



## Practical Insights: Incorporating Podcasts into Your Course

By Jonathan M. Ahlbrand, Online Instructor, Mktg. 120

### Technology Innovation

IPods, mp3, music players.... We hear a lot about this technology. It has moved from being optional to the life of a young person to being integral to who they are. The flexibility of this technology and the recent advancements in small scaled computing and memory chips has fundamentally changed how we enjoy music, and even how we access knowledge.

In 2005, “**Podcast**” was voted the technological buzzword of the year. Derived from the integration of the word **broadcast** with the product name of the Apple **iPod**, this new phenomenon is a true paradigm shift away from traditional broadcasting of news and information. In the past 18 months, thousands of Podcasts have popped onto the Net covering more topics than you can imagine. Geographic barriers are gone and any Podcaster can enjoy a world-wide audience. More importantly, it gives anyone the opportunity to express themselves and is truly a technological manifestation of free speech.

Unlike radio, it is a very personal experience for the listener. It allows them to consume information in places and at times that are convenient to them. Furthermore, this information is now highly portable and like online learning, easily facilitates the “anywhere/anytime” learning philosophy.

### Mktg 120 Podcast Experiences

When I first developed my Mktg 120 online course 5 years ago, I (thinking I was a pioneer), incorporated a number of small “one minute micro-lectures” into the first few weeks of the course that could be downloaded and listened to from the students’ computer. I had found some audio tools for recording and converting files to mp3 format. Over the last few semesters, I learned from my end-of-course survey that students really never listened to these micro lectures and those that did, found that they were of no value. Further analysis revealed that poor production quality, lack of meaningful content and lack of entertainment quality contributed to the lack of “listenership”.

In spring 2006 I began to replace the Mktg 120 online “micro lectures” with newly developed content-rich Podcasts. Unlike the “micro lectures” my student surveys reflected very positively on the value of this content. This was a significant change. As I revise and re-record these Podcasts each semester, I now have a greater understanding of what works with students.

### Educational Application of Podcasts

So how can we use this to improve the educational experience for online students? Many faculty are in fact incorporating Podcasts into their face-to-face and online courses. But the real question that first must be answered is how is this material to be integrated and why?

Simply, it is a question of value. It is about enhancing the instructional experience for students and reaching them in a different way.

Recently there have been numerous articles in academic journals about faculty who have been posting their lectures as Podcasts for students to download. Consequently many students stopped coming to class.



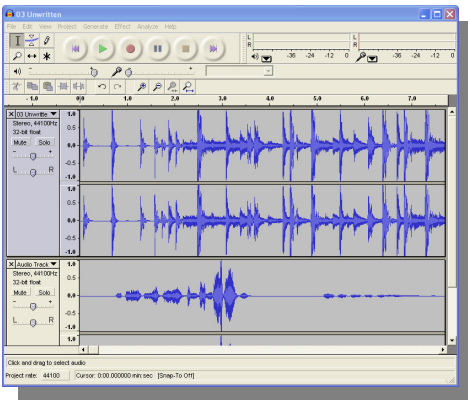
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Instructional Podcasts should **enhance** the instructional environment, not replace it. The format of the Podcasts should be interesting, insightful, and definitely entertaining. If you're boring in a lecture, rest assured you are even more boring coming through a Podcast. Nobody wants to hear a college instructor drone on for 45 minutes as if somebody was really listening. A good Podcast should be engaging and entertaining and leave the students wanting to download the next installment.

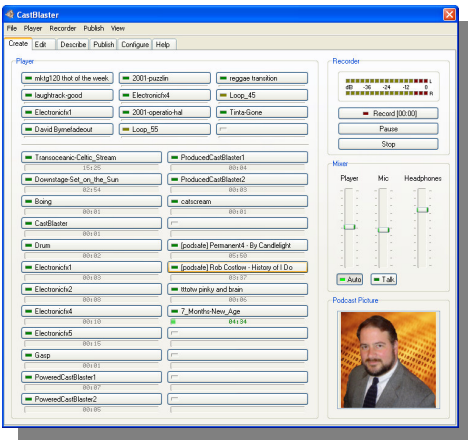
### Technological Considerations

**Software for creation and editing:** There are many free and commercial products available for audio production. I suggest you start with some of the free tools before you invest in the commercial ones. Here are 2 tools worth downloading:



**Audacity** (Free/open source multi-track recording/mixing application) This application is very powerful and can be used in all stages of audio production.

