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## **Exploring Podcasting of Required Reading in a Graduate Counseling Course**

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### **Abstract**

Podcasting is a relatively unexplored technology tool in education (Hew, 2009). This study explored the integration of podcasting in an onsite graduate counseling course to determine how digital students responded to the integration of podcasting and to determine if podcasting impacts student comprehension of required reading materials. The results indicated that, while students came to class better prepared to discuss the material and enjoyed the podcasts, they preferred traditional teacher-led discussions to the podcasting technology.

Key words: podcasting, technology skills

Podcasting is an audio-file download technology currently being used to facilitate the delivery of instruction in both traditional and online courses (Traphagan, Kuesera, & Kishi, 2010). Audio podcasting (hereby referred to as podcasting) is the most common form of podcasting content used in education contexts (Rossell-Aguilar, 2007), however only 3.3% of research on the topic has been conducted in education (Hew, 2009). While advocates of podcasting support its use based on convenience (Clark, Sutton-Brady, Scott, & Taylor, 2007), ease of use (Lee & Chan, 2007), and unique educational benefits (Durbridge, 1984), detractors feel that the increased workload resulting from learning the new technologies and time needed as custodian of the course audio files (Blaisdell, 2006; Menzies, 2005) require a more thoughtful approach to implementation of this technology tool. As with any novel technological tool, educators need to evaluate the reasoning behind the use of podcasting (Maag, 2006). Hew (2009) concludes his review of podcasting

by suggesting that research should focus on “examining where and how to best use podcasts as an instructional medium” (p. 346).

### **Background and Research Questions**

This study focused on teacher-created podcasts whose purposes were to focus the learners’ attention on relevant information, to provide the opportunity for critical thinking, and to create a community of learning. The podcasts captured instructor-student and student-student interactions while discussing the content of required readings. The study was an exploration of how podcasting could be used in a counseling course to ensure that students comprehended what they read in required course materials. The questions the researchers asked were “How do digital students respond to the integration of podcasting as a learning tool?”, and “Is student comprehension impacted by the use of podcasting?”

### Literature Review

#### Theoretical foundations

Learning in the counseling environment is a process of communication and interaction. Multiple theories of learning converge to describe the counselor-client relationship. Situated learning, socio-cognitive learning, and conversation learning theories all provide the foundational framework for this study when combined with activity theory. This combination of learning theories specifically supports both the counseling process and the integration of technology to increase supervisee cognition.

Situated learning views learning as the acquisition of knowledge within a process of social participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This learning often takes place in a cognitive apprenticeship situation (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) where the counseling supervisor and supervisees collaborate to identify client problems and provide viable solutions. The supervisor (the expert) works alongside the supervisee (the apprentice) to create situations where the apprentice can begin to work on client problems in a community of practice.

In counseling, learning is as much about communication as content. The supervisee is an active learner constructing new knowledge in a socio-cognitive environment. The forming and re-forming of concepts, while interacting, can create a greater awareness and recognition of one's own thinking. Collaborative group work and sharing with peers are powerful ways to question one's own pre-conceptions, conceptions, and assumptions. This socio-cognitive process contributes to the restructuring of cognitive schemas. The communication takes place between the instructor-learner, learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content increasing critical thinking and reflection.

Effective learning occurs when people can converse with each other by questioning and sharing their descriptions of the situation. Pask's conversation theory (as cited in Rudel, 2006) described learning as an ongoing conversation with oneself and other learners and teachers. It is a coming to know process where learning is constructed in cooperation with others. The process of reading an assigned book, responding to reading prompts, and discussing and debating viewpoints provides an environment where conversation theory is applied.

These social learning theories combined with activity theory form a solid foundation for the study of the integration of podcasting to impact student learning. Activity theory, by its name, focuses on the activity itself that shapes learning (Daniels, 2001). The subject, object, and tool combine to impact the socio-cognitive process. In this study, the subjects (the supervisees) work with the object (the task) and the tool (podcasting) to influence their learning. Activity theory is a way of determining the influence of the social setting and technology on learning.

A final factor contributing to the framework for this study was interactivity. While there is no current interactivity theory, it is perhaps time for one to evolve. Promoting interactivity, encouraging instructor-learner, learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content interchanges as well as building learning communities is critical to improving learning (Bangert, 2005; Bannan-Ritland, 2002; Dennen, 2007; Kennedy, 2004). Podcasts have the potential to enhance student knowledge construction in the socio-cognitive environment. The purpose and design of the podcast is critical to student learning.

