

Veterinary potcasting

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The RVC is involved in an Academy funded project led by the University of Leicester to investigate the potential of podcasting to enhance traditional approaches to teaching and learning. The IMPALA project (*Informal Mobile Podcasting And Learning Adaptation* - www.impala.ac.uk) includes initiatives at the University of Leicester, the Royal Veterinary College, Kingston University and the University of Gloucestershire. Each institution is exploring different applications of podcasting ranging from engineering rap lectures to podcast geographical field trips. This article outlines work to develop anatomical potcasts for use by preclinical veterinary students.

Digital audio in education

The rise in popularity of mp3 players (such as Apple's iPod) for entertainment has provided the potential for the widespread use of digital audio in teaching and learning. These opportunities include capturing lectures, recording interviews or providing technical guides. Most students are now familiar with the concept of downloading music and our initial experience at the RVC suggests that they are happy to mix their favourite music tracks with a digital audio lecture or two!

The early findings from the wider IMPALA project suggests that there are a range of benefits for students in using downloadable mp3 files. They include the fact that regular podcasting helped students to stay organised, brought some informality and fun to their learning, supported their independence but also enabled engagement with materials whilst mobile and *situated*. Situated learning emphasizes learning presented in authentic contexts and with other

people. And of course they can always listen again, any time, anywhere to the files. Most importantly, IMPALA student were able to distinguish between podcasts for entertainment and those for studying.

Potcasting

Like all medical and veterinary schools, the RVC has an anatomical museum with a large number of anatomical pots and specimens. Many of these were produced by staff and students in the past and offer stunning examples of the art of dissection. Sadly, the modern day student has less time or opportunity to spend on these basic skills and must therefore depend on interpreting the work of their predecessors. However, this can be difficult as many of these pots carry little more than the name of

MP3 player: A digital audio player that stores, organises and plays digital music files

Podcasting: Distribution of a multimedia file over the Internet for playback on mobile devices or personal computers

Potcasting: A new term to describe podcasting applied to anatomy museum specimens

the original dissector and perhaps the identity of the principal organs on display.

At the RVC we are now attempting to bring some of the old art of dissection alive with *potcasting*. We are recording a range of audio files that students can download and listen to whilst they walk around the anatomy museum. These files are in mp3 format and are uploaded to the College VLE from where students can download them using iTunes or save them onto a computer hard drive.



Various digital audio devices.

The potcast project has been piloted with second year students identifying specimens related to the curriculum that they found difficult to interpret. The anatomist then developed a short script for each pot which was recorded and edited by a member of the e-Media team. In some cases these audio tracks have been enhanced by annotated digital images of the specimen to help students identify key structures. Students then have the opportunity of reviewing a specimen while on the move using the image or listening to the audio track while viewing the real specimens.

Other versions of the potcasting model that are being trialed include a themed overview of a number of different pots. This allows the tutor to highlight related anatomical features in different species or the anatomy relevant to a particular condition or procedure covered later in the course. Video potcasting is also proving an effective way of demonstrating three dimensional features, for example in a dissection.

Other ongoing trials

We are also experimenting with simple and inexpensive methods of capturing audio for teaching and learning purposes to complement the potcasts. Students have been recording anatomy lectures, with the lecturer's permission, using an Olympus digital Dictaphone. They then convert the lectures into mp3 format using free software such as Audacity and upload it on to the relevant section of the VLE. Whilst the majority of students appear to download and listen to the potcasts on their PC, others report listening to them on their mp3 player on the bus home.

Another example of the use of digital audio involves recording interviews with subject experts about their research work and its relevance to veterinary education. These interviews provide an overview of issues and research relating to wider topics such



Screenshot of a canine abdomen potcast.

as tuberculosis, diabetes or milk production and the *live* question and answer style is designed to engage students and staff directly in the latest developments. In some ways this mirrors past practice in providing audio cassettes but the great attraction of using the web and portable devices is that it makes it easier to produce and distribute the recordings.

Student feedback

Student focus groups and online surveys have indicated that these resources are a popular new medium. Students report that they value the opportunity to review a lecture that they have not fully understood either immediately after the lecture or when revising later. For example one student commented:

It allows me to process information and understand the content of the lecture better as I personally learn and remember information when I hear it rather than when I read it. It has also been useful to be able to go back to parts of a lecture where I'm not sure if I understand something and to hear a concept explained again.

The impact of potcasting is still being evaluated as part of the IMPALA project. However informal feedback from students has been enthusiastic and they have played an active role in identifying specimens to potcast and providing ideas on the most effective ways to distribute the media. This initiative has been well

received by anatomists at the College, with several adapting the basic model to support their own teaching.

The future

The technologies described here are simple and cheap to produce (see page 6). Student assistance has kept the amount of staff time required to a minimum and partly passed the responsibility for the project to the students. The examples we have piloted demonstrate the potential of reinvigorating traditional teaching technologies using modern mp3 player technology.

Potcasting development and research is ongoing and the College is now starting to explore the potential of using this technology to support and encourage student's independent learning. The RVC is also in discussion with the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons about developing some joint potcasts between the two Colleges. It is hoped that this may encourage our students to visit both museums with a guide in their ear pointing out the lessons to be learnt from comparative anatomy.

For more information please contact nshort@rvc.ac.uk
www.rvc.ac.uk/emedia

Example of potcasts can be downloaded from www.rvc.ac.uk/review

Audacity can be downloaded from audacity.sourceforge.net