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Last orders for the lecture theatre? Exploring blended learning approaches and accessibility for full-time international students

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the emerging findings of a small-scale project which evaluated the use of podcast lectures in a Strategic Management module. The project is set in a context of improving access to learning for a diverse group of full-time on-campus international postgraduate students. It reports student perspectives on podcast lecture materials as a substitute to face-to-face lecturing. The paper concludes with reflections on the use of podcasts in the Business and Management curriculum within a shift from a didactic to a resource-based pedagogy.

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1. Lectures, technology and tradition: A reflective prompt on learning spaces

The utilisation of a wide range of pedagogical approaches for part-time and distance-learning students in Higher Education (HE) is firmly embedded in the curriculum. In the past twenty years, a myriad of technologies have enabled increasingly creative teaching tools to enhance the learning experiences of those who do not study on campus (Fernandez, Simo, & Sallan, 2009). Improvements in the design of multimedia applications have made the use of such tools increasingly accessible for both teachers and learners. The contemporary learning environment for students who study at a distance, therefore, has become vivid for those who like to listen and watch as well as those who like to read.

The adoption of technologically-mediated approaches for full-time, on-campus students seems to have been rather less revolutionary. In spite of the availability of many video and audio techniques, core curriculum features remain largely consistent with twentieth century practises. University campus designs feature the provision of lecture theatres and significant contact time is devoted to teaching groups of students face-to-face (Al-Khatib, 2009; McGarr, 2009). Yet, from a pedagogical standpoint, the effectiveness of lecturing is regarded as somewhat limited (Folley, 2010). In particular, critiques of large-group lectures have focussed on issues such as communication and language, the shortness of student attention span and factors relating to note-taking and retention (Crose, 2011; Pritchard, 2010). Some research has indicated the inflexibility of traditional lecture approaches for contemporary learning spaces (Ross & Rosenbloom, 2011). Many students benefit from increased opportunities to access learning resources outside of the fixed requirements of lecture timetables.

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Generationally, students are increasingly leading technologically-focused lives, with the use of online and digital resources becoming routine, again suggesting opportunities for a more widespread adoption of mixed or technologically-mediated teaching approaches (Lonn & Teasley, 2009; Ross & Rosenbloom, 2011). Contemporary teaching methods provide a range of opportunities for non-lecture-based approaches such as discovery learning and applied techniques, particularly in vocational disciplines such as Business and Management (Gorra & Finlay, 2009). Together increasing student diversity and the potential of learning technologies prompt reflection on the contribution of formal face-to-face classroom-based lectures.

2. International students within wider student diversity: a practical prompt for teachers

International students reflect broader levels of diversity in HE, bringing particular learning needs and have long been identified as 'canaries in the coal-mine' highlighting wider issues of inclusivity and access (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Practice-based research suggests that the HE learning environment poses particular challenges for international students who are second-language speakers, have prior experience in different pedagogical cultures and who are working across different disciplines or levels of study (Folley, 2010; Jones, 2007). Traditional classroom methods call on strong socio-cultural norms which may disadvantage international students who lack the confidence to engage with opportunities to ask questions or otherwise participate (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2009). These issues by no means affect international students exclusively but learning transitions for this heterogeneous group appear steep. Research indicates the emotional strains and stresses of studying as an international student in the UK and highlights potential for under-performance, particularly in programmes of shorter duration, such as one-year Master's degrees (Wang, Harding, & Mai, 2011; Wu & Hammond, 2011).

International students also constitute an important part of the HE community, not only introducing social and cultural diversity but also generating much-needed institutional revenues, particularly for universities in countries like Scotland where patterns of core government funding have been changing and the range of courses and modes of study expanding. In 2012–13, for example, EU and non-EU international students comprised approximately 19% of new entrants to Scottish HE (SFC, 2014). In this context, a focus on the design of culturally inclusive learning spaces seems not only desirable but necessary.

3. The focus

This paper responds to these dual prompts and reports the emerging findings from a small-scale reflective project exploring the use of podcast lectures in a Strategic Management module in Aberdeen Business School as a tool in support of enhanced inclusivity. It illustrates student perspectives on their experiences of podcasts as a substitute to face-to-face delivery. The paper concludes with personal reflections on my own use of podcasts as a tool to develop a more culturally-inclusive pedagogy.

3.1. Active learning, traditional lecturing: some strengths and limitations

As noted above, traditional lectures remain a cornerstone of HE teaching. Variously regarded as a mechanism for efficient information transfer, an opportunity to inspire students rhetorically or as cost-effective, universities and teachers maintain a close identification with this particular approach as a distinctive feature of the HE experience (Jones, 2007; McGarr, 2009). In spite of its long dominance, however, face-to-face lecturing suffers from particular limitations, notably in responding to increasing student diversity. Traditional lectures draw on a teacher-centred, transmission approach, can encourage student passivity in learning, may not fully respond to the cognitive capacity for listening and processing information at length and as a synchronously-delivered channel require timetabled participation (Jones, 2007; McGarr, 2009; Tormey & Henchey, 2008). As such the pedagogical effectiveness of traditional lecturing is contested. In applied subjects such as Business and Management lectures have been supplemented with other approaches to broaden the potential reach of teaching within a focus on active- and student-centred learning. Nonetheless curricula retain a strong focus on lectures, particularly for larger cohorts of students where the economic implications of more student-centred methods are emphatic (Short & Martin, 2011). Equally, traditional teaching methods can offer familiarity and 'comfort' to both students and lecturers. Some groups of international students, for example, will have experienced strongly teacher-focused approaches in the past (Eaves, 2009). The use of such approaches can ease learning transitions and, as indicated above, scaffold access for second-language speakers during early stages in a study programme. Yet the deep learning potential of active learning strategies emphasises their usefulness over the transmissive model (Crose, 2011; Rollag & Billsberry, 2012). Such counter-considerations suggest that a blend of transmissive and active techniques are useful even during preliminary stages of a student's transition.

3.2. Podcasts, learning spaces, design and accessibility

Reflecting the uncertain benefits of lectures, and the wider critique of a reliance on transmissive pedagogies, technological methods have increasingly been identified as showing potential for supplementing and extending their reach. Such approaches include podcasting within the context of blended learning. Yet the effectiveness of these methods is also contested (Joordens, Le, Grinnell, & Chrysostomou, 2009). In terms of cost-effectiveness podcasting seems equivalent or superior to traditional lectures, since it is asynchronous and does not rely upon physical presence on campus. As such it has featured

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