### **Podcasting and Student Learning**

Podcasting studies to date have shown that the use of podcasts encourages active learning, creates better connections with students, (Jenkins & Lynch, 2006; Lum, 2006) increases student participation in group activities, adds to a sense of community, and improves the overall satisfaction with the learning experience (Edirishingha, Rizzi, Nie, & Rothwell, 2007). Evans (2007) explains that podcasting allows learners to review materials, and Campbell (2005) expands on this to say that, “At its best, podcasting can serve as training in rich interiority and in shared reflection” (p. 42). In their study, Goldberg, Hasse, Shoukas, & Schramm (2006) found that the use of podcasting provided students with more time to think about the content as well as to apply it. The students in this study gained a deeper understanding of the material and increased retention.

Podcasting provides a unique learning opportunity. It is an interaction between the learner and the content. The learner listens to the speaker and reacts to the information. Listening requires interaction. No good listener is passive. The podcast is a direct personal connection with the content and the teacher; therefore it has great potential value in teaching and learning (Goldberg, Hasse, Shoukas, & Schramm, 2006).

### **Challenges to Podcasting**

The effective use of podcasting in education is in its infancy. While the pedagogical debate continues concerning how to use podcasting to engage learners and increase students’ learning, there is no doubt that the process of learning the technology to produce a podcast requires new knowledge and skills. One of the most frequently mentioned barriers is the increase in workload for faculty who must learn the technology and upload the audio files

(Blaisdell, 2006; Menzies, 2005). Key elements in developing podcasts include a commitment from administration, willing faculty to pilot and explore appropriate educational uses, and IT support (Blaisdell, 2006). Time, willingness, and resources are basic requirements to learning the technology. Podcasting requires preparation, editing, and post-production.

Campbell (2005) describes what he calls ‘a few intricacies’ in publishing podcasts. He states,

You’ll need to understand some of the basics of digital audio: sampling rates (higher is usually better), bit depth (greater depth, again represented by higher numbers, is usually better), compression formats (the major players are MP3, Windows Media Audio or WMA, and Apple’s Advanced Audio Coding or AAC), and compression bitrates (higher is usually better) (p. 36).

This sampling of new knowledge is certainly daunting. Adding the skills of multimedia authoring and audio engineering to the already robust list of duties and responsibilities required by faculty may raise equity issues in applying and implementing this tool.

For those willing to pursue the knowledge and skills needed to design and develop rich media, the payoff may be in connecting to today’s students. These students come to classrooms skilled in using digital technology tools. They blog, text, shoot video, manipulate photos, and generally, communicate and create using technology in a ubiquitous manner on a daily basis. As Campbell (2005) cogently states, “...we in higher education do them a disservice if we exclude their creative digital tools from their education” (p. 36).

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### **Methodology**

While audio podcasting is the most common content used in education (Rossell-Aguilar, 2007), research calls for more studies focusing on the impact of this tool on student learning. Studies specific to integrating podcasts in counseling do not exist. This study responds to a challenge put forth by new administration: explore strategies for integrating technologies to increase today's digital student engagement and learning.

### **Participants**

Nine graduate students (eight men and one woman) enrolled in a CACREP-accredited Community Counseling course in a southeast region of the United States participated in the study. Students provided written consent for podcasting and were informed that they could withdraw from this activity without incurring a grading penalty. No students chose to withdraw from the study. Three 20-minute podcasts were produced during the course of one semester.

### **Process and Procedures**

Students were enrolled in Sex Therapy: Principles and Practice, a required course. Approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board before data collection began. Each student was assigned to participate in three podcasts, along with other learning activities. Each podcast was based on students' reading of a course-related book. Prior to each podcast, students completed short-answer questions designed to connect the perspective of each book to the practice of sex counseling. For example, after reading Dr. Patrick Carnes' (2001) book, *Out of the Shadows*, they were asked, "What models of therapy would you use to help a non-addictive spouse understand the part his/her behavior has in contributing to the addictive spouse's compulsion?" During the class session itself,

students were assigned two to three questions for podcast discussion. Roughly five to six questions were covered in each podcast discussion. The class of nine students was broken into groups of three to maximize individual student participation. For each podcast, students received an outline of a script to provide a structure for each 20 minute session.

Each podcast was recorded on a Zoom H4n Handy Recorder, equipped with an XY stereo microphone to address a wider area of sound (thereby accommodating five people sitting at a conference table). The podcasts were edited in GarageBand, a software program, and were uploaded onto a site on iTunes, accessible with the URL <http://www.apple.com/itunes/podcasts/techspeaks.html> for student review and future classroom use.

