“iLearn, iTrain, iTeach:

What do young people think about good teaching and successful learning?

Capturing learners’ voice with a view to using podcast recordings to better inform trainee teachers on initial teacher education programmes.”

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Abstract

What do young people think about good teaching and successful learning, and how do they articulate these views?

How can audio of these views be captured to enable capacity building and e-learning on post-16 teacher training programmes?

In an attempt to build a digital teaching resource taking account of podcasting emergent technologies, this project has captured audio recordings via unstructured interviews of young people aged 16 - 18 in Essex, Kent and London talking about ‘good teaching’ and ‘good teachers’. These recordings are being used as part of a blended delivery during trainee teacher induction to aid reflection and discursive practices. The recordings represent for the institutions taking part an attempt to capture the learner voice and to generate stimulus materials designed to support staff training, self-evaluation and action research. The story of the research is not yet fully formed, being at a mid point. The digital resource has been created, and the next step is to capture how institutions might use the data for their own purposes. The session accompanying this paper will look at the findings to date, drawing heavily upon the use of audio clips.

This paper is an attempt to articulate three key themes:

- To illustrate how podcasting teaching tools can be used with trainee teachers within a Higher Education context and to reflect upon and evaluate my creation and development of this e-learning resource;

- To develop a commentary on the fears and anxieties of teachers-in-the-making regarding their own learners;

- To give a voice to the thoughts that young learners (aged 16-18) have about ‘good teaching’.
This is a work in progress. It is at a mid-stage between resource construction/piloting, and we are now waiting until next academic year to fully use and explore the digital resource and archive materials now recorded.

Introduction: A context of ‘non-situated learning’

My own recent experience of joining the Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) teacher education team at the University of East London (UEL), shows that many of the trainee teachers in initial teacher education arrive at the start of their programmes without much contact with younger learners. Thus, they are often surprised by the degrees of confidence, reflection and articulation with which many younger learners are able to engage with their own learning. They are surprised at how learners are able to talk confidently about what they think is good teaching and to be able to describe in some depth and with sophistication styles of teaching and teaching tools and techniques. At the same time, many trainees are understandably cautious and concerned about the teaching role – in particular over issues of classroom and behaviour management, often clouded by their (mis)perceptions of what younger learners (aged 14 – 19) are like.

As a teaching team we spend a great deal of time during the induction period of the PGCE PCET concentrating upon issues of professional identity, reflection as a professional learning tool, and new for this academic year, the socio-economic context within which colleges local to the university work. The teaching team have also newly adopted a ‘Reflective Journal’, piloted for this academic year, to allow and encourage trainees to formally express their ongoing and changing professional identity and to encourage the recording of critical incidents and lesson self-reflections and evaluations. Some of this content is formally assessed since it makes up part of marked assignments, but a great deal is there for the self-reflection and professional learning of the individual involved.

In a sense, until the trainees get to visit colleges and meet learners, this learning is highly ‘unsituated’. This is both a pedagogic and professional issue – how do trainees as
professionals-in-the-making come to develop a sensitivity towards their learners and towards the mechanics and craft of teaching and learning itself? Equally, how can we, as teacher educators, model best practice in supporting trainees in this crucial initial development?

Extracts from the Reflective Journals (quoted here with permission of the trainees themselves) express clearly the ambiguous location of many between excitement and fear; between valuing wanting to ‘change lives’ and being worried about the ‘nature’ of the lives of their younger learners:

“When I arrived at a local sixth form to have a look around I felt a little intimidated, as my experiences of sixth form were very different studying in middle class York. However, during our tour I saw nothing but eager, hardworking students who were all focussed and seemingly interested in what they were learning. I had half expected to walk past classrooms and see students running around, shouting, fighting and generally getting out of hand…”

“…in light of some of the early discussions on my PGCE I was worried that I had been too naïve about the challenges of teaching in FE colleges, particularly in Newham, and was left wondering if this was the right path for me after all…”

“As my choice to come to UEL was mainly based on the fact that I would be studying and working in east London, the introduction to the socio-economic "peculiars" of the local area was of no surprise or shock. As I looked around the room I wondered how many in the group had a similar point of view (I'm guessing and hoping the majority) and how many might end up struggling to deal with East End's “deprived youth”. One of course does not negate the other, and I suspect I too will find it rather challenging at times – despite all my good intentions and genuine interest in giving my students the best possible opportunities”

Once they have started their teaching placement, this hope for young learners can sometimes all too quickly become frustration:

“I have an issue with student’s complete inability to work independently or for themselves. In many lessons it feels as through students would prefer me to just give them definitions of
keywords and tell them to memorise. The idea of building skills for themselves seems beyond them.”

