Podcasting and Study Abroad: A pilot project.

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With the rapid growth of digital technology, many new opportunities have opened up for innovative and interactive methodologies. Teachers now use Powerpoint, web-based lessons, blogs, online discussion forums, and even fully online courses through learning management systems like Blackboard and Moodle. But most of these are instructor-driven and instructor-managed, which can limit student creativity and expression. In this paper I will describe a small pilot project in which students created and produced their own short audio podcasts during their time studying abroad.

What is a podcast?

The word "podcast" is a portmanteau of "iPod" and "broadcast", and describes an audio program that is recorded digitally, distributed via computer networks and accessed with a digital media player or computer, rather than broadcast over the airwaves like a radio show or requiring physical media. Podcasts can be recorder on IC recorders, many MP3 players, computers or even many cellphones. Because it requires little specialized equipment and no sponsorship, podcasting has become a popular medium for those without large resources to distribute content to a wider audience. The low cost and flexibility of recording technology allows nearly anyone to produce and distribute a program. Using technologies like RSS feeds or iTunes, a podcast can be made available to a worldwide audience at almost no cost if desired, or simply sent via email or accessed through links on a host webpage.

Although there are commercial podcasts, the vast majority are produced and distributed for free. There are thousands of educational podcasts, including podcasts directed at language learners. These podcasts can be valuable tools for students looking for new sources of listening practice, idiom and culture study, vocabulary, and even grammar instruction. At our university's English Education Center, students already watch short "videocasts" (from www.elllo.com) to practice

their listening skills and become familiar with various accents. For this project I want to turn this model around and let the students try their hand at creating their own programs.

Podcasting in language education

How can producing podcasts help language learners? Creating short audio programs about their experience has many benefits for language students. It requires using their writing and organizational skills to write a script or at least notes about their subject, encourages them to practice their pronunciation as they rehearse, paying attention to prosody, rhythm and intonation. Students gain a sense of accomplishment from having produced a program in English. Recording (at least when recording alone) allows students to practice their English output without the pressure that a live audience applies. Shy students in particular can benefit from this low-stress practice.

Baiko's Study Abroad Program

The Study Abroad program at Baiko sends English Language and English Literature majors to Southern Queensland University near Brisbane, Australia for two months of study at the Intensive English Program there. Students live with host families in the community, take classes every day, and attend weekend programs and family outings. This English immersion experience has had excellent outcomes for many of our students, but two months goes quickly, and is not enough to make permanent changes in study habits and English usage in all students. I have noticed that while students often return from Australia confident and motivated, memories fade quickly, and they tend to forget some of the details of their experience, including some important lessons about their own achievements and capabilities. Students who leave Australia speaking much more fluently often fall back into their old speech habits once they return to Japan. The more time that separates them from the experience, the lower their motivation to study English seems to become. This phenomenon is one of the things I wanted to address with this project.

Facilitating reflection

Students should record their impressions of life and study abroad while they are fresh, during their study abroad experience, not after. In doing this, they can

not only gain the direct language learning benefits of doing the project, but also process and reflect on their experiences as they organize and produce the audio. In addition, when they return they can replay their podcast and those of other students, keeping the experience fresh. By hearing podcasts made by other students, they can also be reminded of things they may have forgotten or paid little attention to at the time.

Apart from the benefits to the students involved, this project offers opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the study abroad program. Listening to the podcasts of the students who took part in the program the year before can help students as they prepare for their own experience. Culture shock and unexpected problems can delay students in their attempts to become acclimated to their new lifestyles. Hearing from experienced students about the things that caused the biggest adjustments can help them expect and deal with these issues. Listening to students talk about their experiences can also help Baiko University to evaluate the Study Abroad program and help suggest ways to prepare future classes for their own summer abroad. If agreed to by the students who produced them, the best of these podcasts could also be used as recruiting tools during Open Campus events to highlight the Study Abroad Program.

The project

Three students were loaned digital voice recorders, (two purchased by the school and one loaned by a faculty member) before they left for Australia, and asked to take charge of loaning them to other students, backing up the resulting files on a portable USB drive, and then loaning them to the next students. All students were given a basic instruction sheet explaining what was expected (see appendix). To elicit the maximum amount of creativity from the students, I chose to be very open and free about topics, giving some suggestions, but no firm requirements. I asked that the podcasts be about three minutes long, and that the give their names at the beginning. As this was not a part of the syllabus for any classes, students received no grade points doing the podcasts. Because this was a pilot program and because many students used their full names to introduce their podcasts, they were not made available on the school website.

Results

Results were remarkable for an optional activity with no grade attached. Of the 37 students who went to Australia, 33 recorded podcasts, suggesting that not only is this not considered burdensome, it was seen as enjoyable. The podcasts were mostly shorter than three minutes, with the average being about two minutes and thirty seconds long.

Most students talked about fairly predictable topics, like food, daily life, limitations on water use, prices, host families, scenery and weather. While these may not seem to be particularly exciting, they do reflect what students are interested in and what things they find unusual or surprising, and hence may be useful to students preparing to go. Although most students gave fairly shallow reports, some showed quite a fairly perceptive side, and described their host families or the scenery with great facility. One aspect that stood out was that students' fluency was quite a bit higher in these recordings than in normal face-to-face speech, likely reflecting the influence of practice and lack or pressure on their speaking ability. While a few students simply read from a prepared script, most seemed to have practiced at least a few times. In short, the quality of the podcasts was surprising, and I am convinced that even low-level students are capable of far higher quality work than may seem apparent in the everyday classroom.

Lessons and suggestions for the future

With the success of this project, I intend to expand it next summer, and to try and make it a requirement with points to be applied to the participants' Oral Communication grade for the semester following their return from Australia. I think it would be realistic to ask students to do two podcasts next year, one on a subject of their choosing and the other being an interview with another international student at USQ.

A few technical aspects of the project also need to be improved. Students should be instructed to use only their first names in their podcasts. This will allow podcasts to be more easily shared without privacy concerns. Students should be given an opportunity to practice recording using the digital recorders before they leave for Australia. I am currently requiring my first-year Oral Communication

students to make short recording projects now in order to familiarize themselves with the process. I hope to have in place a means for students to upload files directly to Baiko's servers so they can be available on the intranet or website, but this will require discussions with the appropriate committees. Any availability outside the school must be carefully considered and agreed to by the students involved.

Conclusion

I believe this project will add a valuable component to Baiko's Study Abroad program. A much more thorough study will be done after the 2012 Study Abroad program.

Appendix

Australia Podcast Project

While you are in Australia, you will each record a short podcast. What's a podcast? It's a short program or presentation, like a radio program. But it's not on the radio, it's on an MP3 file that can be shared by email or over the internet. (The programs you record will NOT be shared outside of Baiko without your permission!)

We have given three IC Recorders to Masayuki, Yuri and Kaede to use to record the podcasts. You should borrow an IC recorder and record a 3-minute program. The content is up to you, but some suggestions are:

-Interview with an Aussie or an international student who is not from Japan.

-What is the biggest surprise to you about life in Australia?

-Food

-Shopping

-Music

-Style

-Transportation

　　　　　Anything that you find interesting or important is ok!

1-Plan what you will say (you can write a script if you want)

2-Borrow a recorder from Masayuki, Yuri or

3-Begin by introducing yourself. Example: "I'm Naoto Kan and I will talk about Australian food"

4-Record your program, (Press REC button, speak, then press the STOP button)

5-Give the recorder back to Masayuki, Yuri or _____ so they can backup your file and give you a copy of it. If you are comfortable copying the file to a PC, you can do it too. Just don't delete any files from the recorder!