



Combining podcasts, online lectures and workshops to promote student engagement

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- Students looking blankly into space.
- Numbers of students attending lectures falling.
- Only a small group of students engaging in discussion.
- Few students reading the additional papers that I had recommended.

These statements summarise the situation I found myself in 2007 while teaching a final year course in Environmental Risk Assessment. I wanted the students to engage more fully but recognised that this was difficult with a class of around eighty students. So I decided that the following year I would move away from the lecture-practical paradigm and into the new world of online lectures and podcasting. However, delivering solely through online lectures didn't ensure that the students would engage with the material, so the online lectures were incorporated into a series of workshops. The idea was that prior to the workshop the student would watch the lecture, read the recommended papers and come along to discuss them and carry out some form of activity before taking an online test. The tests were designed to be simple: if the student had done the reading, watched the lectures and participated in the workshops then 100% was achievable. Alongside the workshops I kept my numerical risk assessment exercise, based on modelling soil erosion in a small catchment, which constituted most of the assessment, running as it had in previous years.

So did it work? Overall the module was well received getting mostly positive feedback. Most students watched the online lectures and many commented positively on the experience. The ability to watch the lecture when they wanted and to rewind the lecture so that they could go over the material again was a popular feature. However, a few students missed the opportunity to ask questions during the lecture or had problems with internet access off campus. Students also read more than in a typical module although one student complained that there was too much reading. Generally the workshop element was well received with most students finding it a productive and enjoyable experience. The online quizzes appear to have been successful in encouraging students to read more, although one student commented on wanting them to more closely reflect a course text.

What about the cost to the lecturer? It took a fair bit of time to set up the Virtual Learning Environment web space and to redesign the delivery to fit within my workshop themes - not quite as much time as developing a new module, but getting close. However, now it is set up the module only needs minor tweaks each year. I now spend one more hour a week on face-to-face contact – but the contact hours are a lot more fun for me and the students.

Would I recommend it to others? For my module this approach worked and it was well received by the students. If your students are looking jaded in lectures then perhaps it's time to consider whether combining different delivery methods would help them to engage more fully with your material.