

Podcasting for College Courses

The term podcast officially denotes a series of audio recordings delivered over the web via an RSS feed that can be subscribed to by listeners. However, the term is also generally used to indicate audio or video files that are posted on the web for playing and downloading. The latter meaning is often used in higher ed, when an instructor wants to record a lecture or sections of a lecture and make the recording available to his or her students on Blackboard. Podcasts of this nature can be “not too hard” to create and very useful for students who appreciate a break from reading text. These recordings can be played on a home computer, in the campus computer labs (students can request the use of headphones), or they can be downloaded to a portable device (iPod, iPhone, etc.) and listened to on the go.

Preparing to Record

While the tech side of creating an audio recording may worry some instructors, the more important part is planning the content. This does not need to be a formal lecture; some might say the shorter the better. (See Pennsylvania University's 60 Second Lectures series here:

http://www.sas.upenn.edu/home/news/sixtysec_lectures_archive.html.) It's helpful to consider how much content you want to include in each file. Breaking a longer lecture into shorter chunks makes for files that are quicker to download and easier to digest.

You may want to have a written version of what you want to say, or an outline of it, to make the recording smoother. You may also want to consider how “perfect” you want the recording to be. We are all used to hearing very polished recorded media, but speaking in a relaxed manner and not fretting over the occasional “misspeak” can make for a more personable and user-friendly talk. Give yourself time to practice—with both the tech aspects (software, headset or microphone) and the preparation of your talk—before you are rushed to get something posted. That way you'll have time to play your recordings back to get a feel for how you come across to the listener.

One professor we know has provided several audio files to her students via Blackboard. Usually, she simply opens the recording software when she has the urge to explain something to students, records herself explaining, saves the file and posts it on Bb. These short lectures typically last three to five minutes, and offer quick insight into the current reading or discussion forum topic. She has also posted longer audio files (30 minutes), which are great for downloading onto an iPod or other device. On another occasion, she recorded herself discussing the slides in a PowerPoint presentation, ringing a bell when she wanted us to move to the next slide. While her home-made style may not work for all situations, her students really appreciate her efforts and find the recordings to transmit not only her ideas but her personality—a nice plus when communicating via the web.

Recording Needs

While a professional recording studio is always nice, most podcasters get started using their computer, simple recording software, and some kind of microphone. Generally speaking, preference goes to a decent headset rather than the mike built into your laptop. A quiet office or workspace (with a door that can be closed) is always a plus. One popular software option for recording audio files is the free Audacity program, available at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>. Audacity supports not only recording but also editing of "tracks," and allows you to add in a bit of sound such as intro music fairly easily. Of course, we recommend learning the basics and then deciding how involved you want to get as you try things out.

You will want to save your audio files as .mp3 files, because they are compressed for quicker upload and download and compatible with most players. To do this on Audacity, you also need to download and install a small plug-in application, the LAME MP3 Encoder. Instructions for this process can be found on the Audacity support wiki. You will also have to set a "bit rate" for recording. This rate determines the quality of the recording (i.e.: a higher bit rate equals a higher quality piece, but also a larger file size).

Please Note: Blackboard recommends no more than 250 mg of uploaded content per course. While most Word documents are only a fraction of that, the size of audio files can be significant. According to the Audacity website, "a 128 kbps bit rate [the default setting for the program] takes up about 1 MB of space per minute." If you want to use multiple large files for a given course, you may want to consider uploading each one for a limited period of time.

How to Get Started

Here are some resources to get you started podcasting:

1) If you are tech-comfy and a DIY-type, you can download the Audacity software and try it out on your own. There are several how-to sites for Audacity users. Here are some places to get started:

The Audacity Homepage

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

Brief Audacity Demo

<http://net.educause.edu/Screencasts/Audacity/Untitled.html>

Instructions for installing the LAME MP3 Encoder plug-in

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/help/faq?s=install&item=lame-mp3>

2) If you would prefer one-on-one support to get started, make an appointment with the CTL. Expect a brief review of the info covered here, questions about your specific needs, and a hands-on tutorial on Audacity. Prepare a short script (no more than 5 minutes of material), and you'll leave with at least a practice version of your own podcast.

A Final Thought

Depending on the type of courses you are teaching, you may want to consider assigning your students to create audio files, too. After all, who wouldn't appreciate a fresh approach to making class presentations? A group assignment, including a written script and a recorded and posted audio file, is one way of incorporating the activity. The MLRC (3rd floor library) is equipped to support small group projects such as this. We recommend that you contact them for specifics as you are planning the activity.