

## Podcasting at the University of Connecticut: Enhancing the Educational Experience

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At the beginning of my freshman year of college in 1966, I wanted to pursue a career in radio broadcasting. I even had a small amount of high school internship experience at local radio stations on which to build my dreams. However, by the second week of college I reexamined that decision because of doubts regarding future career options, especially for someone whose voice was far from the requisite baritone. So I switched to psychology for no better reason than I had done "OK" in a half-year of psychology in high school. Thus began my second career as an educator. Some forty years later, in September 2005, I purchased my first iPod (a first generation Nano) and realized that an opportunity existed to come full-circle. Combining what had become my career in psychology with my original passion for broadcasting, I discovered podcasting.

My first podcast was recorded using the built-in microphone of my [Apple](#) iBook G4. It was a recording of my midterm exam review session (attended by only a few students) and I made it available as a podcast for the entire 315 students enrolled in my class. Being among the more tech-savvy professors at the [University of Connecticut](#), I quickly learned the basics of RSS feeds, XML files, uploading files to the Apple iTunes store, and publicizing podcasts on aggregator sites and blogs. With the help of some "how to" Web sites (e.g., <http://www.apple.com/itunes/store/podcaststechspecs.html>; <http://www.podcastingnews.com/>), I was up and running within a week.

As the first person to incorporate podcasting into courses at the University of Connecticut in fall 2005, I decided not to simply "coursecast" (i.e., record actual lectures). I felt that there was nothing particularly novel about recording lectures and questioned their educational value. I recall a memorable montage from the 1985 motion picture, *Real Genius*. The sequence depicts a class in a lecture hall at various points during the semester. In the beginning, the lecture hall is full of students. Tape recorders gradually appear at the students' desks, and ultimately the students disappear, leaving only tape recorders. By the end of the film, the professor has been replaced by a tape recorder broadcasting the lecture to the students' tape recorders. This recurring image makes me question the pedagogical value of routine coursecasting.

Portable access to recorded lectures is what's new today, and this mobility underlies my use of podcasts to enhance and enrich my courses. This semester, I offer three podcast series – two for my General Psychology I course (which enrolls over 300 students), and one for my 85-student Animal Behavior course. My podcast series, called "iCube: Issues In Intro," ([Web](#), [iTunes](#)) is a series of weekly discussions about course content, not the course content itself. In iCube, I record meetings with students who come together to discuss lecture material in greater depth. No extra course credit is given for participation. Students have told me they show up for the excitement of being part of something new and different. Also, iCube is one of several ways that I make a very large class feel "psychologically" smaller. I meet students in a small, informal setting where we discuss course content and get to know one another in ways not possible in a large class environment. Podcast listeners tell me they feel more connected with the class by being able to listen to our informal discussions at their leisure. Some have told me that even though they were not involved in the actual recording, they feel like they are part of the small group.

My "Animal Behavior Podcasts" series for my Animal Behavior course ([Web](#), [iTunes](#)) is similar to iCube, but is an Honors enhancement. That is, Honors students in this otherwise non-Honors class can obtain Honors credit by participating in weekly discussions that are shared as podcasts. Recently, I invited an animal rights advocate to participate in a podcast for what turned out to be a lively discussion of very divergent views. This particular episode has received considerable international interest and was advertised in the newsletter of the [Animal Behavior Society](#).

Finally, I have a series of twice weekly [“Precasts”](#) for my General Psychology students. These are enhanced podcasts that I created using the shareware program, [ProfCast](#). With ProfCast, one can create an enhanced podcast from a [Microsoft](#) PowerPoint (or Apple Keynote) presentation, while narrating that presentation. While some students may find the podcasts useful for review, I use them to meet different goals. My “Precasts” are brief descriptions of some of the main points that students should look for in the upcoming lecture. They are not the actual PowerPoint screens I use in class (because of the multimedia nature of those screens and potential copyright concerns), but instead, brief bullet points over which I provide a narrative. Because I have taught this course to over 20,000 students, I have a good idea of which concepts are more difficult than others, and I elaborate on those concepts in the Precasts.



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I encourage students to use the Precasts before each class and refer to them afterwards to help flesh out and scaffold their notes. Students who miss class can use the Precasts to obtain a basic audio-visual outline to assist them when they borrow notes from students who did attend. Moreover, I arrive at the lecture hall early to broadcast the Precasts for any early-arriving students. Because my class is offered first period, I used to play rock music to wake them up and liven up the large lecture hall before class. Rather than sitting in the large auditorium sleeping, staring into space, or listening to music on their iPods, students now have the option of preparing with the Precasts before class begins which has a far greater pedagogical value. (At least I hope so!)

I should point out that there are times when coursecasting may be useful, even though creating this simple record is not my main purpose for podcasting. For example, I recorded a few lectures that occurred on religious holidays knowing that a number of observant students would be absent. I also would consider creating coursecasts of lectures presented during treacherous weather; a potential problem during our New England winters. Clearly, there are other situations where coursecasting may be beneficial, such as in assisting students with certain physical and/or learning disabilities. In all cases, one must weigh the pros and cons of coursecasting in relation to the goals and structure of the course.

Advances in hardware and software continue to afford educators with opportunities to improve their teaching. I originally embraced these opportunities using Apple's HyperCard software. When HyperCard disappeared, I switched to PowerPoint to provide multimedia (i.e., animations, scanned images, digitized audio, and video clips edited to enable me to make a point precisely and succinctly), not to read screens laden with bulleted text. Now ProfCast, with its simple “drag and drop” interface, enables me to combine PowerPoint with podcasting to clarify, elaborate, and engage my course materials in new ways. One thing I've learned in my 40-year journey to become a “broadcaster,” technology must remain subservient to pedagogy lest we forget our educational mission.

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