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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 3 | *Teaching Cycle 3*

Information Technology and the Muddiest Point - Using Podcasts for Active Learning



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Teaching Cycle 3 Report

Information Technology and the Muddiest Point: Using Podcasts for Active Learning

1. Introduction: Account of the issue

As stated in the report on the second teaching cycle above, FM10120 Studying Film is a core first-year undergraduate module in Film Studies in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television at Aberystwyth University. The module is designed for a large cohort (approximately 150 students), and is intended to introduce students to key aspects of the study of film, including issues surrounding representation, formal analysis, genre, audience, stardom, moral debates and narrative. Because the module performs a very important role in introducing students to the academic study of film, there are areas that we just do not have the time to cover in as much detail as we might like to across the twelve weeks that the module spans. So I wanted to come up with an idea to allow students to engage with aspects of Film Studies outside of timetabled sessions. I also wanted to develop a teaching methodology which might also allow the students on the module to 'distance' learn key topics and or ideas and to learn these topics/ideas in their own time. I was keen to employ new media and information technologies in order to accomplish this. But I also wanted to develop a teaching technique to do this which would also compliment our current teaching provision on the module. The below table gives details of the topics we cover across the module, and the ways in which these topics were timetable and spread out between weekly lectures and seminar sessions.

STUDYING FILM TEACHING SCHEDULE

Week	Week Beginning	Lecture (Tuesday 2.10pm, Hugh Owen A12)	Seminar (Thursdays or Fridays - see allocations)	Screening (Monday 12.10pm; Tuesday 9.00 am- see allocations)
1	4/10/10	Introduction: Film and Representation (Dr. Paul Newland)	How do we study film?	<i>Lost in Translation</i> (2003)
2	11/10/10	Film Form (Dr. Paul Newland)	Exploring cinematography	<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)
3	18/10/10	Close formal analysis (Dr. Kate Egan)	Doing textual analysis	<i>American Beauty</i> (1999)
4	25/10/10	Film Narrative (Dr. Sarah Thomas)	Thinking about narrative	<i>The Maltese Falcon</i> (1941)
5	1/11/10	National Cinema (Dr. Paul Newland)	The notion of a 'national' cinema	<i>The Full Monty</i> (1997)
6	8/11/10	Film Authorship (Dr. Kate Woodward)	Thinking about film authorship	<i>The Shining</i> (1980)
7	15/11/10	ASSIGNMENT WEEK		
8	22/11/10	Film Genre: The Western (Dr. Kate Egan)	Thinking about film genre	<i>Stagecoach</i> (1939)
9	29/11/10	'Moral Concerns' and film analysis (Prof. Martin Barker)	Film and moral debates	<i>A Clockwork Orange</i> (1971)
10	6/12/10	Stars and Stardom (Dr. Sarah Thomas)	The circulation of star images	<i>Ju kuen (Drunken Master)</i> (1978)
11	13/12/10	Approaches to Film Audiences (Prof. Martin Barker)	Clip screening and group discussion Prep. for Portfolio pt.3	<i>A Ma Soeur!</i> (2001)

This year, for the first time, I was tasked with delivering the key lecture on 'film form' in the second week of the module. This lecture was to be no more than fifty minutes in duration. I realised very early on that a fifty-minute session would only really allow me to cover a range of material in a very introductory way, and that, allied to this, some key topics students should ideally engage with in some detail could only really be mentioned in passing or at best skirted over. As such, I wanted to give the students an opportunity to let me know at the end of this lecture on film form which of the range of topics I covered in this lecture they would like to have further information on. I decided that the best way to do this was to ask the students to wait until the end of the lecture and then write the 'muddiest point' (the point that I mentioned in the lecture but which didn't have time to develop in any real detail that they felt unclear about or would like to be given more information on) on a 'post it' note and stick it on a wall at the front of the lecture theatre. Then I would collate these 'post it' notes to see which were the two most popular points the students would like me to further elaborate on. My task then would be to record two short podcasts (one on each of the two most popular topics flagged up by the students) which I would then upload to Blackboard. My feeling was that the employment of short podcasts on two topics related to the nature of film form might produce a rich and useful learning experience for the students, primarily because this method would provide an interesting, up-to-date spin on the transmission mode of learning which might also in some ways facilitate a kind of active learning (as the students search out the podcasts and listen to them in their own time).

