

“Using iPods to Reflect on Teaching Writing”

University Writing Program iPod Project, 2004-2005

Project Summary

As a part of the 2004-05 iPod project at Duke, Duke examined potential uses of this technology in the pedagogy of first-year academic writing seminars (Writing 20). These classes are taught by postdoctoral Mellon Fellows in Duke’s University Writing Program (for more information about the Mellon Writing Fellows, see <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/mellon/>). University Writing Program (UWP) directors Joseph Harris and Denise Comer investigated whether iPods could support reflective practice in teaching academic writing and sponsor improvements in the quality of undergraduate writing instruction. In particular, they proposed using the iPod as an unobtrusive audio recorder to help writing instructors capture and analyze classroom discussions of student writing and, with the help of colleagues and a senior writing faculty, improve their facilitation and leadership of those discussions.

Each of the ten Mellon Fellows receiving an iPod designed a project using the recording functions of the iPod to capture audio from either classroom time or individual conferences with students. Project objectives included clarifying classroom goals, building students’ workshopping skills, and guiding students to discover potential improvements in their writing on their own rather than relying on faculty guidance. The Fellows’ use of iPods fell into two groups:

“Monitor” use

Using the iPod primarily to track who talked and when during their classes and to devise strategies to encourage fuller participation in class discussion

“Snippet” use

Using the iPod to isolate certain key moments in talking about writing and were thus able to reflect on how they might redirect such conversations in the future.

Project Evaluation

Reactions of the fellows and program directors to the project indicate that the iPod can indeed be a useful tool in reflecting on teaching. In addition to the observations of program directors, the ten fellows participating in the project completed a survey about their experiences with iPod use this year. Eight of the ten surveyed found that the iPod was at least moderately useful for reflecting on teaching, with two describing the technology as “very useful” for reflection. Participants reported that hearing themselves as they taught or met with students was insightful, giving them what one characterized as a “distanced perspective” on their teaching. Many found the iPod recording unobtrusive, particularly in comparison to the presence of a colleague or senior faculty observer. A number of

participants judged the iPod as especially useful in this regard, having a minimal impact on the classroom dynamic. Of the two types of use outlined above, employing teachable “snippets” was judged most promising for work with new teachers of academic writing by project participants and leaders. UWP directors found the process of reflection sparked by the iPod recordings very fruitful. In addition to the use of the iPod to support reflective instructional practice, six of the ten fellows also used the iPod directly with students. Of these six, five found the tool to be at least moderately useful.

Future Directions and Suggestions for Improvement

The Fellows involved in the project discovered the need for more training and support for editing the audio files that they recorded (e.g. to select and share clips) and for more training with the iPods. In particular, they suggested that training might include not only introductory training (as was provided this year) but also a follow-up training session later in the semester. More training with the Audacity software for editing sound files was viewed as particularly critical to the use of iPods for reflective teaching practice, enabling the Fellows to more effectively isolate and share audio segments of critical moments in teaching.

This year’s program will culminate with a summer teaching workshop where Fellows can showcase the things that were learned over the past year. The Mellon Fellows who participated in 2004-05 also want to extend their experience by incorporating audio clips and lessons they learned into a more public tool for instructors. UWP directors currently plan to continue the project with next year’s Mellon fellows, assuming the continued availability of iPods.

Summary compiled by Kevin Fogg and Yvonne Belanger, CIT based on the interim project report submitted by UWP directors Joe Harris and Denise Comer.