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**“Making History”: Podcasting in the USMA World History Course**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the feasibility of integrating podcasting into the USMA Freshman World History course. This course is a two-semester introduction to both the development and interaction of world civilizations and the historical method. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the *New Oxford American Dictionary* definition of podcasting as “a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player.” The focus will of this paper will be on the creation and content of such digital media rather than the technical means of delivery, such as RSS feeds.

The ubiquitous nature of portable media devices and our students’ increasing familiarity and comfort with them leads inevitably to a desire to harness them for teaching purposes. This meshes nicely with Cashion’s first element of encouraging student motivation, “Begin Where the Students Are.”<sup>1</sup> Podcasts have been used for introductory classes at other institutions, most notably Duke University, as described in the *Duke University iPod First Year Experience Final Evaluation Report*.<sup>2</sup> At Duke, the focus was predominantly on instructor-generated content that students could access as a means of overcoming limited contact with the professor. Since USMA provides significantly more contact with the teacher, I decided to focus my podcasting on student-generated content that could be shared with other students. In this way, I wanted to reinforce a key idea of the course: historical study is in large part about argument and interpretation of evidence rather than a single truth or set of truths.

**Method**

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<sup>1</sup> William E. Cashion, “Encouraging Student Motivation to Learn Lessons from Experience”, Student Handout, USMA Master Teacher Program.

<sup>2</sup> This report and others relating to Duke’s use of iPods for instruction can be found at <http://www.isis.duke.edu/events/podcasting/archive.html>.

The main idea behind the introduction of podcasts was to give students an additional form of media that they could use to enhance their learning. We already provide students with a course notebook containing key terms and lesson questions; the notebook is designed to help students prepare for each lesson as well as focus their studies when preparing for major examinations. However, many students find it difficult to absorb the assigned readings (typically 20-25 pages per lesson) and extrapolate those ideas into the lesson questions. My hope was that adding audio and visual media would both enhance student engagement with the material and allow them to more effectively communicate their ideas and impressions of the material with their classmates. Additionally, I wanted to see how creative students would get with their presentation of the material. The podcasts would be graded material as part of the 250 instructor points (~ 10% of the course grade) allotted to each instructor. Each student would create two podcasts, one for each half of the semester. The points assigned for these podcasts were interchangeable with those assigned for quizzes – that is, because I gave more quizzes and podcasts than I had instructor points, students were able to “drop” the worst of either one.

The original intent was to provide 2 sections (30 students) with iPods and microphones to allow them to create their podcasts. I abandoned this idea when I discovered that first semester plebes were not authorized to possess or use iPods. Instead, students were able to check out a headset microphone from me that plugged into their laptop. This allowed them to record the audio for their podcasts and use the Windows Movie Maker software on their laptops to turn it into a usable product. Detailed step-by-step instructions were provided to assuage the concerns of students with limited technical knowledge. For their podcast, the student was to provide an explanation, not to exceed three minutes in length, of the most important ideas or events in that lesson, and their impact in the time studied. Students signed up in advance to provide a podcast for a specific lesson, and were required to send that podcast to me not later than 2 hours prior to the lesson. I evaluated that podcast and sent the student specific feedback, as well as a grade, prior to the lesson. At the start of the lesson itself, we played the podcast and then openly discussed its content and how well it had met the standards. The playback was done anonymously,

although some students could readily be identified by their voices. The podcast was then uploaded to the course website, where it could be accessed by the students for the remainder of the term.

## **Implementation**

Although the level of analysis and creativity of the podcasts started off relatively low, they soon improved dramatically and allowed for the introduction of visual media along with the audio narrative. Initially, students struggled with the concept that their podcast couldn't just be a summary of the entire reading, but instead needed to focus on the major ideas and/or forces at work in the lesson material. This required some reinforcement in the classroom and discussion among students as to what level of evidence was required to meet the desired standard. These conversations were ultimately very productive, as they helped to reinforce the overall class standard of providing specific evidence to support a thesis and argument, which is a key course goal. Within a few weeks, cadets showed a great ability to master the technology and provide insightful and accurate submissions, although some still struggled and lapsed into summary. The best of these submissions not only highlighted the key ideas and forces in the lesson, but linked them to past ideas and events discussed in class. Because students showed such quick mastery of the technology, I decided to integrate a visual element into the second round of podcasts. In addition to their narrative, students were required to integrate still images that correlated with or enhanced their narrative. The students readily embraced this change and seemed to interact more with the new format. One unanticipated side effect was the tendency of some students to integrate images that, while appearing to correlate with the narrative, were actually from another region or time period. Again, this was useful to integrate into a larger discussion of use and evaluation of sources, especially internet ones.

As part of the end of course survey, I asked the students two specific questions regarding the use of the classroom podcast, and a broader question about the effectiveness of technology in the classroom. The quantitative responses are reproduced in the Appendix- overall, students felt that the podcasts contributed to classroom learning, but were less sanguine about their utility for examination preparation. The comments were almost all positive, such as:

“The technology was great and it enhanced my learning. It is a shame in my opinion that not all cadets can experience what we experienced.”

“I have never been in a class that has used technology so effectively. I wish all of my classes could use technology like this; it allowed me to focus on learning (by removing the issue of focusing on taking notes) and kept me involved.”

Each section also had one response from a cadet who felt that the podcasts either had no impact or hindered effective learning:

“Usually the podcasts weren't that helpful to me since I did the reading and already knew most of what they were saying.”

“Less reliance on [technology]. optional hard copies etc.”