A debriefing session followed each podcast. Students wrote written responses to each question and a large group discussion was processed during class. In addition, an end of the semester questionnaire was completed by each student (see Table 1).

Table 1 Debriefing and End of Semester Questions

Debriefing Questions Following Each Podcast
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What did you like most about participating in the podcast?</li> <li>2. What did you like least about participating in the podcast?</li> <li>3. What else would you like to say that you did not get a chance to say during the podcast due to the time constraint?</li> <li>4. In what ways has this experience increased your learning about the principles and practice of sex therapy?</li> </ol>
End of Semester Questionnaire
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the benefits of podcast participation?</li> <li>2. Of the three podcasts, which one did you find most stimulating and which did you find least stimulating? Please explain your responses.</li> <li>3. How would you rank order the instructional activities used in this class in terms of help you develop and an ability to apply the principles and practice of sex therapy?</li> <li>4. Overall, what is your opinion about using podcast discussions as an instructional activity?</li> </ol>

### Results

This study examined the exploration of strategies for integrating podcasting into a university course to increase today's digital student engagement and learning and to determine if this tool increased student comprehension of required reading. The questions answered after each podcast and the end-of-semester evaluation focused on issues of engagement and cognition. In response to the questions about the benefits of podcasting aligned to learning, student responses included:

- “Learned to process the material better” (three students).
- “When you know that the information you put out there is going to the world, you come to class prepared.”
- “Allowed for deeper thought for discussion.”
- “The outline (provided by the instructor) kept the discussion focused as opposed to an open, sometimes random class discussion.”
- “It (podcasting) made learning fun!”

The second question had to do with which book students found most and least stimulating and the results will guide future book selections for the course. The third question had to do with learning preferences. Lecture-discussion was the most preferred instructional activity followed by video viewing, case study, and podcasting. The fourth question had to do with an overall opinion about podcasting as an instructional activity. In this case students' responses included:

- “Some concepts may have been too complex to discuss in a podcast format.”
- “I thought it (podcasting) was very creative.”
- It (the podcast) gave us good insight within the class but I would not listen to a podcast discussion outside of class.”
- The podcast provided a great insight into the possibilities of assisting the therapeutic processes of clients.”

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of podcasting to increase today's digital students' engagement and learning and to determine if the use of podcasting impacted cognition. Previous research shows an absence of specific studies that explore the impact of podcasting

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in the counselor education classroom. All of the students who participated in the study indicated that they felt compelled to prepare before they could participate in the podcast. The idea of coming to class prepared was heightened by the high level of the pre-podcast questions. The questions asked students to connect previously learned course material, knowledge of counseling theory, models, and structures to specific contexts, i.e. addiction, gender and religion.

Interestingly, most of the students preferred a traditional lecture-discussion format over all other instructional strategies. Although the idea of podcasting energized students to come to class prepared, when asked to evaluate the approach, most students called for a return to traditional instruction. As one student commented, “There are better activities for learning the material in terms of the effort put into it”. This point of view echoes the research of Kerr (1996) when cautioning, “The preconception about technology’s efficiency and effectiveness is strong, and often leads to directions that ultimately turn out to be unproductive” (p. xiv).

### Conclusions

This study asked two questions: “How do digital students respond to the integration of podcasting as a learning tool?”, and “Is student comprehension impacted by the use of podcasting?”. In this study, students clearly preferred traditional instruction to the podcasting integration. Although they reported coming to class better prepared due to the podcasting organizational structure, they felt the benefit of using the podcast to learn was not worth the time and effort required. Related to any change in student comprehension due to the podcasting, students were unanimous in reporting that they learned the material relevant to the assigned reading. Professor evaluation of

the quality of answers to podcast discussion questions supports student self-reports.

Exploring alternative instructional strategies and delivery systems is something many professors do as a matter of professional growth and development. This study focused on teacher-created podcasts whose purpose was to focus learner attention on relevant course information. Students were asked to assess the impact of the experience at various stages of the activity. Overall, students learned the required material. Some students found the experience “made learning fun” while others indicated a preference for more traditional methods of instruction.

### Limitations and Future Research

The case study approach used in this study limits the ability to generalize the findings. Future studies could take a quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approach. A quantitative study, for example, could compare and contrast podcasting to other instructional strategies. A qualitative study could bring personal values into the podcasting discussions, e.g. addiction, gender and religion. A mixed methods approach could take a pragmatic look at knowledge claims made by this instructional strategy. Whichever approach, there is a need for continued research to determine how to effectively integrate technology tools in pedagogy and learning.

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