Before I designed this teaching cycle I decided to engage with the literature on podcasting. I would draw upon ideas around the use of e-learning as blended learning developed in the work of people such as Allison Littlejohn and Chris Pegler (2006). But first I found it useful

to obtain a working definition of precisely what podcasts are, and their origin. Here is a useful point from Coghlan et al (2007):

"Podcasting" is a term inspired by the Apple Computer Corporation's iPod - a portable digital audio player that allows users to download music from their computer directly to the device for later listening. The term is no longer specifically related to the iPod but refers to any software and hardware combination that permits automatic downloading of audio files (most commonly in MP3 format) for listening at the user's convenience. Unlike traditional radio or other Web-based streaming media, podcasts give listeners control over when they hear the recording.

(Coghlan et al 2007: 2)

What I really like about this description of podcasting is the way that it emphasises how far listeners are given a measure of control over the material. My feeling is that this might enable the students to engage with the teaching material in a rich way, as they will feel more personally engaged with the podcasts that they would be with me speaking in transmission mode in a traditional lecture.

Drawing on the work of Prosser and Trigwell (1999), Biggs argues that the quality model (QM), a generic theory of teaching, holds that theories of teaching tend to be built upon two basic conceptions of teaching: 'teaching as transmitting knowledge, and teaching as facilitating student learning.' (Biggs 2001: 224) Working to this idea, I thought that podcasts might function across both of these pedagogical paradigms - they might work as tools for the transmission of knowledge, but they might also facilitate student learning in different and often rich and interesting ways. Linked to this, I am aware that students these days might be 'experts' in the use of information technology, and as such they will probably find on-line learning a fun and fairly painless exercise. Indeed, I am somewhat relying on the fact that the students will be very familiar with the type of interfaces employed both on Blackboard and with the downloading and playing of podcasts. From my research around this topic it seems I am not alone

There is evidence that podcasting provides wide-ranging pedagogical benefits for lecturers and students (see Franklin and van Harmelen 2007; blog.podagogy.com; Salmon and Edirisingha 2008). And a number of useful case studies are available online which document the successes of podcasts in real university teaching situations (Spencer and Cooper 2007; www.ltscotland.org.uk; Leaver). Primarily, podcasts facilitate a form of distance learning, and also allow for learning to take place during the students' own preferred timeframe. For example, 'Podcasting allows education to become more portable than ever before.

Podcasting cannot replace the classroom, but it provides educators one more way to meet today's students where they "live" - on the Internet and on audio players. Barriers to adoption and costs are minimal. The tools to implement podcasts are simple and affordable.'

(Coghlan et al 2007: 3) Furthermore, podcasts speak to quotidian aspects of a technological way of life that most of today's students share: 'Podcasting allows students to use their technology-based entertainment systems (iPods, MP3 players) for educational experiences.

Because students are already familiar with the underlying technology, podcasting broadens educational options in a nonthreatening and easily accessible manner.'

(Coghlan et al 2007: 4) Marc Prensky (2001) has defined 'digital natives' as the generation that has grown up with digital technology, operating at "twitch speed", performing multiple activities simultaneously. Prensky claims that 'digital natives' have acquired different ways of thinking, thanks to these different, new technological cultural practices. Prensky further suggests that while 'digital natives' might have shorter attention spans, and less ability to reflect on topics, they instead have greater visual skills, the ability to concentrate on different media simultaneously, and the ability to monitor changes and make inductive discoveries.

So I intend to discover whether or not my students belong to the 'digital natives' generation, and, if so, whether or not podcasts help them to learn.

