Preliminary Report: Internet Use in a History Course
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During fall 2006 a pilot study was conducted in my introductory world history course here at the University with several emerging Internet learning tools. I described this experiment in the last issue of this newsletter (Arendale, 2006). This article presents some early findings and lessons learned from the pilot study.

Much of the popular press and media reports has extolled the virtues of these new Internet services and tools. There are a limited number of more scholarly articles and reports issued on the usage of podcasting technology among people (Campbell, 2005; Raine & Madden, 2005; Read, 2007). There have been more formal education articles written about the use of blogs and wiki web pages (Engstrom & Jewett, 2005). However, some others have identified some potential negatives consequences regarding social isolation fostered through use of personal MP3 players (Ivey & Tepper, 2006). With the newness of the technology and the length of time for scholarly studies to be conducted, manuscripts submitted, and publication schedules, it is not surprising that the professional literature is limited. I have been personally influenced to investigate their technology after watching an increasing number of students walking around the college campus with iPods plugged into their ears and seeing students text messaging one another through their cell phones. I had even joined them by purchasing an iPod MP3 player and was listening to music and podcast Internet radio programs since February 2006.

Overview of Web 2.0 Internet Services and Tools

In the past 36 months several new Internet communication and information delivery systems have emerged. I was interested in using several of these with my survey of world history course. The typical student in the class is a first or second year student. The popular press had touted that my students were frequently listening to podcasts (Internet radio shows), using Wiki web pages (e.g., Wikipedia), and using social networking web sites (e.g., Facebook and MySpace). Several instructions across the U.S. had gained early notice for their use of such technologies for improved learning outcomes by their students.

If you are interested in more information about podcasting, please go to a special website that I created, http://arendale.org/podcasting-resources/ It contains several narrated PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and web links related to the educational uses of podcasting. It is based on a talk that I gave through the CRDEUL Forum series during November 2006.

In my history class the students and I created an online wiki web page. The students created their own study guide for upcoming major exams through posting information to this site (http:myworldhistory.org). Some of the students created summaries of the chapters. Others developed outlines for the potential essay questions.

The students did an amazing job with their contributions to the podcast episodes (http//thenandnow.org) You can still subscribe to the past episodes of the podcast and download them for listening. There is a link on the podcast webpage in the upper right hand corner to subscribe to the series though Apple's iTunes service. There were a variety of voices on these weekly Internet radio shows. I served as host and provided suggestions for understanding the potential essay questions. The study review leader

for the course contributed a short segment of targeted study strategies for tackling the content material. Another student assistant who put the show on the Internet provided a short Internet technical tip. Several students in the class provided segments. One student created an oral summary of the chapter assigned for that week. Another student selected music to play each week that others might enjoy. A few students produced a special podcast episode which was devoted to music particular country or region of the world. It is not enough to read about a culture, sometimes you need to experience its culture through popular music of the country.

Frequency of Use of Internet Services and Learning Tools

The preliminary data gathered through self-reported data from the students provides a more diverse image than the one that is often described in the poplar press. The most popular Internet activity was visiting Facebook and Myspace social networking web sites. Nearly two-thirds of the students had done so before the Fall semester. About half the students had composed material on collaborative wiki web pages. Listening to podcasts was the least frequently accessed service. While more than half of the students have been downloading music from the Internet, less than a third had listened to such shows. Students expressed that they were very confident of their computer skills and ability to create material for the Internet. However, about a third very concerned about privacy issues on the Internet. Preliminary data analysis suggests that this may adversely limit some students from accessing selected Internet learning tools.

During the Fall 2006 semester, the most popular Internet resource was the wiki web page that contained the students= self-generated exam study guide. Nearly three-quarters of the students used it and rated it highly effective from their point of view for helping them academically. The podcasts were used by about half the students in the class. This was about double the rate of listening to podcasting when compared with earlier semesters. Their ratings of the podcast were more mixed with nearly an equal number rating it low, medium, and high. An interesting result was that most students just went to the podcast website and downloaded the individual episodes for listening. A much smaller number took the additional step of subscribing to the podcast. This replicates reports from other podcasters who noticed that some listeners preferred to download from the web rather than subscribe. While the average student probably has lots of experience with visiting web pages, the additional steps for subscribing to podcasts seems to discourage the additional effort.

