

Reaching students beyond the classroom with a podcast

Michael Rappa
North Carolina State University

Podcasting became one of 2005's biggest news stories with a dramatic surge in the number of people—from ordinary teenagers to celebrities and CEO's—who are taking up the microphone and putting anything and everything they have to say on the Internet. Now university professors are entering the fray, bringing their classroom lectures to the world with podcasts. In August 2005, I became one of those professors to join the trend and podcast my course, "Managing the Digital Enterprise." It is a survey of the opportunities and challenges managers face in an increasingly digital world, and given the subject matter a logical vehicle to experiment with podcasting. The course website is open and free to the public and has a global audience of more than 30,000 each month.

In the talk that follows, I reflect on my experience and address some of the common questions I am asked about academic podcasting.

What exactly is a podcast?

In the simplest possible terms, a podcast is an audio file (or, more accurately, a series of audio files) distributed over the Internet by syndication, usually in the MP3 format.

How are podcasts different from the kind of audio streaming we have heard before?

Audio streaming has been on the Internet for quiet some time. What makes a podcast new and different is the way the audio files are distributed. Podcasting uses a method of Web syndication called RSS that enables listeners to subscribe to a particular podcast "feed" using software applications called RSS readers. By doing so, the listener will automatically receive each new episode in the series upon its release. The audio files are downloaded to the subscriber's computer (or other devices) in the background. The result is to give people more freedom and control over what they listen to. It is like having one's own personalized radio: when you turn it on, you hear only those broadcasts *you* want to hear, when *you* want to hear them. The key to this is syndicated distribution.

Why is it called “podcasting”? Do I need an iPod to listen?

No, the listener does not need an iPod to listen to a podcast. The iPod just makes it easier and conveniently portable to listen offline. I am not entirely sure how it came to be called podcasting, but it was one of those fortuitous events when two phenomena came together at just the right moment. The name stuck. For its part, Apple Computer has become a major promoter in the distribution of podcasts via its iTunes Music Store. The iTunes software application, which one can download for free on Mac and Windows computers, is a great way to subscribe to RSS feeds.

Can anyone create a podcast?

Yes, just about anyone with a computer, a microphone, basic audio software and file space on the Web that enables RSS syndication can create a podcast. It’s really not that difficult. It will certainly get easier and easier as sites on the Web expand to offer basic podcast services.

How is your podcast produced?

I create my podcast using an Apple Macintosh Mini and GarageBand, a software application that comes bundled with the Mac OS. That, and an inexpensive microphone, is all you need. I produce and edit each episode myself. The podcast is distributed by the Open Courseware Laboratory, which I run at NC State. We use a free open source blogging platform called Wordpress to syndicate the feed.

The technical part is straightforward. What is more difficult is creating audio content that listeners will enjoy or, in my case, learn from. Making a podcast can be a humbling experience. There is much more I can do to improve on that front. It is not as simple as just recording lectures.

What made you decide to use a podcast in your own course?

Last year I began to offer my course by distance education for the first time. Instead of videotaping the classroom lectures, which is typically what is done, I wanted a way to engage students at a distance in a more intimate dialogue—a personal conversation. I was looking to experiment with something new and podcasting was the perfect opportunity. Compared to video, it is far less expensive to produce and easier to edit a podcast. Therefore, I could have more creative control over what to produce and when. Students also have an easier time accessing audio content over the Web. The end result was something that both campus and distance students could benefit from hearing.

How is what you are doing with podcasting different from other faculty?

The academic community is early in the process, and so as you might expect there is a lot of experimentation. Most of what is happening right now is professors who are audio taping their classroom lectures. Frankly, I think that approach has its limitations. The typical classroom lecture is not read from a well-prepared script. In my classroom there is a discussion that takes place with students, there are presentation slides and visual cues. An interactive class discussion is hard to record well and may not be very compelling to the audience listening to a podcast. Therefore, my approach has been to create 30-minute conversations done more in the style of talk radio (currently there are 25 episodes). Some faculty podcasters have gone so far as to hold interviews, sometimes over the phone, with informative guests. That is an interesting approach, too.

What do students think about having a podcast from their instructor?

