, and once again students could log on to the university's podcasting site to watch themselves as well as listen. A peer review sheet was used in the classroom, and after examination by the professor, was passed on to the student presenter. One additional question on the self-reflection instrument involved a reaction to the peer reviews.

Pre-service teachers reported in class that if listening to themselves was difficult, watching themselves was really tough! Many had a very human reaction by first concentrating on a critique of how their clothes and hair looked. This was not necessarily negative in that although students are requested to dress professionally for these mini-lesson presentations, there were predictably varied interpretations of this requirement. Viewing themselves full length in front of the classroom gave them a closer approximation of how professional they would look in future classrooms wearing the same attire.

Behaviors students vowed to correct after viewing themselves included excessive use of hand gestures, fiddling with hair and jewelry to the point of distraction, and nervous ticks that could be perceived by students as a lack of self-confidence. To illustrate this reaction, "MY HAIR! My voice grates on my nerves and it's hard for me to pay attention to myself." And a more serious comment,

> Through planning this lesson, I have learned that time and preparation are key. Being in front of the class is like being the main attraction on a large public stage. A teacher must strive to keep the students' attention while battling to teach them in the process. This can only be done with consideration and immense preparation. A teacher should not expect to teach his/her students if he/she is not knowledgeable of the material nor excited about its presentation. A good lesson is one that is formed in consideration of all these factors.

Although not part of the classroom assignment, some pre-service teachers later used GarageBand and other software to visually enhance their podcasted lesson. In some cases, they included a title page, references for information used in the lesson, and a sound track to accompany the lesson.

Conclusion

Research has shown that one reason teachers do not include technology in their instruction is lack of confidence (Williams, 2009). By giving these future teachers the opportunity to experiment with innovative technology through the shelter of classroom participation or situated as realistically as possible, it is hoped they will become confident enough to fully integrate technology into their own future classrooms (Hur, Cullen, & Brush, 2010). The safety net represented by learning these innovations while protected as students may be one reason for the positive nature of pre-service teachers' feedback and their increased confidence as the quotes confirm (Hur, 2010).

One limitation of the project being duplicated is the small number of students involved in each part, both the podcasting for self-reflection and the survey of technology use. Although this represents an impediment to further research based on this project, the small number enabled the professor and students to experiment with the technology to a greater extent than would have been possible with a larger number. The survey although small as well represented a good way to drill down to determine students' technology use at the class level. This data was valuable in determining how to address technology with a specific class of students.

There is not much data available concerning pre-service English teachers specifically with respect to their teacher education program and the amount of technology they are introduced to and how these experiences later result in the amount of applied technology in their own classrooms. McGrail (2005) looked specifically at practicing English teachers and their perspectives about technology. Conclusions of the study indicated that training on how to integrate technology for instructional purposes may be one key to shaping technology use in English classrooms. It is hoped this podcasting project in which pre-service teachers learned how to record, by both audio and visual methods, upload, and play back their recorded podcasts may lead to them using this method in their own classrooms or may give them confidence to use other, newer innovative methods.

As a conclusion to the podcasting project, pre-service teachers in the methods class recorded their podcasted grammar lessons at a local studio that produces commercials and other video projects. The podcasts were then uploaded to a local high school's website. These podcasts are now being used for extra instruction or remediation of grammar problems anytime a student at the school may need the extra practice. As a result, the podcasting project represents a true theory to practice experience situated initially in the classroom. It is hoped that the pre-service teachers who participated in the podcasting project became more tech savvy with added confident due to the self-reflection that may result in greater transfer for using technology their own classrooms (Hur, 2010).

References

Chester, A., Buntine, A., Hammond, K., & Atkinson, L. (2011). Podcasting in education: Student attitudes, behavior and self-efficacy. *Educational Technology & Society, 14*(2), 236-247.

Fowler, H.R. & Aaron, J.E. (2009). *The little, brown handbook.* (10th ed.) New York, NY: Pearson Longman.

Gribbins, M. (May, 2007). *The perceived usefulness of podcasting in higher education: A survey of students' attitudes and intention to use.* Proceedings of the Second Midwest United States Association for Information Systems, Springfield, IL.

Heilesen, S.B. (2010). What is the academic efficacy of podcasting? *Computers & Education, 55*(3), 1063-1068.

Hew, K.F. (2009). Use of audio podcast in K-12 and higher education: A review of research topics and methodologies. *Education Tech Research Development, 57*(3), 333-357.

Hur, J.W. (2010). Teaching for application: A model for assisting pre-service teachers with technology integration. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, *18*(1), 161-182.

Hur, J.W., Cullen, T., & Brush, T. (2010). Teaching for application: A model for assisting pre-service teachers with technology integration. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 18*(1), 161-182.

Lee, M.J., McLoughlin, C., & Chan, A. (2008). Talk the talk: Learner-generated podcasts as catalysts for knowledge creation. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 39*(3), 501-521.

Lonn, S., & Teasley, S.D. (2009). Podcasting in higher education: What are the implications for teaching and learning? *Internet and Higher Education, 12*(2), 88-92.

Lum, L. (2006). The power of podcasting. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education, 23*(2), 32-35.

Luna, G, & Cullen, D. (2011). Podcasting as complement to graduate teaching: Does it accommodate adult learning theories*? International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 23*(1), 40-47.

McGrail, E. (2005). Teachers, technology, and change: English teachers' perspectives. *Journal of Teacher Education, 13*(1), 2-24.

Meng, P. (2005). *Podcasting & vodcasting: A white paper*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, IAT Services.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common core state standards (English Language Arts).* Washington DC: Author.

Niemuth, T. (2010). New tools for student engagement. *Leadership, 39*(3), 24-27.

Parkin, L. (2008, January 31). *Amazon.com to acquire Audible.com.* Retrieved from Voice Over Times website: http://www.voiceovertimes.com/2008/01/31/amazoncom-to-acquire-audiblecom/

Pultorak, E. G. (1993). Facilitating reflective thought in novice teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *44*(4), 288-295.

Walls, S.M., Kucsera, J.V., Walker, J.D., Acree, T.W., McVaugh, N.K., & Robinson, D.
      H. (2010).   Podcasting in education: Are students as ready and eager as we think
      they are? *Computers & Education, 54*(2), 371-378.
Williams, M.K. (2009). Preparing preservice teachers for 21st century classrooms:
      Transforming attitudes and behaviors about innovative technology. *Journal of
      Teacher Education, 17*(3), 393-418.