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Michael Simonson

Nova Southeastern University, simsmich@nova.edu

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And Finally ...

Podcasting ... or "Seeds Floated Down From the Sky"

Michael Simonson

Bud-like seeds floated down from the sky—from space actually. They were not noticed at first, but soon the seeds grew into pods, plantlike oblong objects that when ripe disgorged a terrible creature, a creature that killed and eliminated humans and replaced them with

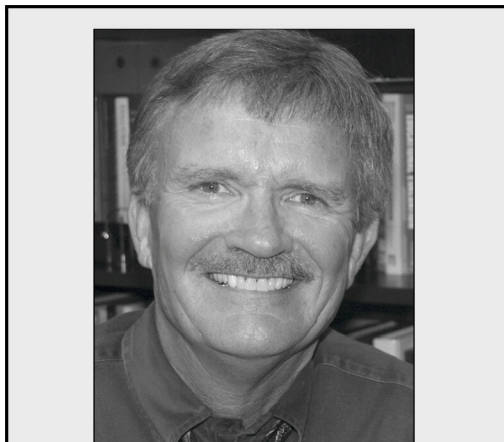
exact physical replicas that were identical in appearance but lacking in any emotion. Podpeople.

This sentence could be the plot-line to one of the four motion pictures made over the last 50 years based on Jack Finney's 1955 book *The Body Snatchers*. The film most remember was released in 1979, starring Donald Sutherland, who was one of the last on earth to remain free of will and independent of the pod menace.

Another explanation of this sentence might be a teacher's lament about the students in class constantly putting the tiny "buds" in their ears to listen to the tens of thousands of rap tunes on their personal iPod, hidden in a back-pack.

The iPod has become an icon in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and podcasting has become one of the most talked-about applications in distance education. Podcasting and iPods are written about in the popular press, in journals, and even in the prestigious *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The *Chronicle* recently published a long article with the unfortunate title "How to Podcast Campus Lectures."

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Michael Simonson, Editor, *Distance Learning*, and Program Professor, Programs in Instructional Technology and Distance Education, Fischler School of Education, Nova Southeastern University, 1750 NE 167 St., North Miami Beach, FL 33162. Telephone: (954) 262-8563. E-mail: simsmich@nsu.nova.edu

Podcasting is not a new idea. It has been around at least since the audio tutorial movement and the Sony Walkman. A podcast is really a single concept event that is explained by an audio file, or an audio file supplemented by still pictures or video. The most widespread and current example of a type of a podcast is a song, usually 3 to 5 minutes long available in an electronic file format, such as MP3 or MP4, that also might be available as a music video with singers, dancers, and actors in addition to the song. Luther Vandross' tune "Always and Forever" is a wonderful 4-minute-and-54-second example. The tune is also available as a music video showing Vandross singing the song.

Individual songs work well as podcasts because most modern tunes have the characteristics of an effective single concept event—what many now are calling a podcast, which really is a learning object that is stored in an MPEG format. The characteristics of an *effective* podcast are as follows:

- A podcast is a single idea that can be explained verbally or, if necessary, with audio and appropriate still or motion pictures (not a face talking);
- A podcast is a recorded event that is 3-10 minutes long;
- A podcast is part of a series with each single event related to others;
- A podcast is a learning object available in an electronic format that is easily played, most often as an MP3 file;

- A podcast is stored on a Web site or other Internet location for easy access; and
- A podcast is current and changed or updated frequently.

In spite of what the *Chronicle* says, a recording of a lecture is a poor example of a podcast. Rather, it is best to "chunk" the class into five or six single concept blocks, each as a separate learning object. Effective lecturers do this already; they break up their class session into related topics. These topics can become podcasts when they are recorded electronically in an MPEG file format, especially if they are supplemented with related examples and recorded properly without distracting background noises. Podcasts are a reincarnation or reinvention of what the mastery learning movement of the 1960s called single concept files or single concept films. They were effective then, and can be effective today.

And finally, let's call them something other than podcasts. MPEGcast doesn't have the same cachet as podcast, but then Mpegcast doesn't remind everyone of Donald Sutherland pointing his finger at the last normal person, either.

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- Finney, J. (1955). *The body snatchers*. New York: Dell.

"... A RECORDING OF A LECTURE IS A POOR EXAMPLE OF A PODCAST."