It is inevitable that some students' learning styles will not mesh well with this kind of program. This reinforces the need for a diversity of teaching methods in the classroom to meet the needs of a wide variety of students.

### **Assessment**

Overall, the integration of podcasting into the course was a success. Playing the podcast at the start of the lesson session was a good way of “jump starting” the discussion with a student perspective. When a sub-par podcast was produced, it provided an opportunity for peer critiques as to what had gone wrong and how to improve it. With the availability of minimal technical assistance, students were able to rapidly master the technology with minimal impact on their available time. However, there were a few unresolved issues that need to be addressed.

As I mentioned earlier, it is difficult to truly call this “podcasting” since the students were not using an actual portable media player to listen to the material. It is difficult to measure, therefore, to what extent the student were actually able to engage with and use the material on their schedule, as opposed to being tied to the relatively clunky and cumbersome laptop. For the second semester, I intend to have at least one and possibly two sections outfitted with iPods in order to test how truly portable this concept can be. Ideally, those students would be able to take the podcasts with them on trip sections, to the gym, and anywhere else they can use a digital media player in accordance with USMA policy. The other sections will still podcast, but will use the laptop interface instead of an iPod. If the “portable” sections show a significant increase in use of the podcasts and satisfaction with the utility of their content, USMA should consider making such portable media players part of the incoming class IT purchase. On the other hand, if there is no appreciable increase in usage in the iPod sections, the only change that may be needed

is the addition of a microphone to the headphone set currently purchased as part of the plebe computer issue.

As previously mentioned, some students consistently struggled with the “most important idea” aspect of the podcast. Many of these students were still trying to get beyond the high school construct of history as a listing of names and dates to be memorized, and had difficulty distinguishing trivial elements from significant factors or events. This may also be due to the relative unfamiliarity of the students with the broad outlines of Western Civilization, and consequently a difficulty in seeing trends in events. A better methodology may be to instead ask the podcaster to link the lesson material to the block questions, which are broader and cover multiple lessons. This would help guide the student into linking the lesson material with broader aspects of the course, and possibly enhance the perceived value of the podcasts as useful in preparing for course examinations. Waiting later in the course to start the podcasts may also be helpful, as it will allow students to get a better grasp of expectations before being expected to produce a product.

Finally, the question of scalability must be addressed. The audio-only podcasts averaged around 500-700 KB, very manageable in terms of size and server space. However, because of the integration of visual content, the audio-visual podcasts ballooned to an average size of 3-4 MB, with some as large as 8 MB. This was manageable in a group of 30 students, since the total load on the server did not exceed 200 MB. If similar techniques were implemented in the entire course (with an enrollment of 750 cadets), the server load would skyrocket to a load of 400 MB for the audio podcasts, and nearly 3 GB for the video podcasts. Add on the bandwidth demands of students consistently uploading and downloading these large files and a real possibility emerges of degraded course website and network performance. Although this is currently well within the capabilities of the USMA network, further expansion of this technology should involve the USMA IT specialists to keep them informed.

## APPENDIX (2 pages)

Survey results produced using USMA Course-End Survey System.

Podcast-specific survey questions:

Answers:

- [5] Strongly Agree
- [4] Agree
- [3] Neutral
- [2] Disagree
- [1] Strongly Disagree

Section Hour - HI107J9

	Answer [5]	Answer [4]	Answer [3]	Answer [2]	Answer [1]	(no rsp)
F1. The podcasts were useful in understanding material presented in class.	4 (29%)	8 (57%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
F2. The podcasts were useful in preparing for examinations (WPRs and TEE).	2 (14%)	5 (36%)	5 (36%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Answers:

- [5] Strongly Agree
- [4] Agree
- [3] Neutral
- [2] Disagree
- [1] Strongly Disagree

Section Hour - HI107L9

	Answer [5]	Answer [4]	Answer [3]	Answer [2]	Answer [1]	(no rsp)
F1. The podcasts were useful in understanding material presented in class.	5 (45%)	4 (36%)	2 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
F2. The podcasts were useful in preparing for examinations (WPRs and TEE).	3 (27%)	4 (36%)	2 (18%)	2 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Other related questions:

Answers:

- [5] Strongly Agree
- [4] Agree
- [3] Neutral
- [2] Disagree
- [1] Strongly Disagree

Section Hour - HI107J9

	Answer [5]	Answer [4]	Answer [3]	Answer [2]	Answer [1]	(no rsp)
B1. This instructor stimulated my thinking.	9 (64%)	4 (29%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
B2. In this course, my critical thinking ability increased.	7 (50%)	5 (36%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Answers:

- [5] Strongly Agree
- [4] Agree
- [3] Neutral
- [2] Disagree
- [1] Strongly Disagree

Section Hour - HI107L9

	Answer [5]	Answer [4]	Answer [3]	Answer [2]	Answer [1]	(no rsp)
B1. This instructor stimulated my thinking.	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
B2. In this course, my critical thinking ability increased.	7 (64%)	4 (36%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Freertext question: “What, if anything, would you change about this use of technology in this class?”

Comparable course-level statistics:

Answers:

- [5] Strongly Agree
- [4] Agree
- [3] Neutral
- [2] Disagree
- [1] Strongly Disagree

Course - HI107

B1. This instructor stimulated my thinking.

B2. In this course, my critical thinking ability increased.

Answer [5]	Answer [4]	Answer [3]	Answer [2]	Answer [1]	(no rsp)
287 (46%)	229 (37%)	70 (11%)	29 (5%)	5 (1%)	0 (0%)
231 (37%)	241 (39%)	119 (19%)	26 (4%)	3 (0%)	0 (0%)

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