On recalling the group’s induction walk along the east London ‘Docklands’ area of the Thames, one trainee reflects:

“...The walk from Canary Wharf along the river to just east of Tower Bridge was a good addition, as it said plenty about what the area used to be like (warehouses etc) and what it is like now (posh flats, gated communities). It is in stark contrast to most of the rest of east London – as a walk to Shadwell station reminded us later – but the gated communities and riverside apartments could have as much an effect on the lives of East London’s young people as the council estates and tower blocks of Bow and Poplar. I can only try and guess what that effect might be at this point (anger? resentment? feeling of worthlessness? Who knows…) but I suspect I might find out once I start my placement!”

Many of the trainees (as indeed do many teachers) find themselves occupying highly contested and ambiguous relationships with their learners:

“I feel that I need to challenge them, and help broaden their horizons and their aspirations. Even if it needs to be done while they are kicking and screaming...”

“My opinion varies - They are sweet and lovely, smart and enthusiastic, frustrating and hard work, stubborn and disrespectful. They can reduce you to tears in one lesson, but amaze you with their creativity and enthusiasm two days later. They are given a hard time by the media and the police - twice in the last four days I witnessed the police stop and search my students, once at the tube station and once outside the theatre. Their lives are not easy, or fair, and yet they sometimes seem resigned to their fate. I think they are scared of what they don't know, so choose to dismiss it and stick to their small (and safe) known worlds. I find teaching them hard
work, but also extremely rewarding when they ‘get it’. I feel it’s a greater duty to do the absolute best I can and give it my all”

“Students do have the ability to surprise you. Some students appear quite unmotivated until you get to know them and they turn out to be amongst the best students.”

Within all these hopes, fears, insecurities and frustrations, the importance of the induction period into the initial teacher education programme becomes paramount. The induction becomes about the recognition on behalf of the trainee that the construction of their professional identity and self is about to undergo rapid transformation. The induction period becomes an attempt to turn this reflection into more situated learning – to contextualise first visits to placements and first contacts with learners within boarder brush strokes. It is this research problematic that has lead to the construction of the learner voice podcasting resource that this paper addresses:

How can we give a voice to the learner that can be better understood by the trainee teacher?

Talking audio; talking podcasting

The term e-Learning 2.0 is used to refer to new ways of thinking about e-learning inspired by the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, tools, software and platforms. This new e(nhanced)-learning places increased emphasis on social learning and the use of social networking and social software such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and virtual worlds such as ‘second life’. Web 2.0 is a recognition that the virtual world of high-speed communications technology has moved on – and it has moved on due to very changes in the technology itself: how it maps together, how it works outside of ‘real time’ and how users adopt tools with fluidity and ‘intuitive’ flair the more exposed we become. The growth of users, increased interconnected interactivity of new internet tools and the affordability and availability of broadband ‘always-on’ internet connections, has led
to what we refer to as a Web 2.0. The Teaching and Learning Research Project (TLRP) refer to four distinctive features of the value of Web 2.0 technologies – the playful, the expressive, the reflective and the exploratory (Selwyn, 2008).

Within the literature there are claims made by some that we are experiencing a polarization of the ‘digital native’ and the ‘digital immigrant’ (Prensky, 2001). Based upon factors such as accessibility, affordability and submersion, it is the post-1993 generation who are most often seen to be the first true ‘digital natives’ – they are currently in year 10 of their secondary schools and have just started to study for GCSEs. There is also some talk of the ‘new actor’ within cultural and educational dynamics and global change (Veen and Vrakking, 2006). Equally, it is claimed that we are witnessing the ‘rise of the homo zappien’: a mouse in one hand, a keyboard/PDA/MP3 player in the other. Clicking and zapping their way through a media saturated reality where learning is fast paced, immediate and social in nature (see Veen and Vrakking, 2006).

Within this rise of Web 2.0, podcasting technologies and tools are themselves a phenomenon of growth in their own right – and an example of the very ‘social’ and rich-media ‘time-shifting’ cultural and leisure practices that the notion of Web 2.0 represents. There is now a growing body of literature that has attempted to illustrate the value of podcasing as an educational tool rather than simply a leisure-time phenomenon (see Maag, 2006 and Freedman, 2006). There are also the beginnings of a debate locating podcasting and the modelling of its use within discussions of initial ‘pre-service’ teacher education (see Souter and Muir, 2008).

