Podcasting Australian History

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iPods and their numerous rip-offs and cousins are ever-present in secondary schools today. Students constantly listen to them, and the sight of two students bound together by the one pair of headphones has become as familiar as the silhouette+white headphone brand of the Apple iPod. Along with mobile phones they are the bane of many teachers' classroom management plans. At some schools there are blanket bans on them. But what if their power could be used for good?

This article is not for the techno-geeks among you that already know what a podcast is.[1] I own neither an iPod, mobile phone nor TV, so how I came to be running this project is a mystery. I guess it stemmed from the frustration of continually confiscating mp3 players from my students. In response to this experience, and after hearing of similar experiments with VCE biology, I wanted to integrate them into the learning process. After gaining some seed funding from Knowledge Bank and Bendigo Innovations & Excellence I set about co-opting my students' technology for learning. First, I had to learn how to use one. Then I set about recording short (5-7 minute) podcasts that introduced each topic that we were studying in Year 9 Australian History. On most occasions the students were extraordinarily engaged – they listened intently and were much more interested than if I had been trying to command their attention in person.

The culmination of the project was a day-long fieldwork excursion. Students competed in teams, visiting different sites in Bendigo, listening to podcasts about each place and then completing tasks. You can read about and watch their reactions at http://ihistory.wordpress.com. Students have really welcomed the use of 'their' technology into the learning process. However, like any teaching tool, podcasting needs an educational goal to be effective. If the use of ICT is driving the educational experience then it will descend into a short-lived fad.

In this article I will explain my perspective on the educational rationale for using podcasts in history education, consider the advantages and disadvantages of their use and briefly introduce the practicalities for those interested. Before launching into that task, here is a brief summary of what podcasting is.

1. WHAT IS A PODCAST?

The word 'podcast' is an amalgam of the words 'iPod' and 'broadcast'; in other words, a broadcast that can be played on an iPod, or any other brand of mp3[2] player. Usually, they exist on the internet and can be downloaded onto an mp3 player or computer. Anyone can create a podcast and place it on a site on the internet. Listeners can then subscribe to this podcast using a 'podcatching' program such as iTunes. Once subscribed a listener does not have to visit the internet site to download each new podcast; instead, the internet site automatically sends the new podcast to your computer.

Educationally speaking, a podcast is a glorified sound recording, created in digital form (an mp3 file) so that it can be put onto a student's computer or mp3 player. The podcasts my students and I create consist of the following:

- a narrative about a particular topic, sometimes including excerpts from songs or interviews with experts
- backing music to accompany the narration

Once created, I put these podcasts onto a (free) internet podcasting site or transfer them directly onto students' mp3 players.

2. THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF PODCASTING

One of my concerns about using mp3 players is that it could be simply a fad, a gimmick used to suck students into caring about a topic they otherwise have little interest in. So there must be a deeper rationale for the use of mp3 players and podcasting in history education. In my view there are two main reasons.

The first and main reason for using podcasting is that it is an oral way of telling stories. History, as the word suggests, is about stories. History education is most effective when students experience a connection with the *story* of East Timor, Medieval England or nineteenth century Australia. Students are not, in my experience, primarily concerned with the themes and ideas of history. This comes later. First is the fascination with a story. And before writing or type was widespread, oral stories were told which invested past events with meaning. Of course, in some cultures this is still the dominant mode of historical reflection. Podcasting allows me to tell a story in a succinct, focussed and prepared way. If I try to tell stories 'in person', often student misbehaviour or other distractions get in the way. My students tell me they appreciate being able to *focus* on the story and information in a podcast, rather than having to ask me to repeat stories. Partly because my school has a high number of students with literacy problems, auditory learning is preferred.

