

Recorded lectures: Looking to the future

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Monash University's Faculty of Law has been providing undergraduate students with audio tapes of lectures for many years. Traditionally students would borrow the audio tape and listen to it within the Library. In 1999 the University Library began investing in digital recording technology enabling selected lectures to be made available to students via streaming servers. By Semester 1 2006, 64 undergraduate law classes were being taped, with some classes registering over 7000 hits for the semester. Student expectations of and reliance on these online lectures has steadily grown, with teachers facing increasing pressure to tape their lectures. This pressure is now expanding to demands for more flexible methods of access to the lectures.

This paper looks at the development of recorded lectures at Monash University, with a particular emphasis on the experience of the Faculty of Law. Teacher concerns regarding the provision of recorded lectures and the potential implications for other teachers and units in the faculty of a Semester 2 trial of podcast lectures is discussed.

Keywords: online learning, learning on demand, recorded lectures, podcasting

History of lecture recording at Monash University

Monash University has been providing students with access to taped copies of their lectures, via the Library's Taped Lecture Service (TLS), since the 1970s. The initial service allowed students to borrow tape recorded lectures anywhere between 4 and 24 hours after the completion of the recording, and to listen to them within dedicated listening rooms within the library. The service, which was labour intensive in the collection and processing of the tapes, quickly developed in popularity among students with language difficulties, domestic and work commitments, and with students who preferred the taped format (Harrison & Binns, 2000).

In 1997–1998 the Library conducted a pilot project to determine the feasibility and cost of remote digital recording of lectures and providing them to students via the web (Harrison & Binns, 2000). The success of the pilot project led to the implementation in 1999 of the Monash Lectures Online (MLO) service. The MLO service automatically records the live lecture, delivers the lectures across the University network to a RealAudio server. Students can access the streamed lecture via the Internet within 3 minutes of the completion of the recording (Harrison & Binns, 2000). In 2004 extra funding was provided to “upgrade, expand and enhance the MLO services” and to upgrade lecture theatre technology (Burke, 2004).

Online lectures: The Faculty of Law perspective

The MLO system has been used within the Faculty of Law since the system was officially launched in 1999. Statistics available at that time showed that law recordings represented approximately 64% of all streams (lectures played for longer than five minutes) accessed. Law students have consistently reported satisfaction with the service, with continuous requests, made by individuals and through the Law Students Society, for an increase in the number of lectures being taped. Over the previous seven years, usage of the MLO service within the Law Faculty has steadily grown with 64 undergraduate lecture streams being taped in semester 1 2006.

As the availability of online audio recording of lectures has grown, so too has the provision of an electronic version of the lecture overheads/slides used in the face to face lecture. A semester 1 2006 survey (unpublished) of Law Faculty students showed that students perceive the availability of the slides to be of benefit to them, particularly where they are made available before the relevant lecture or its recording is available. The importance of this dual approach of audio and visual modes for enhanced student learning is supported by the literature as discussed by Williams and Fardon (2005). Students take

notes directly in or on the relevant slides during the lecture, or when listening to the audio recording. A delay in providing the slides has sometimes been a cause of student complaints reported by teachers, and also featured in the comments received in the survey.

Much of the online learning support provided to law students has been a result of teacher innovation, perceptions of student needs, or direct student feedback and requests, with minimal formalised research undertaken to determine the real student needs or desires. The semester 1 2006 survey (unpublished) of Law students was an attempt to redress this lack. It was conducted to investigate student perceptions of the importance of online material provided by the Faculty and their use of the material, with a view to maximising the efficiency of the resources devoted by the Faculty to their provision. Students were asked to rate how valuable the online materials, including lecture slides and the MLO service, were to their studies. Of the 299 respondents, 83% rated the MLO service and 89% rated the lecture slide provision as either valuable, very valuable or extremely valuable. The comments provided by students support these figures, with a number of students advocating the use of the two resources together.

Anecdotal feedback by students and the Law Students Society reported over time has always been supportive and encouraging of the MLO service. Feedback from the 2006 survey confirmed these reports, with comments such as the service is "...very important and essential", is "provided in a very efficient and useful manner", and the service "gives students more subject choice and timetable flexibility".

Amongst the positive feedback received by students complaints regarding the service have also been recorded, both anecdotally and from the survey. These complaints include frustration with human error on the part of the teacher incorrectly operating the lapel microphones, student perception of the low number of lectures taped, and the inability to save the lecture streams. Suggestions for improving the service provided in the survey included provision of video stream, RSS feeds, and the ability to save the online lectures. These suggestions only echo the increasing calls by students across the University to enable them to save a copy of the lecture recording, rather than forcing them to listen while online.

Podcasting would seem to be a solution to meet these requests, given that a podcast solution would naturally include a straight download format as well. This demand may only be the taste of things to come if Mayer (2006) is correct in his prediction that by 2011 American law students will be, in part, basing their choice of law school on the availability of podcast lectures. If these predictions can be mirrored in the Australian context, adoption of podcast lectures may become an act of competitive necessity. Already other Australian law schools, including The University of Melbourne, Deakin University and the University of New England, are utilising podcasting as a means of lecture delivery or supplementation.