**Ideal type of a podcast**

So what are podcasts and what is podcasting?

JISC (2005) define the term ‘podcast’ as “publishing of sound files on the internet. Users subscribe to podcasting via designated software.” (JISC, 2005: 57)

To use one popularist Web 2.0 phenomena to define another, the *wikipedia* definition of a podcast (accessed January, 2009) reads:
“A podcast is a series of audio or video digital media files which is distributed over the Internet by syndicated download, through Web feeds, to portable media players and personal computers. Though the same content may also be made available by direct download or streaming, a podcast is distinguished from most other digital media formats by its ability to be syndicated, subscribed to, and downloaded automatically when new content is added. Like the term broadcast, podcast can refer either to the series of content itself or to the method by which it is syndicated; the latter is also called podcasting.”

And a final, third definition reads -

“Podcasting is a generic name for a method of distributing audio and other multimedia files over the Internet for playback on mobile devices and personal computers. Although this type of content has long been available on Web pages, a podcast is usually defined by its ability to be automatically downloaded to a user’s computer by subscription. That electronic file can then be easily transferred to an iPod or other portable audio player and listened to at any time.” (Curto, 2006)

Strictly speaking then, I have found it useful to think of a podcast as comprising the following ideal-typical elements:

1. Audio file (video files are referred to as a ‘vodcast’);
2. Playable through an iPod media player;
3. Playable through any MP3 or WMP player;
4. Downloaded from the internet;
5. Produced using an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) Feed allowing automatic downloading;
6. The listener can subscribe to a series of recordings – thus making them ‘automatic’ as above.
Within this ideal-typical formation, and most commonly, most ‘podcasts’ are not solely for the purpose of the iPod (from where the phenomenon derived its name), and in the case of my own, ‘podcasts’ do not necessarily need an RSS Feed – my content is downloadable from a VLE but without an automatic subscription; learners/listeners need to manually log on and look for content to download if they desire to do so.

Towards a ‘pod-agogy’

As Boulos and Wheelert (2007) note, the value of Web 2.0 tools lie in their relatively simple and immediate generation by users: you do not need particularly expensive equipment nor a sophisticated know-how to create your own Web 2.0 tools, be it a wiki, a blog or as in this case, a podcast. This is as true for the educator as it is for the leisure enthusiast. In addition, the defining principles of Web 2.0 – collaboration, flexibility and interactivity create an ‘architecture of participation’ (Boulos and Wheelert, 2007). Many commentators have noted that this very ‘social’ aspect to Web 2.0 tools fits well within a broadly ‘constructivist’ theory of learning through learner playful manipulation and social collaboration (see Rosell-Aguilar, 2007 for a fuller discussion). My own use of podcasts with the initial teacher education programme is two-fold. I script/produce/record an ‘erratic and occasional’ podcast hosted on the internal institutional (Blackboard based) Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and in addition, am constructing the learner voice podcast series of resources that this paper focuses upon.

What pedagogic strategies can we adopt in the production of a podcast? From my own previous experience as a practitioner teaching sociology in the Further Education (FE) sector in the UK for fourteen years, podcasting was a tool highly valued by 16-19 year old learners as an addition

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to their formal classes and homework. In constructing these podcasts over a two-year period between 2006-2008, I developed a number of ‘rules’ of my ‘podagogy’ – as follows:

- Recording short files worked best (between 3 – 8 minutes), retaining learners/listeners attention easier;

- It was vital to announce the programme/context at the very start of each podcast;

- I used three or four key words at the start of each podcast which were then picked up and used/developed through the recording in order to ‘locate’ the content for the listener;

- Frequently, I used the technique of counting and summarising points as a means to locate the audience within the audio;

- There was an emphasis given at all times to use of specialist language, and also to the definition of this language and its deconstruction all through the recordings;

- Each podcast recording re-capped at the end using the same key words that it started with.

Villano (2008) offers teachers in Higher Education five simple pieces of advice to ‘build a better podcast’:

1. be prepared
2. focus on sound
3. edit wisely
4. be consistent
5. follow the leaders.

As Villano notes, one or two podcasts might be amusing or interesting to learners for their novelty factor, but a regular well structured programme of podcasts provides much more value
for their learning. This would be true for any support of learning, but it is a point worth considering.