Coghlan et al report on a podcasting trial that took place at the University of Washington in the US in 2005. I found this document very useful indeed, as it clearly outlined the ways in which podcasts might be integrated into other modes of teaching and learning, and positives and negatives of the experience. For example, one positive aspect of the trial was the cost: 'Implementing the podcasting program at the University of Washington required almost no changes to the existing technical infrastructure, and costs were low.' (Coghlan et al 2007: 5) Furthermore, 'Podcasting is a mobile technology [...] Perhaps the most significant attribute of podcasts is the ability to provide a rich, self-paced learning environment that is accessible anytime, anywhere.' (Coghlan et al 2007: 28) This all sounded very positive to me, so I found that I quickly became confident that the type of podcasts I wanted to develop would not only be fairly straightforward to execute but also advantageous for my students from the perspective of their learning experience.

But, of course, I needed to offer myself some caveats. Firstly, I was perhaps presuming that my users (Le. the vast majority of the students) would be receptive to the employment of this technology, and, indeed, that they will have the means and skills required to access these podcasts. I was also presuming that the University could provide me with the necessary infrastructure and support to develop this teaching cycle in technological terms. Furthermore, I had to consider the following planning issues flagged up by Coghlan et al (2007):

Technology alone will not improve learning. However, it can support the learning process by making access more convenient and enabling new activities. As you consider what you hope to achieve, you may want to ask:

- Is your goal to automate lecture capture so students can listen again to class discussions anyplace and anytime?
- Do you want to augment class sessions with additional audio material?
- Is podcasting a tool that will allow students to collect authentic content (such as interviews) for use in class projects?
- Are you hoping to reach audiences that are less inclined to read than listen?

(Coghlan et al 2007: 33)

So it was important that I considered specifically how the podcasts would help the students engage with the teaching material. I was clear that I wanted the podcasts to augment the material that would be covered in my lecture. And I was also clear that it would be useful for the students to access this material wherever and whenever they wanted to.

2. Plan of the Teaching Cycle

The first thing I obviously needed to do when approaching this third teaching cycle was to seek out training on how to put together, upload and manage podcasts. I enrolled on the CPD course 'Podcasting for learning extended beyond lectures' run by Mary Jacob. This short course very clearly worked through the ways in which we might understand the potential uses of podcasting: appropriate approaches; which editing tools to use; and plans for teaching activities. Luckily the session featured some hands-on activity. I found that I was very quickly able to master the editing software, Audacity. This software allows you to create and edit audio files. Here I was able to draw upon my experience as a recording musician. Mary then demonstrated how to upload these audio files to Blackboard, and how to monitor statistics on student usage of the podcasts. Again, I found the process of working with audio files very straightforward indeed, and I could see very quickly that podcasts could be put together with the minimum of fuss.

All I had to do then in terms of planning this teaching cycle was to write and deliver my lecture on film form to the student cohort on the Studying Film module, making very sure that at the beginning of this lecture that I make my aims absolutely clear, and to prepare the students to write down their 'muddiest points' on the 'post-it' notes at the end of the lecture.

3. Concerns and Potential Problems with Teaching Cycle

I did have a number of potential concerns and problems with this teaching cycle. Firstly, as Race and Brown highlight, '[L]ecturers often grumble that students don't do enough work between lectures, but the reason is sometimes that students can't work out what they should be trying to do.' (Race and Brown 1998: 40) This comment makes absolutely clear the necessity to fully prepare the students for all of their learning experiences. So I had to make the aims and objectives of the teaching cycle (and the employment of the two podcasts) crystal clear to the students.

But there were other, perhaps more important things to think about as I developed this teaching cycle. For example, Coghlan et al (2007) point out the need for the both the vocal performance on the podcast and its sound quality must at all times be taken into account: 'The quality of speakers' voices, speech patterns, intonations, and other sound effects may not be the same as those of a professional broadcast.' (Coghlan et al 2007: 3) This is a very useful point. I knew I wouldn't be able to produce a professional quality recording with the equipment and time I had available. But this at least implanted in my mind the need to very carefully write and perform the podcasts, and to pay attention at all times to their usability.

Furthermore, in my research on podcasting I became aware of the fact that copyright infringement issues might potentially come into play. I decided that as I was not planning on using sounds from a film soundtrack, for example, that this concern should not be relevant in this case, but it might become relevant in the future employment of podcasts, especially if I seek to use film sound or to offer quotations from published texts.

