
Podcasting: if Terry Wogan can do it, so can we ...

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Yes indeed ... if Terry Wogan, the well-known BBC Radio 2 broadcaster, can produce podcasts, so can Aberdeen University Library. Our journey into completely unknown territory, in acquiring new creative and technical skills, has been an education in many ways. The library 'Pod-Squad' (alias Claire Molloy and Elaine Shallcross) would like to share our experiences of producing podcasts with library teams who are considering having a go themselves.

First of all, don't be afraid of the technology. It is not difficult to create a basic MP3 audio file using open source software such as Audacity. It doesn't even cost a great deal – the important question is 'Can you see a need in your library to provide information and guidance in an innovative and alternative format?'

WHY DOES OUR LIBRARY PRODUCE PODCASTS?

How many people do you see on your way to work, and in your library, with the familiar white earphones plugged into their ears? Our guess is that you see a significant number. Many people of all ages have MP3 players – we want to exploit the popularity of the medium to deliver important information about the library to members of the university and visitors alike.

Podcasts can be produced on any topic and tailored specifically for different groups who use the library. Some staff and students have additional learning needs, and many students prefer

independent learning to more formal induction lectures and tours – what better way for them to learn more about the library than by downloading a visual and audio tour? It's quick, it's easy, and it costs the user very little.

Long before the podcast project was proposed, our team of information consultants identified a need to provide an alternative to the traditional library induction sessions on offer – particularly for those students who arrived late or who simply didn't have an induction as a formal part of their course. With full teaching schedules it isn't always easy to fit in extra talks, so podcasts are viewed as viable alternatives to conducted tours.

Providing support for international students, particularly those whose first language is not English, is an important role for the library. We hope that these students may benefit from being able to listen to a podcast when they are using the library, and as many times as they need.

The university recently introduced an 'applicants' portal' for every prospective student in order to communicate all the information required when they are considering applying for a place. We want to utilise this facility by making podcasts easily accessible via this platform, with the hope that they can learn more about library services, facilities and resources on offer before they even leave their homes.

Lastly, some visitors are simply intimidated by the prospect of making their way through security gates and finding where to go in a large building on six levels. Listening to a podcast can prepare them for their first visit to the library.

HOW WE STARTED

We began by reading articles and books on podcasting and listening to podcasts produced by academic libraries. Our first step was to listen to a presentation by Chris Kretz from Dowling College about podcasting in academic libraries.¹ Jack D. Herrington provides useful tips on professional-quality podcasting in his book, *Podcasting hacks*²

After getting acquainted with the terminology, ask for advice on the range and quality of hardware and software available for podcasting. There are two ways to produce a podcast and the equipment you use depends on the size of your budget, how many people will be involved in the project and how many podcasts you intend to produce. It is possible record and edit a podcast for less than

£30 using the freeware Audacity,³ a set of headphones and a cheap USB microphone. With these you can create simple MP3 podcasts. The alternative is to invest in hardware and commercially available podcast software to produce higher-quality sound files in several different formats. We were fortunate to be able to borrow all the necessary equipment before making the decision. A member of academic staff in the music department of the school of education recommended (and supplied) a good-quality digital recorder (MAudio). A colleague in the learning technology unit suggested looking at an Apple product, iLife 06,⁴ as it contains GarageBand, a piece of sophisticated podcasting software that would allow us to create two different file types: simple audio-only MP3 files and enhanced podcasts in M4a format containing digital photographs, floor plans and links to web pages. Using borrowed equipment, we were able to test the feasibility of producing podcasts whilst being largely self-taught, and so we could avoid costly mistakes.

The sound quality of the audio tracks and the ability to compile enhanced formats were both important factors in a decision to purchase quality hardware which will be used predominantly for podcasting.

WHAT PODCASTS DO WE PRODUCE?

We began on a very small scale with a plan for a simple audio tour of the main branch, the Queen Mother Library - all six levels in one podcast. The experienced 'podcasters' amongst you will be shaking your heads at this point and thinking 'That's not very practical.' We soon reached the same conclusion; that it would be more helpful to users (as well as easier for us!) to create short snappy podcasts focusing on individual floors.

Starting with the security gates at the entrance, we worked round the ground floor identifying the main points a new user would need to know about – core services, how to get in, where to get help, how to use a photocopier. With the ground floor recorded, the subject floors were scripted, recorded and photographed. To help the listener follow a tour of a floor, each podcast is divided into chapters marked by stops. Colourful posters marking each stop are posted around each floor and floor maps are provided to aid navigation.

Whilst we were recording, further ideas for podcasts came to mind, such as guidance on using library resources and collections, and equipment, particularly the self-issue and return machines. At

the start of every academic session new students often struggle to use these machines – queues build up – frustration sets in. As a fix, library staff take turns to stand by the machines to give instruction. We thought that an enhanced podcast, containing photographs of each step in the issue and return processes, would be an easy way to learn how to use library equipment independently and still look cool.

