

A sociocultural approach to understanding students'
use of podcasting in Higher Education

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The crest of St Mary's University College is a large, light blue watermark in the background. It features a shield with a white cross and four birds, topped by a unicorn holding a torch. A banner at the bottom reads 'MONSTRATE ESSE MATREM'.

**A socio-cultural approach to understanding students' use of podcasts in
Higher Education**
**Paper presented at the 6th International Conference of Technology, Knowledge
and Society, Jan 15-17 2010**

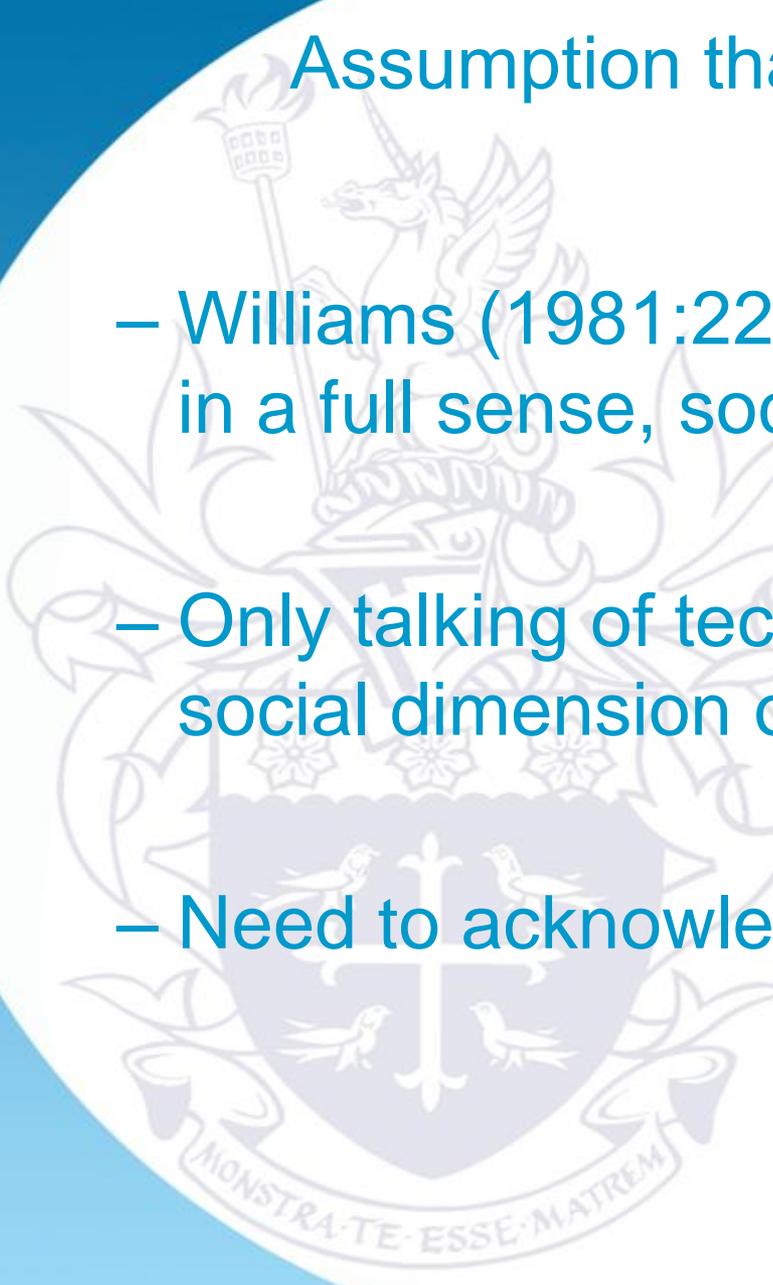
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Rationale for piloting podcasts

- Pilot study underpinned by determinist discourse producing a **set of 'assumptions'** about students and technology:

- 1) Technical proficiency
- 2) 'innate' interest and engagement with digital technologies
- 3) Learning on the move
- 4) Use of mobile devices (ipods) the same in informal and formal contexts

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Assumption that technology will 'impact' on students' practices

- Williams (1981:227) '[A] technology is always, in a full sense, social;
- Only talking of technology's 'impacts' ignores social dimension of its use;
- Need to acknowledge role of human agency

Design and aims of project

- Data collected December-May 2009;
- Business Law students, Levels 1 (semester 1, 39/60 students) and 3 (semester 2, 14/18 students);
- Questionnaires (53 completed out of a possible 78);
- 5 Focus Groups (30 students, both levels)
- Aims: to critically explore the socio-cultural dimensions of students' attitudes to, and adoption or rejection of this technology.

Business Law cohort: context

- Only 5/53 aged 22+
- Rarely accessed podcasts for informal/social reasons
- Over two thirds living at home, main mode of travel to University by car;
- 70% have part-time job during term-time;
- One third of students in study did not own an ipod;
- 20% of participating students did not have a mobile phone.
- All students had access to either a PC or laptop in place of residence.

