

## **Outdoor Education Australia**

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### **Developing Podcasts for Outdoor Education**

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#### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

Podcasts are heading towards a saturation point in popular internet culture. Their flow into the rest of our lives may or may not be inevitable, but this session will argue that there might be a place for podcasts in Outdoor Education. It will begin with a consideration of the nature of podcasts and their possible use in an education context. Some of the podcast experiments the presenter has made with students and other teachers will be discussed, and the mechanics of constructing podcasts will also be described.

#### **What is a podcast**

Podcasts<sup>2</sup> are audio files<sup>3</sup> in digital format – usually MP3 – that people download to and play on their computer or a portable audio device (such as any MP3 player).

These audio files come in two main types: professional and amateur. Professional podcasts are usually the audio from existing radio or television programs, although there are some companies that are now making purpose designed podcasts. Amateur podcasts are made by people like you and I, and include an almost unimaginable selection of topics, lengths and qualities.

Podcasts use a type of computer file known as an RSS FEED<sup>4</sup> to enable someone to subscribe to and then receive updated files. Professional podcasts usually update over a regular cycle, such as weekly or daily, while amateur podcasts may be updated regularly or irregularly.

A PODCATCHER<sup>5</sup> (sometimes also known as an AGGREGATOR or PODCAST RECEIVER) is the software designed to subscribe to and download podcast files. Many podcatchers<sup>6</sup> will also synch with MP3 players for fast and efficient file transfer from computer to player.

#### **Available podcasts**

A quick scan through the many podcast directories<sup>7</sup> available shows a huge number of podcasts – certainly well into the tens of thousands, and maybe heading towards 100 000 in the near future.

Many radio and television programs are now releasing their programs in podcast form. In Australia, the ABC<sup>8</sup> is a prime example of this with most of the ABC's radio programs available through free podcast subscriptions.

Amateur podcasts utilise the interests of the particular developer to produce podcasts like some of the following:

- Debates, interviews, speeches, and sermons
- Music and other vocal performances by unsigned groups
- Self guided tours
- Amateur commentary tracks for films and TV shows
- Audio books and poems
- Personal journals, diaries and rants

- Foreign language guides
- Information podcasts on any number of topics
- How tos and self help guides for technology and other areas

### **Why podcasts in education**

For any new tool the question must always be asked – why use this? Or, perhaps another way of looking at this question is, what can I do with this tool that I couldn't do before?

I see a few main arguments to support the use of podcasts in education:

1. The ubiquity of iPods and other MP3 players provides a ready base of users of this tool.
2. Support for students with low literacy skills or other learning difficulties
3. Catering to students with a range of learning styles
4. Providing material to vision impaired students
5. Allowing for self-paced learning
6. Empowering students to create and distribute their own music, poetry, etc.

Now, none of these are things that we couldn't already do without podcasts, so I see podcasts as simply providing an alternative to the existing repertoire of teachers. It acts as another tool that we can use in our work with students.

I consider this from two perspectives – the teacher and the student.

For teachers, we might use podcasts to:

- Record classes for absent students
- Use as a supplement to accompany other material
- Use as an extra resource for self-paced learning
- Use as support for students with reading or other learning difficulties
- Distribute interviews/guest lectures from remote areas or from overseas
- Tell stories and help with language acquisition
- Offer foreign language support, lessons and guides (eg. Pronunciation)
- Help with music lessons
- Assist in student counseling – through, for example, study guides, relaxation "tapes", and stress management tips

For students, podcasts present an alternative method of creating and submitting work for assessment tasks. It also presents a new way of sharing work amongst students and dramatically increasing the potential audience of a student's work.

Students could:

- Create commentary for walking tours
- Write and share music
- Develop commentary for video or other visual presentations
- Write and record stories and poems for other students
- Develop notes and lectures on particular topics
- Present information in audio form

Students might also use podcasts as a means of sharing work and ideas across curriculum areas and across year levels and schools.

### **Why in outdoor education**

So far so good. You might see podcasts as something useful or as just another technological toy that teachers in other areas may use. I think however, that there are at least a few good reasons to see Outdoor Education as a particularly suitable context from which to experiment with the use of podcasts.

