Podcasting - Good practice

As a teacher, and also as a podcaster, your voice is your most important asset. Most of us would not have attended any voice training session, however we are required to provide multi-media content to our students, and this includes recording of our voice. This section provides a few easy to apply suggestions how to improve the use of your voice, and with this your students' learning experience. This section has been created from interviews with Jason Myatt and Robert Ketton.

Communication in the classroom

Video

The following video recording of a seminar presentation by Robert Ketton is part of the “Transition to Teaching” seminars held for 4th year teacher students in the Faculty of Education. While targeting soon-to-be teachers, this presentation is also of relevance to academics.

Watch the video Be a More Dynamic Presenter.

(link provided with permission from the Faculty of Education)

Communication in a podcast

Communication through a podcast without the visual component is more difficult than face to communication, for instance since we can no longer rely on body gestures, or facial expressions to put emphasis on what we say and to show how we mean what we say. This now needs to be communicated through the use of your voice alone, and through the way you use your voice.

Be confident! Be prepared! Smile! And relax!

Preparation before recording a podcast is very important, unless you are one of those people who operate best when they can improvise. You need to know your subject well and be confident. If you are confident, you can relax as you know what you are talking about. Relaxation gives you a much bigger and better vocal range, and once you're relaxed, your voice will look after yourself to a large extent.

Also, to be credible to your students, you need to show confidence in your voice when you record a session. Think about writing a detailed script which you read from when recording in your office. You can still change it while you are reading it. Pre-read your notes, or the script, before you start a recording. Keep in mind that when your audience can hear you, but not see you, they may portray an image different from the true image as visual clues are missing. For instance, um and ah are signs of uncertainty, and should be avoided where possible. Rather
than editing out every single one of these, work on yourself so you come across with more confidence. It also pays to be positive, and to smile, as they say “you can hear a smile”.

Example

Listen to Jason Myatt's explanation of the importance of being prepared.

Jason on being prepared

And slow down!

The following examples will show you the difference between a fast and a slow speaker. The fast speaker will cover the content much quicker than the slow speaker – but at what cost?

If you consistently talk too fast, place a note in front of you that tells you to “slow down”.

Example

Jason's take on speed.

Jason on talking too fast

Show enthusiasm!

There's nothing worse than showing your students how bored you are that you are teaching this course for the 10th semester in a row. Show enthusiasm, and make it exciting! The students have not listened to you speaking about this topic yet. If the material has become boring, maybe it's due for some updating? Invite guest speakers for your podcast, who will give a fresh presentation on a topic you really don't want to talk about any more.

Do you have a strong accent?

A strong accent should not stop you from recording a podcast. It is, however, even more important that you slow down the delivery! If your students are not used to your accent, it will be much easier for them to understand what you are saying when you speak slowly.
Example

This is an example of an audio recording by Yan Zhao, Lecturer in Chinese Studies in the Faculty of Arts. Yan has a strong accent but talks slowly in this recording, and through this becomes much easier to understand.

Yan talking slowly

(recording provided by Jason Myatt, and made available with permission from the lecturer)

The following strategy should prove particularly useful to people with strong accents.

A strategy to improve your audio recording

Have you ever listened to a recording of your own voice, and thought it was absolutely terrible? The best way to check the quality of your recording is to listen to it yourself, as you are your own best or worst critic. When you have finished your recording, take the time to listen to it. Ask yourself the following questions:

• Did I get my message across?
• Was I speaking too fast?
• Did that go too long?
• Did I fall asleep?

If you can answer the first question with YES, you are on the right track. The other three questions may require a bit of practice, and discipline unless you are a natural (Slow down! Keep it short! Show enthusiasm!). You don't need to listen to all of your recordings – just listen in from time to time. Ask a colleague to listen, and comment on your recording.

It is very important to proceed at a pace which your students can understand and keep up with! Don't leave out ends of words. And get a dynamic range in your voice to sound more interesting!

Other strategies

Remember who you are talking to

If you create an audio recording in your office without an audience, you should picture yourself talking to one person, not to the whole class of distance students. The student listening to your recording will be just one person and not sit in an audience. Personalize your greeting, don't say “good morning class”, as to communicate well in a podcast is to talk one on one. It may help if you talk to a photo of a friend.
Example

Jason explains the importance of talking to one person, not many.

Jason on talking to one

Microphone technique

If you are using a handheld microphone, keep it just little distance away. Lapel microphones need to stay clear of clothing – if it rubs against the mic, this will create noise and diminish the quality of the recording.

Example

Learn more about Jason's microphone technique.

Jason on mic technique

How long should an audio recording be?

As a guideline, keep each recording to a maximum length of 15-20 minutes. It is more difficult to search through an audio file than a text file, and your audience's attention span will most likely be well under 20 minutes. It may make sense to split a longer recording into smaller bits, eg relating to a topic each. What students remember from an hour long lecture is little, and this is likely to be even less from an hour long podcast.

The best podcasts are those that address the audience and get to the point quickly, so try to keep your recording as short as possible, and know who your audience is, and what their attention span is.

Planning a podcast – before you start

Exercise

Before you record your own podcast, listen to existing educational podcasts to get a feeling for this medium. There is a large number of podcasts available – follow the steps described in the Podcasting module to subscribe to at least one educational podcast and listen to a few episodes. Post the link to the community site if you think others might benefit from this podcast as well.

The ideas in the following section have been drawn from Hendron (2008). Hendron suggests to think about a theme, and the large picture for the whole podcast. For instance, will you post regular tutorials? Provide news at the end of the week? Give pieces of a puzzle in each recording, that will form a whole at the end of the semester?
He also suggests to be consistent between “episodes” as this creates a professional touch. If you start the first podcast with a musical intro, keep it throughout the semester. Break up sections with a short melody. Start with the same words – such as “CSC1402 Foundation Computing. Welcome to Birgit Loch's weekly podcast from the University of Southern Queensland. Today's episode...”.

Examples, and more help

**Example**

This site was created by Jason to show examples of professional podcasts prepared by Media Services for USQ course material for course CDs. You will need to login with your USQConnect username and password.

**Reading activity**

The Media Services websites gives hints for preparing and recording audio. Have a read through this page.