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Podcast trumps lecture in one college study

Students who listened to a lecture via iTunes U outperformed those who saw it live

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The ability to pause and rewind podcast lectures gave the upper hand to college students in a recent study that compared the performance of students who attended a lecture in person and those who viewed it from iTunes University. The study, "iTunes University and the Classroom: Can Podcasts Replace Professors?," was conducted at the State University of New York Fredonia. It called for some introductory psychology students to watch a recorded lecture available online and others to attend a traditional classroom lecture. Students who watched the lecture podcast—available from the iTunes U online video library—scored an average of 71 percent. Students who sat through the 30-minute classroom lecture scored an average of 62 percent, according to the study. Dani McKinney, the study's lead researcher, said test scores were most dramatically affected by note taking. Students who watched the video lecture and took notes, McKinney said, scored an average of 15 points higher than their peers in the lecture hall. "They listened to [the podcast] over and over," said McKinney, a Fredonia psychology

professor since 2006 who completed the iTunes study with researchers

Jennifer Dyck and Elise Luber.

"Listening passively doesn't get anything accomplished. It's not enough to just do rote memory and repetition." Examining the notes taken by students who participated in the study, McKinney said it was clear many students took advantage of the pause and rewind buttons.

"People stop the podcast as they go along," she said, adding that professors often go too quickly through lecture slides, giving students little time to jot down notes. "When I lecture, I don't stop unless you ask a question. ...

A lot of professors act like it's a race to get through those slides instead of a learning experience," Erik Poole, director of instructional technology at Drexel University's LeBow College of Business in Philadelphia, said podcasts have been most useful for adult students who can watch lectures while traveling or working. But just like students who don't remain focused in the classroom, watching podcasts without taking notes and paying attention will leave students unprepared for quizzes and tests, he said. "The big key is the ability to capture that knowledge and the content from the faculty member," Poole said. "Technology is just a tool, and it can only really enable students to do better if they utilize it properly. ... They still need to put the work in."

Most Fredonia students did not “take advantage of the mobility of the podcast,” according to the research. Only about 20 percent of students said they watched the podcast lecture on a mobile device, while 80 percent watched the iTunes download on their laptops. Five percent of participants had listened to a podcast before, and no one had ever listened to a lecture podcast, according to the study. For those professors who might worry that the technology discourages students from showing up in class, this statistic might be welcome news: More than 90 percent of students said they preferred “traditional lectures with computer-based learning as a supplement for revising” their notes. iTunes podcasts are best suited for introductory courses, McKinney said. Advanced undergraduate and graduate classes that require consistent participation would not translate to podcasts as well as courses that broadly discuss topics like psychology and history, she said. McKinney said the scores for each group were low—even the podcast watchers averaged a low “C”—because the test was part of the college’s research and didn’t affect their grades. “The motivation wasn’t there,” she said, “because it wasn’t a real class.” Even so, participants in the study were vying for a \$15 iTunes gift card awarded to the student with the highest overall score. Next fall, Fredonia will offer

lecture podcasts for several courses, although those classes have not been selected yet, McKinney said. The research will continue, she added, because students will have to fill out a survey before downloading the podcasts.

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