Moving to podcasting?

The Monash University Library is conducting a trial of download and podcast lecture recordings in semester 2, 2006. The trial involves between 6 and 12 units across the University, including one undergraduate law. The recorded lectures will be available as a RealAudio stream, an MP3 download, and via podcast. The lecture theatre technology and the experience for the teacher in recording the lecture are unchanged, an approach supported by Fardon and Ludewig (2000). However unlike the current MLO service, the trial will involve some manual handling within the Library. It is anticipated that a successful outcome of the trial would see the manual handling eliminated and the podcasting service scaled up.

Lecturer concerns

Since the implementation of the MLO service, some teachers within the Faculty of Law have been resistant to the provision of recorded lectures via the web. Some of the reasons given include: the belief that the recordings discourage student attendance at lectures; intellectual property concerns of the lecture content; concern that students waste time re-listening to rather than engaging in other learning activities; and concerns lecture content could be used as the basis of claims for libel or defamation. The notion of providing a permanent, personal copy of a lecture, as would be the case with the podcast/download format, is a further concern, as is the potential for students to redistribute them.

Some of these concerns

The literature suggests that some of these concerns are not restricted to Faculty of Law staff. For example Stevenson (2005) and Cowen (2005) report reduced student attendance at lectures as a concern. Cowen (2005) notes an increased self consciousness of lecturers, and the intellectual property of the lecture content is mentioned by Knight (2006), Cowen (2005) and Neville & Fardon (2003).

Teachers within the Faculty of Law have reported that student attendance at lectures dropped, quoting enrolments of 87 and 150 each and attendance at approximately 30 and 80 respectively. In the first of these units the teacher stated in the recording that if attendance dropped below 20 the recording would be discontinued. Students who had listened to the recording in place of attending the lecture subsequently contacted the teacher with explanations for their non attendance. So in some units at least, it would appear that the MLO service is being used by students in place of lecture attendance, however it is not clear if attendance would have increased if the recordings were not available.

To address teacher concerns, the Faculty of Law drafted a statement regarding the provision of online resources and the responsibilities of students (Faculty of Law, 2005). The statement referred to the Monash University 'Codes of Practice for Teaching and Learning', which states: "Students ... have the following responsibilities: - for on-campus students, to attend lectures" (Monash University, 2005). It then stated the Faculty's position that the lecture recordings are provided to "supplement rather than substitute for regular class attendance", that the "provision of taped lectures in units or particular unit streams is made available at the discretion of the lecturer", and that "Students should refrain from asking lecturers to provide taping of lectures or additional teaching materials on-line."

This experience regarding reduced student attendance at lectures is contrary to the results reported by the CALI Legal Education Podcasting Project (LEPP), in which 30 law teachers volunteered to record and podcast their entire lectures or summarised version thereof. The LEPP project found that 80.8% of students reported their attendance at "podcast classes" was similar to their attendance at other classes (Mayer, 2006). Further, only 12.8% of students said they did not attend lectures because they knew that the podcast was accessible. Neville and Fardon (2003) and Williams and Fardon (2005) report that at the University of Western Australia attendance at lectures appeared not to have been greatly impacted by the provision of lectures online, and similar results were also reported by Brotherton and Abowd (2004). A survey of teaching staff who utilised web based lecture recordings at Melbourne University (2004) reported mixed experiences regarding student attendance.

While not specifically tested, in his comments Mayer (2006) suggests that in some cases students' non attendance at lectures would have occurred regardless of the availability of the podcast, and that its availability served to reassure these students that they would not miss out on the information presented in lectures. Similar anecdotal findings were reported by Williams and Fardon (2005), and Albon (2004) noted that students perceived the flexibility of not having to attend classes was perceived by students as "quality learning".

Where to from here?

The tension that exists between the student expectation of the ML service and the concerns expressed by the teachers is an issue that needs further attention. As such, the Faculty of Law is asking students to complete a survey about their attendance and non attendance on campus and their use of recorded lectures. The survey will attempt to draw a profile of student use of the MLO service, and investigate the existence of a relationship between lecture attendance and use of the MLO service. The literature (including media reports) indicates that provision of recorded lectures has produced the following benefits: allowing students to catch up on missed classes (Albon, 2004; Frey, 2005; Mayer, 2006; Williams & Fardon, 2005), supplementing the notes students take in lectures (Frey, 2005; Knight, 2006; Mayer, 2006), facilitating examination review (Frey, 2005; Mayer, 2006; University of Melbourne, 2004; Williams & Fardon, 2005), and enabling students to review difficult concepts as required (Albon, 2004; Knight, 2006; Mayer, 2006; University of Melbourne, 2004; Williams & Fardon, 2005). The survey will attempt to verify the existence of these benefits for law students at Monash University. The survey results will be presented to the Faculty of Law's Information Technology Advisory Committee for further consideration.

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