4. Progress note - putting the Teaching Cycle into Practice

As noted under point 3 above, I wrote and planned my lecture on film form and delivered it on the day. However, as I put my PowerPoint slides together it did occur to me that I could probably predict one or two points which might become 'muddiest points' for some of the students in the lecture theatre, purely because of the fact that I had to make decisions concerning which topics around film form to spend time developing in the lecture, and which topics to mention and/or skirt over. As outlined above, I introduced the lecture by clearly outlining the requirements of my teaching cycle, and, thus, my requirements of the students in this session. I made it clear that I would gather the data on the 'muddiest points' on the 'post it' notes that the students should write on and stick on the front wall of the lecture theatre. At the end of the lecture I reminded the students to fill out the 'post-it' notes. I am happy to say that a good number of the students make the effort to do this and walk down to the front of the lecture theatre and stick their notes on the wall. After the lecture I gathered up the notes and worked through them in order to make a decision concerning which two topics warranted further elaboration in my two podcasts. These two topics became 'film editing' and 'aspect ratio'.

After the lecture I downloaded the editing software Audacity to my office computer, and borrowed a small MP3 player/recorder from the equipment lending facility in the Hugh Owen library. Next I did some brief research into ways in which to introduce editing and aspect ratio to students, and wrote out some notes on each topic I could refer to when I came to record my two podcasts. I made sure with these notes that I would cover the basics when it came to trying to teach students about editing and aspect ratio (using a very useful book by Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: the Key Concepts* as a key guide). I initially practiced

making the podcasts without recording myself. I wanted to speak for no longer than 5 minutes on each podcast, as it seemed to me that a short, punchy working through of these key concepts would make the best use of this information technology, and, most importantly of all, would remain accessible and useful for the listening students. So, with my notes to hand, I began to record my first podcast on the MP3 machine. The recording process worked very well. However, on playing back my initial attempt I discovered that the sound quality was poor. This I realised was because the very small machine lent to me by the library had a tiny built-in microphone, and was clearly not adequately designed for the kind of purpose I had in mind. So I resolved to seek out a better quality recorder. Luckily a very good friend of mine in Aberystwyth has a range of high quality recording equipment, and he happily lent me a more professional Zoom digital recorder with two high quality built-in stereo microphones.

Using this Zoom recorder I recorded my two podcasts and played them back. I found the sound quality to be crystal clear. Moreover, I was very pleased to hear that my spoken voice was clear and confident. After a couple of takes of each podcast I was very satisfied that I had podcasts of a good enough quality for the students to hear. I was also very pleased that I had managed to record each podcast without the need to edit it afterwards in Audacity. I suppose that I was lucky that I managed to record 'takes' that were strong enough in their own right, and were free of annoying pauses or errors. I would happily use Audacity to edit podcasts in future.

The next step was to download the podcasts as MP3 files from the Zoom recorder to my computer. This was achieved with the minimum of fuss. Lastly I uploaded these MP3 files to Blackboard, making sure that I set the system to record statistics of the amount of times

students either listened to or downloaded the podcasts (see Appendix). Finally I emailed the students to tell them that the podcasts were now available for them to use.

5. Summary of relevant data and feedback on student learning

In order to gain an understanding of how successful this teaching cycle has been for the students, and its overall impact, I initially designed a very short feedback questionnaire which I placed on Blackboard and also emailed through to the cohort. Students were encouraged to answer the following three questions, giving marks of between 1 and 5 (5 being 'excellent', 1 being 'very poor'):

Question 1: Overall, how useful was this podcast?

Aspect Ratio (Score:)
Editing (Score:)

Question 2: Did the podcast help you to further understand the topic of discussion?