Obviously more detailed analysis of the data is yet to come. The important links among the student demographics, predictors of academic preparation, skill with use of Internet tools, frequency use of Internet tools, and potential influence on final course grade within the course need intense scrutiny. These studies will be reported in future publications and reports.

Early Lessons Learned from Pilot Experiment

While we are still analyzing data from the research studies of podcasting and the other learning enrichment activities in the class, I can share some lessons that I have learned from this experience during fall 2006 in the history course. For space limitations of this short article, I will focus on the podcast component of the course.

Lesson #1. Always invite students to help co-create the course and its activities. It is much more meaningful for them if they are actively involved. Plus it is much more fun.

Lesson #2. Focus the podcast on material that students create and contribute rather than making it dominated by the voice of the course instructor. It was so much fun to listen to the different student voices expressing themselves on the podcast either through the chapter summaries or selecting music for the episode.

Lesson #3. Involve the other student staff for the course in the podcast. I was lucky to have two undergraduate teaching assistants for the course. Brian Fredrickson was my study group leader. His comments about study strategies for the course were so much more relevant than any they I could have come up with based on my college experience from one hundred years ago. I learned much from Erik Tollusrud who was the other undergraduate teaching assistant. In addition to serving as our chief engineer, he contributed great information for getting the most out of new emerging Internet software and tools. He was also a patient teacher to me and Brian of how to edit podcast episodes and other technologies.

Lesson #4. Include music in the podcast series in various ways. As much as I know, few education podcasts integrate popular music into their shows. This podcast had two ways for music to be integrated: Each week one student would select music that interests them from a website with independent music artists of diverse types. It was music approved for free use on podcasts. This freedom of music selection encountered some interesting discussions regarding music selections. This prompted the addition of the following line to the podcast description, A*Since some music selections may include mature subjects or explicit lyrics, an individual episode may be marked >explicit= due to the lyric content.*@ We created an explicit rule that no music selections could contain language that potentially disparaged other individuals or groups. However, we also wanted to support thoughtful selections by students. So, while there are some songs that would be banned from the show, other music may appear. If that occurs, an Aexplicit@ tag will be placed on the episode to alert the listener. While some of the music selections might have not been my favorites, the key was that they were the selections of the students for their fellow college students. The podcast was OUR podcast, not just mine.

Several times during the semester a special podcast was posted that featured music from a particular country or region of the world. Once again, this music can from a special web site that provided such legally-downloaded music. See the website I developed earlier for podcasting. One of the goals for the course was an increase in appreciation for different cultures and expressions. I think that these special music podcasts helped to achieve that objective. It certainly helped to widen my listening range. It helped to prompt me to listen to music from outside the U.S. I discovered the Aradio@ tab in my library section through the iTunes software that I had downloaded for free from the company (http://itunes.com). I click on the international@ section of the radio stations provided at this website. A favorite of mine was ABatanga Cubanisimo@ Another favorite was AMediterranean Folk@ that featured folk music from Morocco, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and other countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

Lesson #5. My final comment about the experience with the podcast in the course is that it has both provided a fun and creative outlet for me as well as opened up

a new world of ideas and music to experience. Long ago when I was in college working on my bachelors' degree, I served as the Sunday evening disk jockey for our college radio station. Little did I know that 30 years later I would be involved with podcasting. I find that I watch television less and enjoy the Internet podcast shows more. Between the available audio and video podcasts, there are more than 85,000 shows to select from. While some are average or worse, many are wonderful. The same could be said of cable television as well. Being involved in this emerging technology with my students is personally and professional invigorating and exciting.

Next Steps

I am currently working with my graduate research assistant to complete a detailed statistical analysis of the data collected through the research study in my history course. We will be creating several manuscripts that examine the interaction of student demographics, predictors of academic preparation, skill or experience with Internet tools, use of Internet tools in the history class, and impact on final course grade in the course. We will submit the manuscripts to several publications in the near future. I plan to make revisions to the research model and conduct it again with my history students again during Fall 2007.

I believe that there are great opportunities for increased student engagement and learning through appropriate use of Web 2.0 learning tools. I welcome your collaboration with research in this area. Please contact me if you would like to continue the conversation. My office phone is 612-625-2928 and my email address is arendale@umn.edu

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