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>



**CastBlaster** (trial version allows unlimited Podcasts with a 10 minute time limit) this application is easy to use and allows for "real-time" recording thus reducing the need for extensive post production editing.

<http://www.castblaster.com/>

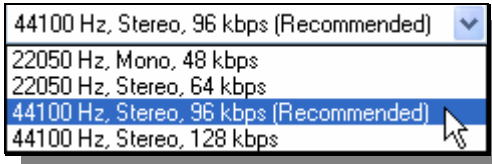


**Microphones and Headphones:** Try to find a high-quality microphone with some noise canceling properties. A \$10 stick-mic will do the job, but will also let in a lot of ambient room noise (chair squeaks, keyboard clicks etc). I have a Logitech USB head set with Microphone. It cost about \$50 and is worth it.

**Recording:** You don't need a studio or a sound proof room, just find a quiet place. Try to minimize any extraneous noises in your recording environment.



**Space and File Sizes:** Multiple mp3 files can take up a large amount of hard drive space. A 10 minute CD Quality (128kbs) Podcast can be as large as 10MB. Most recording programs allow you to set the sampling bit rate to lesser quality thus reducing the file size. At 96kbs, the same file is about 6MB.



### **Techniques**

**Experiment:** Once you have your equipment, spend some time experimenting with the technology and programs.

**Format/Time Consideration:** This is one of the most critical factors in a successful Podcast and it may take some experimentation to determine what captures and maintains the students' attention. One of the best ways to get an idea of possible formats is to download and listen to a variety of Podcasts. You'll learn very quickly that it's not just the content that is important but how the content is delivered. You may find that you'll have to experiment with different formats and different time constraints to find one that works for you.

**Learn from the Masters:** Before you begin, listen to a variety of Podcasts. Note the styles and production quality. Here are a few of my favorites:

### **The Daily Breakfast**

<http://www.sqpn.com/scripts/dailybreakfast.php> produced by Father Roderick, a Catholic priest in the Netherlands. This Podcast incorporates news, movie and video game reviews, religion and commentary all from the point of view of a Catholic priest.

**Note:** The DB is a part of SQPN, <http://www.sqpn.com/> a Podcast "network" created by Fr. Roderick. There many other great Podcasts on this site. Daily Breakfast, Catholic Insider and Rosary Army all were **2006 Peoples Choice Podcast Award** winners in their respective categories.

### **This Week In Tech- TWiT**

<http://www.twit.tv/TWiT> hosted/produced by Leo LaPorte, this is a weekly digest of technology news, thought and opinion. TWiT offers lots of great guests and glimpses of the future of technology.

### **The Naked Scientists**

<http://www.thenakedscientists.com/> Produced by BBC radio this weekly program covers science, medicine and more.

### **Mysterious Universe**

<http://www.sohpodcast.com/mu/> This program covers things like UFOs, Big Foot, paranormal and other strange phenomena.

### **Formatting**

**Preparation:** This is critical. Just as you would normally have a lecture outline, it is good to also have an outline for the structure of your Podcast. Consistency is also very important. As you move from



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week to week, the format of your Podcasts should become familiar to your students. They should know what to expect and what to find in each subsequent Podcast.

**Integrate Music:** Many Podcasts include music as an integral part of the production. Some Podcasters like to have music playing in the background or some sort of rhythm loop to make the Podcast richer and more interesting. You can find royalty free music at these sites:

**Garageband:** <http://www.garageband.com/>

**PodSafe Music Network:** <http://music.podshow.com/>

You may also want to do a Google search for free loops, sound effects and sound bytes from movies, TV etc...

**Formatting Spreadsheet:** you may want to consider developing a Podcast format grid that helps you maintain a consistent production format. This tool can be developed within a spreadsheet or table and could look something like this:

Event	Content/Actions	Timing
<b>Introductory Music</b>	Play Music... fade to welcome	1-3 Min
<b>Welcome</b>	Welcome to <b>week X</b> of Mktg 120 on line. <i>(Tie the music or band to the concept of the course )</i> Today's music is <b>XXX</b> from the band <b>ZZZ</b> you can find this band and others at garageband .com	30sec
<b>Weekly Concept and objectives</b>	This week we will cover the material from <b>Chapter x</b> and will be discussing the following concepts:.....	3min
<b>Transition 1</b>	Play transition jingle 1	15 seconds
<b>Personal Insight</b>	This week I would like to share with you a real situation that relates to this week's concepts.....	3-5 min
<b>Business Quote of the week</b>	This week's quote comes from Jeffery Gitomer.... (explain context to weekly theme)	2min
<b>Closing Music</b>	Play Closing theme and fade out	45 sec

The important thing is to:

- Know what events you plan to deliver
- Know your content
- Keep to your timetable

It is not necessary to create a detailed script that you can read. In fact, you are better off working from an outline and not trying to deliver a flawless presentation. Reading from a script can often be dull and mechanical. Your style can be modified over time, but relaxed and conversational is usually a good way to begin. Pretend the audience is there, because they will be.