‘Pedagogy before technology’?

Beetham and Sharpe (2007) provide us with an important warning when entering the world of e-learning - “Pedagogy before technology”. This concern is echoed in Carr (1999):

“Without appropriate pedagogy, use of high capacity communication services cannot provide significant improvements in learning outcomes. In general, it is the pedagogy that provides for learning, not the technology or the software alone.”

Jackson and Anagnostopoulou (2001) note that in order to ‘make e-learning work’ the teacher needs to set-up a very specific context and set of conditions. The value on the learning derived by the learner is not dependent upon the medium used to deliver the learning, but actually upon the ‘orchestration’ from the teacher. In addition, whether or not the ‘richness’ of the e-experience is truly exploited by the learner is largely dependent upon the approach taken to it by the teacher. The Joint Informations Systems Committee (JISC) note that ‘successful innovation’ is dependent upon the technologies adopted being chosen due to their link to the learning outcome (JISC, 2005). In this manner, podcasting, like any teaching and learning tool is but one choice amongst many and not always the right/best/most suited choice at that.

With these warnings in mind, and aware of my own educational and professional context as attempting to deliver and demonstrate good practice through my own modelling to my trainees, I have tried to make explicit to the teacher trainees my ‘rules’ of e-learning:

1. technology is not always the answer;

2. the pedagogic reason for the resource and learning tool always comes first;
3. e-learning takes tremendous set-up and management by the teacher (at least initially),
despite what assumptions one might hold about ‘young people and technology’;

4. when thinking about e-learning, do not allow the learning to take a second place to the
medium of transition of the learning object.

Despite these warnings, where there is a clear use for e-learning tools, they should be added to
one’s teaching repertoire and deployed. My ‘clear use’ in this context was the wish to illustrate,
quite literally, the ‘learners’ voice’ to my trainees as part of a wider induction programme. The
use of audio – the literal use of the ‘voice’ – seemed an ideal medium through which to illustrate
the reflection, articulation and thoughts of young learners and to start the process of thinking
about the interplay between teaching and learning so vital to the ongoing professional
development of the trainees.

In order to produce the podcast recordings of the young people interviewed, I used the
following:

- SONY ICD-UX80 digital voice recorder
- SONY ECM-MS907 stereo microphone
- Audacity – a freeware recording studio and audio file converter (found at:
  http://audacity.sourceforge.net/). Audacity is a programme I have found extremely
  valuable both as a podcaster and as a researcher. It offers a simple means to edit,
  convert and clean digital audio.

The podcasting project: Multiple voices and stories
Within all this, in order to understand my own practice and my own relationship to the materials this practice has generated, it has helped to identify that there are four research stories contained herein:

(1) The story of the unstructured (recorded) interviews with young people and the elicitation techniques used;

(2) The story of what the young learners have said about teaching and learning – today’s FE learners are tomorrow’s HE learners;

(3) The story of the podcasting resource and its use within the HE teaching context of initial teacher education (as an example of modelling E-learning and M-learning);

(4) Finally, the ongoing story of how the institutions involved in the original recordings might themselves use the audio files for staff training and other aspects of learner voice capture and action research.

**Recording and interviewing young(er) learners**

Full ethical approval was sought (and established) for this research from the internal ethics committee at UEL. The recordings themselves were edited audio files drawn from a series of unstructured interviews with 16 – 18 year old learners across three institutions in Kent, Essex and south London. On the basis of a ‘something-for-something’ guide to participant participation, the learners themselves were drawn from students currently studying sociology (but spoke about generic teaching and learning at all times). It was hoped that the experience of taking part in a research interview would be a learning experience for them and one that they could apply to their own sociological studies. As an elicitation technique, considerable time was taken before and after each private individual interview to speak to each student about their studies, their coursework and in doing so to answer any questions about the research methodology and techniques of this research.
Full openness was established at every point in the process (A key aspect of the application for ethical approval):

1. All learners received a copy of the same proposal sent to the institutions when seeking permission for access;

2. Learners were chosen by the institution and a private and quiet room was set aside for the interviews (necessary for the audio quality of the recordings that would eventually form the individual podcasts);

3. Learners were initially brief together along with a member of staff where possible – full disclosure and full entitlement to withdraw were made clear at each stage;

4. Learners were asked to sign a consent/release form before taking part;

5. Participants took part with full understanding that the recordings would be taken and turned into audio files to be podcast to trainees and at conferences – and that their institution would also receive a copy of the files for potential staff training purposes.