1. Lower levels of use than expected

- Tutor's rationale for piloting podcasts assumed take-up would be reasonably high.
- Very low take-up by 1st year students – only 8/39 downloaded revision podcasts;
- 8/14 3rd year students had downloaded and used (or planned to use) full lecture podcast for revision;

(1) Technical proficiency

I don't have access yet. I don't know where to get them'. (Level 1, Female, 18-21)

'I don't see why this [podcasts] couldn't work if we were taught properly how to use it... I mean, they just told you, it's up on the website, and then, I mean, I went and had a look for it and found the link for it, but I couldn't find how to link it to my iTunes to download it as a podcast'. (Level 1, Male 1, 18-21)

'The whole instruction, how to like, from the beginning to the end, how to download it and what you need to do'. (Level 1, Male 2, 18-21)

'I think it should be built into, say, one of our first seminars and the lecturer will go through it with you [...] I don't think people go out of their way if they're not really interested in it anyway, to go to the i-learning café and learn how to use it, whereas if it's built into, say, half an hour in your seminar time, you can't get away from it. You're shown how to do it and I think people will use it more. [Level 1, Female, 18-21]

(1) cont'd...

- Need to be careful about making assumptions about students' confidence levels when using a new technology
- Majority of students felt insufficient time given to the technical aspects of how to access and download podcasts
- Greater lecturer support needed

(cont'd)

- Less of an issue for Level 3 students

ST: I don't remember exactly what, but he said it was going to be a voice recording so don't shout out and swear too much [laughs] and then he was saying that he was going to have to merge it in, but the fact of where it is on the portal and stuff like that, we have gone through it for three years.

-
- VA: So, it's not news.
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- NI Yes, he just says oh, it's somewhere, you will be able to flick through the module. It's pretty standard stuff. [Level 3, Male, 18-21]

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(2) Interest and engagement: where podcasts fit into students' learning

- Useful for revision and reinforcement but students use it in conjunction with other learning resources such as lecture notes, books, etc:

'Yeah I don't think it was intended to be a complete thing. You have to attend lectures, it's not something that, it's another way of learning. But to have it as a, just to reinforce everything, and then even like to compare and contrast against different textbooks and stuff so I think, I think it's excellent'. (Level 3, Male, 18-21).

- Students testing out where it fits in with their established ways of working:

'Yeah I think with, with me, because we were so used to using the whole textbooks, lecture slides, that you just stick by that, and I was a little bit apprehensive of podcasts because it's something I've never actually used before. But, I mean, the first time I actually went on to it I thought, okay, it is really helpful, so I mean, but because I'm used to the whole textbooks and stuff I think that's probably why I'm a bit scared of the change, in a way'. (Level 3, Female, 18-21)

(2) cont'd...

Male 1: I always find it a bit of hard work [moving through full lecture podcast]. I find it more complex to sort of fiddle around with than when you could actually just bring up the basic lecture notes, look at those lecture notes and then look something up in a book. Whether that makes me old fashioned, I'm not sure.

Male 2: I do exactly the same.

Male 1: Maybe it's a very archaic method of study, it still makes a lot of sense. I don't know, maybe it's because I'm stuck in the ways of that's how I've been taught to learn. (Level 3, Males, 18-21)

(3) Mobile learning: learning on the move

- O'Malley et al (2003) define it as any sort of learning that happens when learner is not at a fixed location, and when they take advantage of learning opportunities afforded by mobile technologies;
- Similar to other studies, findings found little interest for using podcasts 'on the move';
- Part of rationale for introducing podcasts – competing demands on learners time so 'bite-size' chunks could easily be incorporated (Evans, 2008)

(3) cont'd...

- Podcasts incorporated into dedicated study time, little interest in 'learning on the move':

'But if I was just wandering around, someone's voice in my ear... it's not going to help me. I'd have to be in my room, you know, focussed'. (Level 1, Female, 18-21);

'I wouldn't learn

(4) Use of mobile devices (ipods) the same in informal and formal contexts

- Reluctance to use mobile devices for educational purposes;
- iPods and phones serve social and recreational functions for respondents. Perhaps some tensions appropriating these technologies for learning?

F1 Yes, because it's not like just listening to music. No, it's not as... not that... it's meant to be... what can I say? Music is interesting in a sense, but as she said, walking on the street and listening to someone's voice isn't really as... what can I say? Do you know what I mean?

F2: Yes. It's that... it's just quite dull, isn't it?

F1: Yes. It's not... I don't think... it's not... normally, you'd have to be in an educational environment or setting.

[Level 1, Females, 18-21]

(4) cont'd...

'I've got an ipod, but it's just for music, just to listen to on the train and so I don't go and download stuff onto it. I just put my music on it and that's it, to be honest with you'. (Level 1, Female, 18-21)

Implications for practice

- Podcasts rarely used for social and entertainment purposes (informal context);
- Need to critique the 'cyber-kid' discourse
- Assumptions about ease of use need to be addressed – different levels of technological confidence and ability to use unfamiliar software and hardware.
- Need to challenge our assumptions about students' 'spontaneous appetite' for all things technological;
- Technology not inherently motivating – very little novelty value for students;
- Cannot assume same level of interest and engagement with Web 2.0 technologies when applied to educational context.

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