

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

February 7, 2007

The Wired Campus

Education-technology news from around the Web

Podcasting's Popularity Grows Slowly but Steadily

Before any college embarks on a campuswide podcasting project, officials will undoubtedly ask a simple question: If we put lecture recordings online, will students bother listening to them?

There's reason to think that question might be answered in the affirmative. According to the [Associated Press](#), a growing number of teenagers are now using their MP3 players as study aids. The numbers are still smallish — listening to podcasts and audio texts represents only about 5 percent of what teens do on their iPods, according to a recent study by the Harrison Group — but they're growing steadily. So by the time students get to college, they may already have had some experience putting their MP3 players to academic use. —*Brock Read*

###

Below is the AP story linked from The Chronicle of Higher Education brief.



Growing number of students use MP3 players as a study tool

By MADLEN READ

AP Business Writer

Wednesday, February 07, 2007

NEW YORK — Lindleigh Whetstone wears headphones as she shoves clothes into the washing machine.

Her classmate, Stepheno Zollos, wears them as he shops for groceries. An onlooker might assume the teens are listening to the latest top 40 hit, but they're really learning Spanish.

Whetstone, 18, and Zollos, 17, are students in Kathy O'Connor's class at [Tidewater Community College](#) in Southeastern Virginia. O'Connor got an \$11,000 grant from

the school to lend her students iPods so they can practice their Spanish conversations anywhere — not just sitting in front of a computer.

“I get a lot more listening in than I did before,” said Whetstone, who estimates that it’s increased from about 30 minutes a week to 4 or 5 hours.

Students are using MP3 players more to listen to downloaded books, textbook study guides and language labs on-the-go. Books and personal stereos have always been portable, of course, but audio books are easier to carry around in MP3 form. A typical 300-page novel might take up 12 CDs, but only a tiny portion of an MP3 player’s memory and prices for audiobook downloads are mostly comparable to audio CDs.

The percentages are still small, according to a recent study by market research firm Harrison Group Inc. that surveyed 1,000 teens in September 2006 using a 45-minute Internet questionnaire. Music listening made up about 85 percent of MP3 use among teens, video was about 10 percent, and podcasts and audio texts fell under the remaining 5 percent.

But the actual numbers are growing, and companies that make educational materials are banking on them climbing higher.

Over half of teens owned a portable MP3 player in mid-2006, according to TEMPO, a study of digital music behavior conducted by market research firm Ipsos that surveyed over 1,000 Americans aged 12 and up.

“Students are more mobile today. Their expectations of being able to get digital content is certainly much higher than it has been in the past,” said Scott Criswell, product manager of online delivery systems for the higher education unit of McGraw-Hill Cos., one of the three biggest textbook publishers. Criswell said the company now offers more than 800 digital products, most with audio, and that figure has increased by 50 percent over the past four years.

Teachers, especially at the college level, are increasingly making resources available in MP3 form: Michael Barrett, a cardiologist at Temple University, even put recordings of heart murmurs online so his medical students could download and listen to them, instead of squeezing in time with a patient.

“The iPod becomes a simulated patient, really,” Barrett said.

Schools including Stanford University and University of Wisconsin-Madison now belong to iTunes U, a service launched a year ago by Apple Inc. that lets professors post lectures and students download them for free. Meanwhile, some libraries, including Swem Library at the College of William & Mary in Virginia, are lending out MP3 players to students. And for its summer assignment to incoming freshmen last year, Seton Hall University chose to assign listening, not reading: a piece by former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins.

In response, new products have been popping up.

Audible Inc., the biggest audio book seller, and Pearson Education, the biggest textbook publisher, teamed up last summer to launch VangoNotes, textbook chapter summaries and reviews in MP3 form. The companies declined to give specific sales figures, but said thousands of students have downloaded the more than 100 titles,

which should grow to 200 titles by fall.

"Right now it's a small part of our business, but we believe it's going to be a growing part of our overall strategy," said Sandi Kirshner, chief marketing officer of Pearson's higher education unit.

It's not just college students; grade schoolers are starting to do their reading with earphones, too.

One type of audio player called Playaway — a two-ounce flashplayer pre-loaded with an audio book made by Follett Corp. and Findaway World — was sold to school districts starting about 6 months ago. The players are now on loan at roughly 1,500 libraries, 15 percent of which are school libraries.

Belinda Jacks, who oversees 38 school libraries in the Dallas suburb of Grand Prairie, recently ordered Playaways for her libraries, and said they've become "shockingly" popular.

She added that, contrary to some parents' concerns, listening to books encourages reading. This expands on reading out loud to kids, which studies show boosts literacy, Jacks said.

When you compare traditional books to audiobooks, however, there's a big difference in price. A new paperback copy of Charlotte's Web costs \$8 on Amazon, whereas the Playaway version costs \$30, and an iTunes download of it costs \$17 (many other iTunes book downloads cost more — for example, Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice costs \$26, and the more recent Harry Potter books cost \$50.) And that doesn't even count the cost of an MP3 player, for those students who don't have them.

The key is getting schools to help out with the costs, said O'Connor, the Spanish instructor at Tidewater Community College. Of the 16 students in O'Connor's class this semester, only two had their own MP3 players at the outset.

Marketing experts point out that the audiobook industry is already one of the fastest-growing parts of publishing. And given the new technologies that will merge phones and Internet browsers with MP3 players, the market could grow even more quickly, said Jim Taylor, vice chairman of Harrison Group, which conducted the study on teen technology trends.

"It's interestingly changing the way in which people are educated. You just need to ask intelligent questions, and you can get answers anytime, anywhere, in real time," Taylor said. "Education becomes no longer a fact-based learning process, it's search-based, cognitive. It's kind of like what happened to math skills with the calculator."

But just like radio and television before, new gadgets are unlikely to replace the book as we know it. More people are buying books than ever before.

"It's like radio," Taylor said. "Radio is bigger than it ever was. It's just different."