- MP3 players are small, light, getting cheaper, and often capable of recording voice. These make them quite suitable for students and teachers to record reflections and discussion while out on a practical field trip or journey. Students could develop their own reflective podcasts while sitting in their tent on a rainy night, or while watching the sun rise over a mountain peak, or wherever they might happen to be.
- Students could collect audio data from environments – specifically the sounds from environments (such as bird song, wind, storms, crashing waves, and so on) – as a prompt for further discussion and reflection on these environments when they return to school.
- Teachers could make use of talks from experts on environments, issues and activities, delivering these to students while in the field. A representative from a local conservation group talking about a particular conflict when students are in that place, could take the place of that person actually being there if they weren't available. To use an IT term, this is the notion of 'just in time' delivery.
- Audio stimulus material for reflection and inspiration on environments could be brought on trips. This might include songs, music, poems and stories.
- Outdoor Education often takes place in remote environments involving significant travel time for students and teachers. Time spent on buses can be pretty boring and students might occupy themselves with a movie (if the bus has the facilities) or a bit of a sleep. Many students however, already bring along MP3 players to listen to music, and these could be tapped into by giving the students podcasts related to the trip, the activities or the environment to listen to during the travel to and from a venue.

None of these are going to set the world on fire, but then podcasts – like many other technologies – are only tools for us to use where appropriate.

### **Making podcasts<sup>9</sup>**

This is a pretty simple process and follows a number of basic steps. (I'll keep these brief here and extend on them during the conference session.)

#### 1. Record the audio for your podcast

You can use a voice recording enabled MP3 player, a purpose built audio recorder, a computer, or in fact, any recording device to do this.

One issue that you'll need to consider is whether to use a script or not. There is some debate about this amongst podcast aficionados. Professional podcasts are often scripted, amateur podcasts usually aren't. Unscripted podcasts usually sound more like conversations and can be more easy to listen to, as long as the person making the podcast knows what they're talking about.

#### 2. Edit and produce the podcast if needed/desired

There's a large range of software available for this purpose. I use Audacity<sup>10</sup> and have also used Adobe Audition.

Editing might include removing unwanted noise and sounds, deleting the ums and ahs of our standard spoken voices, or extracting irrelevant sections of an audio file. Production can include adding transitions, music, background and sound effects noises, introductions and credits. Editing and production increase the time for the development of the podcast, but

with some practice you can get away with minimal time spent on this. Students however, often have the interest and time to spend on developing quality podcasts with very high production values.

Having done these first two steps you already have a podcast in the form of the audio file. This can be distributed to students by burning onto a CD or a memory stick. The following two steps (3 and 4) only need to be completed if you (or your students) want other people across the internet to be able to subscribe to and download the podcast.

### 3. Upload podcast file to a webserver

If you have worked with websites before this is simply a matter of copying your audio file into the chosen location of your website. If not, get someone else to help you with this.

### 4. Create an RSS feed for the podcast

This is the key step for allowing someone else to subscribe to your podcast. If you don't want to do this you can simply leave your audio files available as a download on your website. But the creation of an RSS feed is pretty easy as long as you include some standard parts<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A CD will be provided at the conference session which contains samples of podcasts and some copies of the software discussed. The CD will also be available to others unable to attend the session. You can contact the presenter – [amannion@whitefriars.vic.edu.au](mailto:amannion@whitefriars.vic.edu.au) – for copies.

<sup>2</sup> An introduction to podcasts is available at [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting)

<sup>3</sup> A range of different types of podcasts are being developed. Video podcasts are now available and are generally known as vodcasts.

<sup>4</sup> More details about RSS feeds is available at [www.rssboard.org/rss-specification](http://www.rssboard.org/rss-specification)

<sup>5</sup> Juice is a simple to use and free podcatcher. A copy is included on the CD.

<sup>6</sup> A comparison of many podcatcher software programs is available at [www.podcatchermatrix.org/](http://www.podcatchermatrix.org/)

<sup>7</sup> Podcast Alley – [www.podcastalley.com/](http://www.podcastalley.com/); yahoo podcasts – [podcasts.yahoo.com/](http://podcasts.yahoo.com/); Podcast.net – [www.podcast.net/](http://www.podcast.net/)

<sup>8</sup> [www.abc.net.au/services/podcasting/](http://www.abc.net.au/services/podcasting/)

<sup>9</sup> Information on some of the legal issues associated with podcasts is available at [wiki.creativecommons.org/Podcasting\\_Legal\\_Guide](http://wiki.creativecommons.org/Podcasting_Legal_Guide)

<sup>10</sup> Audacity is a very simple to use and free audio recording program. A copy is included on the CD.

<sup>11</sup> An annotated sample RSS feed is included on the CD.