Aspect Ratio (Score:)
Editing (Score:)

Question 3: Would you like to see podcasts used this way in future on Blackboard? (Score:)

In total I received a total of 9 responses to this questionnaire. This was a very disappointing figure considering 150 students are enrolled on the module. The following table lists the scores the respondents gave the podcasts (all scores are out of 5):

	How useful was the 'Editing' podcast?	How useful was the 'Aspect Ratio' podcast?	Did the podcast help you further understand editing?	Did the podcast help you further understand aspect ratio?	Would you like to see podcasts used in this way in future?
Student 1	5	5	5	5	5
Student 2	5	5	5	5	5
Student 3	5	5	4	4	5
Student 4	5	5	5	5	5
Student 5	4	4	4	4	5
Student 6	4	4	4	4	4
Student 7	5	5	5	5	5
Student 8	4	4	4	4	5
Student 9	3	3	3	3	5

In addition to these very positive scores (and the feedback they represent), I received some comments from the students:

'I really think that living in this new era of communication and being able to use this kind of technology...it's no reason not to.'

'It did help me very much especially with the aspect ratio. I think that this is a very good way of doing this as it helps recap aspects from the lecture and helps refresh your mind about different things. I think it would be beneficial if this was carried out on a weekly basis.'

'Very useful podcasts. Thank you.'

In addition to this, in the appendices at the end of this portfolio can be found a table which gives information on how many students listened to the podcasts, and when they listened to them. The information in this table offers clear evidence that the students found it beneficial to access these podcast teaching aids at times of their own choosing. The podcasts were listened to at a wide variety of times both day and night. And what comes out of these figures which is particularly pleasing is the fact that the podcasts were listened to across a number of weeks, not just on the day after the lecture. This suggests to me that longer perhaps more involved podcasts might be employed in future to augment and work alongside our traditional hour-long lectures, so that students have access to important learning information at all times.

6. Evaluation of student learning experience in relation to intended outcomes

I hope to see evidence of engagement with editing (one of the topics covered by the two podcasts) in the written material students submit for assessment on the module. Certainly the second and third portfolio pieces will give students a chance to engage with the ways in which editing functions as a key aspect of film language. And in my podcast on editing I did my best to briefly outline aspects of editing which might help the students with this task, as well as giving them pointers towards further reading on the topic.

7. Comments on implications for professional development of teaching practice.

Overall I am pleased to report on the overwhelming popularity of the podcasts with the students. I was also pleased to see from a teaching standpoint that relatively little time was involved in the development and delivery of these podcasts, especially when their

usefulness as aids to learning is considered. These podcasts very effectively extend learning beyond the traditional lecture, but, crucially, this learning comes out of the lecture experience. I think that I will definitely use podcasts again in future, and I might try to think of ways to make them do more teaching work for me. One way in which I might choose to develop podcasts in future is to offer more performative gestures in the podcasts, such as recorded sound and music, in order to make them more fun, but also to give them scope to perhaps be longer and more involved. But I will also aim to keep tabs on the issue of the affect on such interventions on students' attendance at lectures, especially if I start to use them much more widely. Coghlan et al (2007) offer useful tips on this:

Perhaps the best insurance for keeping class attendance high is judicious use of podcasting - not to deliver content but as a tool for active learning. Active learning options include using podcasting:

- as a reporting tool for team-based presentations
- as a living journal for students in international exchange programs
- as an archive for learning experiences that can be built on by other students
- for authentic assessment

If attendance is a concern with the implementation of podcasting, consider some the following options:

- provide supplementary materials via podcast to augment in-class lectures
- develop a different course structure, such as offering lectures via podcast and using class time for discussion or other activities

(Coghlan et al 2007: 32)

Podcasting is unlikely to be part of existing campus policies, so you may want to consider questions such as:

- Are podcasts considered the intellectual property of the institution or of the individual faculty member or student who created them?
- Will all podcasts be made available at no charge to students, or will a fee be assessed?
- Do guidelines for copyright and fair use apply to podcasts as well as other works (e.g., articles)?
- If listening to podcasts is required for a course, must all students own an MP3 player or a computer, or will the institution provide the means for listening?

Just as many policies had to be revisited when face-to-face courses migrated online, the same may be true as lectures and student work moves from print to podcasts.

(Coghlan et al 2007: 34)

So, overall, this was a highly successful teaching cycle.

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