The second reason for using podcasting is that mp3 players are student-preferred technology. As teachers we are prone to using technology that we feel comfortable with and we use it in ways that we feel comfortable with. For example, most teachers have grown comfortable using technology such as DVD and video footage, word-processing, the internet for research and perhaps data projectors. We use these as a way of presenting information or getting students to 'extract' information. This kind of use of technology is still valuable but it is hardly the way in which students now use technology. Students use mobiles, mp3 players and websites such as MySpace to communicate and they have a personal connection with technology. They use technology not primarily to 'extract information' but to create and communicate. In this sense, even my efforts at podcasting are way behind students' own uses of technology, because when I get them to listen to a podcast I am wanting them to extract information. But it is one step towards the way students are using technology.

3. VELS LINKS

The VELS – as many teachers are discovering to their dismay (!) – assume that ICT will be integrated throughout the curriculum and that means more than using computers for word-processing or showing a DVD. There are three interrelated ways in which ICT is meant to be used, which I'll now outline and link to the process of podcasting:

- *ICT for visualising thinking:* this element relates to ICT being used to map thinking processes in a way students can *see*. This does not have much direct impact on podcasting, except that in preparing for a podcast, students do need to logically map out the themes and stories they wish to include.
- *ICT for communicating:* podcasts can be used to communicate information to students. In addition, if podcasts can be used to connect with overseas students, then feedback and criticism needs to take in cross-cultural concerns.
- *ICT for creating:* students learn the skills and protocols for creating podcasts, including software knowledge, oral language vs. written language and what elements in a podcast are appropriate for the message they want to communicate.

4. HOW TO USE PODCASTS

- As a revision tool: often historical information and meaning is quite detailed and complex, and needs several 'takes' to be absorbed. Podcasts are a way of giving students access to this information without a teacher being present.

- As an introduction to a topic: a podcast can be used to pique interest and engagement in a new topic. This is how I use them in the classroom.

- As a tool during fieldwork: mp3 players can store recordings about a site visited and allow students to verbally record observations.

- Students can create them as a way of assessing their knowledge and understanding of a period of history. For example, they might create a podcast of bushranging along with a profile of Captain Midnite.

- Students can create them as a more reflective response to a fieldwork experience or other historical experience.

5. SOME PROS AND CONS OF PODCASTING

Finally, here are some of the benefits and problems I have encountered using podcasting as a teaching tool in History. Overall I believe it to be well worth trying.

Pros	Cons
Economically, podcasting makes sense – the technology already exists in students' pockets! In addition, the software needed to create podcasts is free. The technology needed is cheaper than other educational technology such as DVD players and data projectors.	Mp3 players cost money. Although about two-thirds of students in my socio-economically disadvantaged school have them, we cannot assume they will all have them, particularly at the primary level.
In terms of student engagement with content I think the benefits have been huge. Almost all students reported a preference for aural forms of absorbing content. Interestingly, they explicitly distinguished between listening to a podcast and listening to a teacher, identifying the lack of distraction as a key factor in taking up new information.	It is content-oriented rather than skill-oriented: podcasting, particularly when teacher-created, tends to be about information rather than the *hows* of history.
It is particularly suited to History because it makes stories accessible.	Podcast creation by students is limited by access to technology and timetabling constraints in secondary schools. My Australian History class has two x 1.5 hour sessions, which is often not enough time to become familiar with the technology.
Through creating podcasts students can tell and interpret historical stories in an engaging manner. Verbal communication is a different medium to formal essay writing, and one that some students are more comfortable with.	Schools and parent bodies can be against mp3 players being used in the school because it is seen as 'giving in' to students.
Because podcasts can easily be hosted on the internet, students can connect with others globally. We have one 'podcast exchange' with a school in the US which is doing similar things, and are currently working on a project with a school in Singapore.	Creation of podcasts is time-consuming: it takes time to learn how to use the software.

ENDNOTES

1 A podcast is a digital recording of voice and/or music, usually accessible via the internet.

2 Mp3 – the type of file. For example, a podcast on cats might have a file name of 'cats.mp3'