They like the convenience of it. The podcast is useful as a supplement to the classroom lecture, since it is more condensed. When campus-based students miss class for some reason, they know they can listen to the podcast and not fall behind. A good number of my students have full-time jobs. Inevitably, they are away from town on business some days during the semester. The podcast helps them stay connected and on top of things. This is all new, so perhaps it is too early to make a judgment; but I think students may take to podcasting sooner than we might imagine. They may come to expect podcasts as a regular feature of the educational experience.

Is there a downside to this trend? Will students stop coming to class?

People asked me the same question years ago when I started my course website. One usually thinks that the more content faculty put on the Web, the less of a need there is for students to go to class. That has not been my experience. The Web is not an ideal replacement for the classroom, or face-to-face interaction. For me, using the Web as a supplement for content distribution and for interaction has made the classroom discussion more focused and productive. A great podcast, like an engaging website, can increase class attendance by sparking student interest to learn more about the subject matter. Like any new technology, I am sure there will be unanticipated consequences; but for me, it has been a positive experience.

Do you think podcasting will catch on in academic circles?

Yes, most definitely. You can see it happening already. The higher education section of the iTunes Music Store lists 860 podcasts and is growing. It is a real potpourri of material, of course. One cannot possibly cover it all. But I have listened to some pretty interesting podcasts and

have learned from them. And it is not just about courses. Universities have found all kinds of opportunities for podcasting, from student recruiting to staff development. Stanford University has their own section of iTunes, called “Stanford on iTunes”, where the university already provides a few hundred audio tracks free to the public. There are faculty lectures with wide ranging topics like “Why do baseballs have stitches?” and “Proving the existence of God.” There are commencement speeches, music and sporting events. So what you see in this example is one university moving aggressively to podcast compelling audio content to an audience beyond the campus walls.

Should some professors be worried, if they don't jump on the bandwagon?

Well, I think we all have to be serious about keeping up with technology and, to the extent possible, leverage it productively in our teaching. Universities are large and diverse institutions. Different courses present different kinds of challenges to instructors. Podcasting will be a great opportunity for some, but not everyone who teaches will necessarily find a need. Where we will be in 5 or 10 years time is hard to say. I started my first course website a decade ago. Today, professors use websites as a standard feature of their courses in growing numbers. Students expect to see it. But, honestly, it has been a long time coming. Clearly, for doctoral students and those just starting-out in the profession, podcasting will have a big impact on their careers as teachers.

You have written extensively about Web business models. Does podcasting have a business model?

Today, podcasts are distributed freely in most cases. But the very nature of syndication opens the door to the possibility of a subscription model, where subscribers pay a fee in order to receive a podcast. Or, one could just as easily see the à la carte retail model, where users pay for each episode just like with the 99-cents per song approach Apple pioneered with music downloads. I have also seen the advertising model emerge in places, especially among the large media outlets. The podcast comes with a short paid advertisement at the beginning of each episode. For many businesses though, podcasting will be one element of many used to accomplish a larger goal, and not a business in itself.

Can anyone listen to your podcast?

Yes they can. Like everything else on my website, DigitalEnterprise.org, the podcast is openly accessible and free to the public. There are also audio transcripts for the hearing-impaired. The podcast is syndicated on the Apple iTunes Music Store, so you can easily find it there to subscribe.

I recently saw somewhere the mention of “vodcasting”: is that next? What can we look forward to in the future?

Like audio, video can be distributed by syndication on the Web. Some call this “vodcasting”. I have offered video guest lectures as part of my course for about six years. So, again, it is something we should expect to see emerge because syndication is an appealing form of distribution. But Internet connection speed remains an obstacle to video for a large segment of off-campus users. That is changing, but we are not there yet, especially with a global audience. Video is also expensive. It requires a recording studio, a professional staff for production and editing, and it is more costly to serve video content on the Web.

Maybe what is most interesting, in the near term, is exactly the kind of approach Stanford has taken. Almost everyday on a campus somewhere there is a great lecture being delivered: a world renown scholar talking about a beloved subject he or she knows better than anyone else (or maybe a famous writer, artist, executive or statesman). What better thing is there to do than to share that talk with a larger audience beyond the lecture hall, archive great lectures, and make them available to future students. In this way our voices will be able to continue to pass on knowledge from generation to generation, and it can be done today with a podcast.

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Michael Rappa is the Alan T. Dickson Distinguished University Professor of Technology Management at North Carolina State University. You can find his course and podcast on the Web at DigitalEnterprise.org.