

## PD on the Move

It seems that professional development for educators presents a dilemma. Teachers recognise the need but all too often they are too busy to do much about meeting that need. A series of events recently led me to a solution that is meeting my PD needs at the moment. It started when a friend asked me about podcasting.

Initially I thought of podcasting as a just another craze where kids pretend to be DJs; something akin to the CB radio craze of my generation. Further investigation showed there was much more. Sure there are plenty of kids pretending to be DJs, but I found that they were also developing valuable communication skills.



I also found that there was an abundance of serious content available in podcasts and then it occurred to me that here was a golden opportunity for professional development. I teach IT and I found content such as Computer Science lectures from Harvard University and weekly sessions on IT news and security. Of course I could read information like this from websites, but not while driving to school or weeding my garden. That was the part I really like - PD that does not make me busier!

*So what is a podcast?*

The name comes from Apple's popular MP3 music player, the iPod but the concept need not be restricted to an iPod or even to MP3 players. Podcasting refers to distribution of audio files that feature speech instead of music. Distribution uses the Internet and files are usually provided in the MP3 format commonly used for music. Some podcasts are distributed as video files, but at this stage most are audio only.

Another component of podcasting is the ability to subscribe so that new episodes are automatically downloaded to your computer. Episodes are usually archived with a brief description so that you can choose to download individual episodes.

In a way listening to podcasts is like listening to radio but you get to choose the topics and the time to listen to it.

*How can I find content that is relevant to my interests?*

Podcasts are available on almost every topic imaginable. There are three main options for finding content on topics of interest to you.

1. Use a Google search. You could search on keywords for your interest area and add the terms podcast or MP3.
2. Use the iTunes Store. This does not mean you have to pay. The iTunes store provides a structured format with categories to choose from. To get started, you need the free iTunes software which is available for both Windows and MacOS. You can download it from <http://www.apple.com/itunes/music/>. This website also has a link called Podcasts which tells you how to find what you want. You also need to sign up for an account, which is also free.

3. Use a podcast directory such as <http://www.podcast.net> or <http://podcasts.yahoo.com>. The Yahoo site requires you to have a Yahoo account which you can create online.

Lists of Podcasts typically provide some information about the content, but no matter which method you choose, you will no doubt wish to listen to a few archived episodes before you subscribe. You may find a few episodes which interest you and decide not to subscribe.

If you choose to subscribe, you need a podcasting application to do the regular work for you. A web search on podcasting software or clients will give you plenty of free options whether you use Windows or MacOS. I prefer iTunes because it is also good for playing music and gives access to the iTunes store. It is available for both Windows and MacOS.

*If it is free, who pays?*

Some podcasts are produced by enthusiasts or people in educational institutions and are then made available free for others to use. Some are sponsored and include advertising similar to radio advertising.

*How do I get to listen to podcasts?*

The simplest way is to listen on your computer, but that would not take advantage of the mobility that attracts people to podcasts. As suggested by the name, the intention is that podcasts will be copied from your computer to an MP3 player so that you can listen while doing something else such as travelling. This is the most convenient method because copying the files to an MP3 player is very quick and files can be easily deleted and replaced ready for your next trip.

Most new models of mobile phone have an MP3 player built-in, and this would allow you to listen to your podcasts without carrying an additional device.

If you do not have an MP3 player you may be surprised how cheap they are. An alternative would be to copy the files to a CD for use in a Diskman or car CD player. Newer car CD players can play MP3 files and this method would allow many hours of listening from a single CD. Older CD players would require the CD to be created in the standard audio CD format which would limit the time per CD to just over an hour. Another alternative is to copy the audio to a cassette player but this would take much longer.

Safety experts advise not to use the MP3 player's headphones while you are driving. A safer option is to plug your MP3 player into your car stereo.

*Happy listening.*

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May 2006.