**Frequency:** How often should you create a Podcast for your course? This will depend on you and the amount of time that you want to dedicate this activity. Once a week, twice a week, creating a Podcast takes time. Until you move past the learning curve, your first few Podcasts will take 3 times as long as your 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>. Depending on the software you use, pre-recording activities and the amount of editing you need to do, expect to devote 40-60 minutes to each 20 minute finished Podcast.



### Interviewing Techniques

**Q/A Format:** One technique to make a Podcast more interesting is to incorporate an interactive interview. This doesn't actually have to be live, but you can make it sound live by deploying an interview format. For example, you may choose to deliver a one minute introduction to a topic and mentioned that you will have a question and answer session with another person or guest presenter. You can provide the guest with a list of questions for which you want to have answers. The guest can record their answers to the questions with each answer being a separate mp3 file or a combined file that you can edit later. Depending on the software that you're using, you can load the answers into your system and then go about interviewing this person as if they were actually there. Every time you ask a question, you play the appropriate sound clip.

**Live Format:** This takes a lot of preparatory work but the end result is engaging and informative to the students. This is the closest thing to a real radio talk show. Ask questions, share the microphone, and interact in a normal interviewing situation. Depending on your technology, you may even be able to do this over the telephone or through Skype.

### Post-production

**Editing:** This part of the process can be fairly time consuming depending on the quality of your recording session and the type of recording software that you use. I have found that using CastBlaster eliminates post production editing. Occasionally I will use the integrated editing tools within CastBlaster to extract small segments from the Podcast.

**Uploading files/RSS feeds: RSS.** This stands for Really Simple Syndication. By now you probably have noticed a little XML tag **XML** on certain websites. This indicates that you can essentially subscribe to the content of the web site and have it fed to a program which can collect or aggregate the content. This content can be anything from news, to Podcasts or even Vodcasts (video-casts).

Currently Lansing Community College does not provide faculty the ability to create RSS links, therefore the best we can do is to load these Podcasts into our online classes or course web pages and encourage students to either to listen to them at their computer or download them to their music aggregation program, such as Apple iTunes. Most aggregation programs are free.

**Bandwidth Considerations:** Popular Podcasts can have thousands of listeners and require significant bandwidth to satisfy all of the download requests. In the context of instructional Podcasts, bandwidth should not be an issue since the number of downloads are minimal.

### Final Thoughts

Even if you don't produce your own, you can find many high quality Podcasts to integrate into your course. There is plenty of free content from major news sources that can be integrated with or linked to your course. For example; iTunes has hundreds of free Podcasts available for download from reputable sources such as the Discovery Channel, National Public Radio, NASA and more.

Our customers (students) are tech savvy. Podcasts can be a powerful addition to any course and can provide another way to create a meaningful connection with our students.



Anonymous Student comments:

How do you feel about the Podcasts in this course?

Responses

- “Podcasts, make the class more personal, I like that you take the time to talk to us, it is hard to make an online class personal, and I feel that you care about your students more because you use Podcasts.”
- “It is nice to hear your voice and give us an overview of the week. Keep it up and the music is great.”
- “It's a change of pace. I've done 4 online courses now and this one separates itself because of the Podcasts.”
- “Sometimes things are explained better when you hear it than when you read it. It clears up what I have to do and I like that.”
- “I really like how the music opens it up. It just seems to give me a slight break and something to enjoy and not really think about for a little. I also like the weekly overview. It helps me kind of put a schedule together. I also like the quotes.”
- “Very helpful in giving the overall direction for the week. I like knowing what is important and what we should be focusing on as we read the material and do the exercises.”
- “You are the first instructor that has ever done this for an online class. I personally think it is great.”
- “You do well with explaining the material for the upcoming week and it does help to prepare me before I start into the chapter.”