With the podcasts in such an early stage of development we hadn't anticipated how the concept would take on an appeal far beyond our expectations and beyond the corridors of the library itself. In a very short time we had orders coming in from the colleges for podcasts of applicant open day library induction talks.⁵ Bear in mind that we had received enthusiastic support for our project from staff right up to the Vice-Principal himself, without one single podcast having been created to listen to. They were sold on the concept. No pressure, then!

HOW WE COMPILED THE PODCASTS

Using podcasting software involved a steep learning curve of Everest proportions! In the very early days the freeware, Audacity, was tested to edit audio files, remove microphone hiss and the odd cough and amplify quiet sections. In fact, even with GarageBand, which has all the same editing features, we still find it easier to amplify recording levels for .wav files in Audacity, then import them back into GarageBand.

Despite having started the project by recording a tour of the ground floor the first podcast we completed was about the teaching resource collection.⁶ This section of the library contains a rich variety of materials for Education students to use when on teaching practice, including text books, big books, interactive 'kits', DVDs and CD ROMs.

Typically, a script would be written, edited and recorded by library staff and photographs taken to illustrate the script. GarageBand allowed us to easily drag and drop audio files, backing music files and photographs, and to insert URLs onto a timeline. Once compiled the .band files can be saved in M4a format within GarageBand or exported to iTunes or Audacity to save in MP3 format.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO PRODUCE A PODCAST?

Accounts of other podcasters' experiences of producing similar files seemed to suggest that it

wouldn't take more than a few hours to complete and publish a tour of the library. How wrong could we be? Scripting a 'project' doesn't take long, recording can be relatively quick if too many mistakes aren't made and taking the relevant photos isn't time-consuming – but put them all together and even a five minute broadcast could take more than an hour to make.

Each 'episode' has to be compiled from a number of different audio files, with photographs added at the appropriate points in the script, backing music inserted to mark the beginning and end and sound levels adjusted. Then, to cater for user preferences and varying ages of equipment, each podcast has to be saved in MP3 and M4a formats, published on specially written library web pages and exported to iTunes ...! Allow at least half a day to produce and publish a five-minute podcast from start to finish.

HOW DO YOU GET PEOPLE TO USE THEM?

Our first live podcasts were induction talks for the applicant open days in late February and early March 2007. These were made available via specially created library web pages which also explained how to download them.⁷ Information went out with other publicity about the university to all attendees. The library had a stand at the MA applicant open day with a laptop playing the MA podcast and podcast tours of the relevant subject floors. Weeks later the download statistics still looked good.

We have a news item on our library homepage and word is spreading as we promote library podcasts to academics in meetings. The learning technology unit has been using our podcasts as examples in their 'How to podcast' seminars for academic staff, but the big push will come in August and September 2007 when the new academic year starts.

THINKING OF PRODUCING PODCASTS YOURSELF?

Our advice:

- Find a space to talk, record and play podcasts, where you won't disturb others and, more importantly, where you can be creative without interruption. A quiet space away from extraneous noise is essential – we have made recordings with a background accompaniment of noises from jets coming in to land, motorbikes, noisy car exhausts, sirens, library announcements over the tannoy, telephones ringing and photocopiers at work – annoying

when you are on the third or fourth attempt at recording a piece. Do some test recordings to see if the room has an 'echo'. You will be surprised how acoustics differ from one room to another. You are advised to use the same room for all recordings – they will all then sound the same.

- Find time – it takes more than an hour! It works best if you can dedicate yourself to it. Working in short snatches here and there is not the most effective way.
- Find funding – do some costings. It is quite possible to make simple podcasts without pictures for an outlay of less than £30. Alternatively, be prepared to spend around £1,500 to purchase an Apple Mac computer and carrying case, digital recorder and digital camera. We purchased an iPod and a microphone attachment to have a second recording device and to demonstrate how to download and play podcasts. We decided quite early on that a library tour without pictures would not be popular and so we went for the 'enhanced' format. Statistics of downloads have confirmed this assumption. Consider purchasing a laptop because it can be shared and moved around library offices and sites easily.
- Find volunteers – coerce as many library staff as you can to make recordings. Podcasts benefit from the rich variety of voices and accents found amongst library staff – and you will probably discover some real stars of the airwaves!

THE FUTURE

We will expand on our present series of podcasts to complement the print and electronic library information guides and web pages currently available. Then there are vodcasts; plans are in place to begin work on a vodcast for the school of education distance learners in April 2007. Finally, we will continue to promote our sessions to academic staff and students at every opportunity with the aim of raising awareness of the wide choice of formats now available to access information.

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