Poster paper

Audio Resources for On-Site Course: Interesting Idea, Shame it didn't work.

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Students like different things. Some value handouts, others trash them in favour of their own notes. Some make lists others value memory-maps highlighting interactions between aspects under study. The education literature has numerous studies addressing the diverse tools, techniques and coping mechanism used by students. These are often termed "Learning Styles". A number of models exist (Felder 1996), which seem to relate to broad personality types rather than simply learning preferences. The Felder-Silverman Learning Style Model (Felder & Silverman 1988) pays attention to the type of resources, such as presentations, preferred by the learner.

I have observed that some students have recently begun bringing recording devices such as flash-ram and mini-discs into lectures (for some reason I never see audio cassette). I have also had occasion to benefit from a number of PowerPoint presentations that contained audio. I have found that a downloaded PowerPoint presentation usually tends to be of no help when I am trying understand a topic. However I have found a couple of presentations that contained audio, and they were a great assistance in understanding some aspects of OSPF and Frame Relay - topics with which I struggled.

During the second semester of 2003 and the first semester of 2004 I provided students of IT202 Data Communications and Networking with access to PowerPoint presentations containing a recording of the lecture. The recording was not professional, done in a single take, and provided to the students on the basis of "if it helps, use it".

The workload involved in creating the resource was minimal. MS PowerPoint has an option to "Record Narration" which simply attaches .wav files into the presentation. The resulting file size is rather large, most file were between 5-10M but compressed to approximately 4-5M. The default quality was chosen of 11kHz, 8bit mono resulting in 10kb/s. This is definitely not suitable for streaming but results in a reasonable playback on a local machine. The large file size was not considered a problem as students could download within the campus and write to CD.

The audio resource was stored on a Blackboard (a Content/Learning Management System). The students were provided with printouts of the slides in class. Between 30-50% of students were logged on Blackboard as accessing the resource, depending on the lecture. Also, there was no decline in lecture attendance (a small concern I held prior to the attempt). This was enough encouragement for me to continue providing the recordings.

However, student survey's towards the end of the course indicated that while the students consistently downloaded the files they did not actually use the recording as an aid to study - which begs the question of why download (obsessive compulsive downloading disorder?). I have since stopped providing the recordings and have had no request to reinstitute the practice.

In conclusion, while this has not been a scientific study of the utility of providing audio resources, it appears that I do not believe that it has helped them. In short, an interesting idea that didn't work. The attendance record has also shown a definite preference for attending a live presentation over accessing a recording. I would revisit this if I was ever involved in a distance education program in which students could not attend class in person.

REFERENCES

Felder, R. M. (1996) "Matters of Styl"e ASEE Prism, 6(4) pp 18-23

R.M. Felder and L.K. Silverman (1988) "Learning and Teaching Styles in Engineering Education," Enginerring. Education, 78(7), 674-681.