A central feature of the research interviews was the emphasis at all times upon ‘good teaching’; all institutions and all learners were briefed on the importance to speak about positive experiences (and that we would infer from the research that ‘bad teaching’ would be the opposite of ‘good teaching’). In this way, the institutions themselves were comfortable with the recordings taking place and the learners themselves were comfortable with the idea that others would get to hear the files. All learners who took part spoke candidly, positively and enthusiastically about the experience and expressed interest and pleasure in the idea that their institutions and teachers new to the profession might develop their practice because of the creation of this resource.

File and data management
Each interview lasted between 25 – 40 minutes long and was recorded digitally using the equipment listed above. Each interview started with the question ‘What makes a good teacher?’ and ended with the question ‘What advice do you have for trainee teachers about to start to teach for the first time?’. 19 interviews were recorded in total, generating over nine hours of audio. The audio files were uploaded into Audacity and then edited down into a series of smaller chunks – each lasting between 45 seconds and up to 3 minutes. These chunks of data were re-coded with a file name that best summarised the content of the recording, often where possible drawing upon the exact words of the participants themselves. File names coded in this way start to develop a sense of the authentic voice of the participant and yet at the same time help to establish anonymity. Each set of files – later to become each individual podcast – were then burned onto CDROM and sent back to each institution with the hope that they will use the audio for staff training. This part of the research is still ongoing with two out of the three institutions having made, to date, a strong indication that they are interested in developing an action research project/resource coming out of the data.

The individual pieces of audio – there are now 247 in all – will be selected and uploaded onto the VLE at UEL (and thus turned into ‘podcasts’) to be used as a resource with trainee teachers next academic year during the induction period and also in sessions as illustrations for points of practice as they occur. Eventually all the files will be merged into a digital archive and grouped according to theme. A resource will be written asking next years’ cohort of trainees to access the podcasts during induction and use them as the basis for some reflective writing early on in the programme. Some extended files from a limited number of interviews have already been uploaded as a pilot with much positive feedback from those trainees who have accessed them. Two extended files have also been incorporated into whole group teaching sessions thus far, allowing the ‘learner voice’ to come through.

The learner voice audio podcasts are to sit alongside my own teacher ‘irregular’ podcasts as a resource to be drawn upon throughout the year. This research project runs alongside a separate but parallel project a colleague and myself are working on to create a video-blog of mentors
supporting other less experienced mentors with this role. Trainees will have full access to all the audio recordings from this project and the video recordings from the other project.

What do the podcasts tell us?²

Most striking about the 19 interviews is the commonality between them – both within the three institutions taking part (as might be expected), but also across all participants. Key findings are presented and summarised here:

- Good teachers are spoken about by learners more in terms of their relational qualities than in terms of the teaching techniques and methods they might employ;
- Almost all learners spoke of the need for their own talk to be used within classes as a means through which they come to understand the materials being learnt;
- Unsuccessful learning was seen to take place in quiet classes where learner talk was at a minimum;
- Learners felt that personal and individual feedback was perhaps more important for their learning than the actual classroom experience itself;
- Learners recognised that while ‘good teachers’ often ‘got things wrong’ or had lessons that ‘did not quite work’, they were open in seeking learner evaluation and would engage in a process of self-reflection with their students in a positive and open manner. This made learners feel valued and included;
- Finally, learners spoke positively of pace and variety in classes as the key factor in capturing their own interest and motivation in the lesson itself.

² To be explored using original audio in the conference presentation that this paper accompanies.
Conclusion – looking to the future.

Capturing the data is only half the story. The next step is to use the recordings to allow trainee teachers to understand the points being made – and to illustrate the sensitivity and articulation which many young learners can apply to the processes of their own learning. It is hoped that the voice of the learner can capture the imagination of the trainees at a key moment in their initial professional development and compensate for unfamiliarity before teaching placement begins. It is also hoped that the use of podcasts in a structured and ‘orchestrated’ way can model what is possible with e-learning tools.

The next steps, however, are perhaps the more interesting? If the institutions which allowed access to make the recordings in the first place are interested in taking the project further and using the audio resources created in developing a staff training tool, then the podcasted voices of the learners will have had a direct impact on the working lives of their own teachers. This work is very much still ongoing.

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Webography

http://audacity.sourceforge.net/


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