

## **HOW DOES YOUR COURSE SOUND?**

### **The use of audio tapes in Distance Education**

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In this brief review, I wish to make a strong case that audio tapes can and should be an essential component of a distance learning curriculum. The message is "into the streets" with a microphone in one hand, a tape recorder in the other and a sheaf of well researched questions. This is the audio producer in a university environment.

Portable tape recorders record interviews in the noisiest surroundings, adaptors record two-way conversations over the telephone. With a producer to do the task of interviewing and make the finished programme, there is no reason for a distance education course writer to feel that the book, lecture, tutorial and the satellite are the only means of communication with a student.

Research on the use of audio tapes within and outside a university environment is well documented. As far back as 1975 the British Open University identified key elements in radio and television that would aid student learning. While the findings related to radio and television at the time, they are valid for video and audio recordings where student and lecturer may view and listen to programmes, repeat segments and even take the tape home.

For thousands of USP Distance Education students scattered around the South Pacific, an audio tape brings a sense of "realism" as voices from the outside world enter their homes. This semester, for example, over four thousand cassettes have been copied by the University Media Unit and posted out to extension students. If you are a student on a remote island away from an Extension Centre, an audio tape is both a friendly voice and an educational aid.

A key finding of the U.K. study was the ability of audio to present the student with primary resource material. Examples given were recording of naturally occurring events, such as eye witness interviews, children talking, concerts or performances and talks. Audio provided a selection of sources for students to analyse. It brought to the microphone the views or knowledge of eminent people who condensed essential points in their life, which in written form may have been more complex and lengthy.

The research findings note that audio can provide a student with a condensed argument that will:

- reinforce points made elsewhere in the course
- introduce new concepts not covered elsewhere in the course
- provide an alternative view to material already presented
- analyse material contained elsewhere in the course
- draw on quotation, recorded information, interviews as evidence either for or against a proposed argument
- summarise the main points of the course, providing integration and orientation.

An obvious finding was that attitudes could be changed by novel methods of presentation such as a dramatised form, which enabled students to identify with the viewpoints and emotions of the participants. By listening to discussions and interviews, students could perceive that different points of view existed and could also observe participants being challenged on their opinions and attitudes.

A course writer developing a new librarianship course at the University of the South Pacific worked with the audio producer to record a series of interviews with practising librarians working in specialised libraries in Suva, Nadi and as far away as Noumea. Each librarian talked about aspects of their work. These mini-case studies were edited, collated, duplicated on audio cassettes and made available to students.

To help USP extension students with a research assignment for a course in Educational Psychology (ED252), the audio producer and the course lecturer agreed to record interviews between a student and her lecturer. Litia, a genuine USP student studying educational psychology, is grappling with a research proposal. She visits her lecturer in her office to ask a few questions about the project. We record this first interview.

Litia then conducts a research interview with Taniela, one of the participants in the study. We record. Some time later, Mere completes all her research interviews. "But," she thinks, "before I write up my findings, I'll see my lecturer to talk over some of my ideas." We record that interview too. After editing, the producer inserted scene narrative and the finished audio tape was duplicated for use by the lecturer.

A different approach was used for students of a course on business studies (MG101). This brought the voice of an experienced business woman to the microphone. Mere Samisoni takes the credit for the success and hard work that brought Hot Bread shops to Suva and other parts of Fiji and the Pacific region. It is a story of a successful small business venture. This interview, almost thirty minutes in length, is now being used as a case study by students of MG101. The course writer and lecturer was also interviewed. He talked about the aims of the course then gave a detailed breakdown of each of the fifteen units.

A recording for a course on literature for children (LL108) involved a group of small children. Surrounded by microphones they listened to a story told by Larry Thomas. We recorded the narrator and the excited vocal interruptions of the children as Larry told the story of wicked animals which wanted to eat an old woman.

Audio support for a new course on marketing for tourism (SE207) is slowly taking shape. In March this year the audio producer attended the Annual Conference of the Fiji Hotel Association and recorded several interviews with hotel and resort owners. Edited sections of these interviews will be compiled on an audiotape to accompany the course book.

In the 1970s, The Open University in Britain pioneered Course Teams that are now widely used to develop courses. Subject specialists, course developers, course writers and media representatives sit together in a symposium to discuss the best format for the course book and the most appropriate use of audio/visual materials to supplement the course. Discussing ideas when a course is still in its embryo stage is most valuable for media staff. It allows them time to become fully acquainted with the course writers, to know the objectives of the course and to have enough time to think of innovative programming. The outcome of this co-operative effort results in a course bringing together the educational strengths of each medium. Interdepartmental co-operation is enhanced as both academics and media producers feel their integrity, knowledge, intelligence and skills are being respected.

As distance education is a rapidly developing form of delivery throughout our region, the University of the South Pacific would welcome enquiries about our audio-visual programmes, as well as visits to look at our materials and discuss this medium with us.

## References

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