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## **iPod Therefore I am: using PC videos to aid the teaching of the history of political philosophy.<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper outlines our experiences at the University of Huddersfield of (a) producing and using mini lectures on the history of political philosophy that were available to students as MP4 and progressive download PC video files (and MP3 audio files), and (b) the student feedback on these files which will help future development. This paper largely avoids pedagogical issues regarding the use of technology in teaching and focus more on student feedback and use of these technologies, along with considering practical issues regarding the production and hosting and of these teaching tools.

### **Introduction:**

This paper aims to provide an overview of the production and use of, and feedback on a number of video and audio resources (VARs) and accompanying worksheets produced by staff at the University of Huddersfield to support the teaching of the module entitled *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, a standard history of ideas module, a thinker based module, introducing students to the ideas of Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, Mill and Marx.<sup>2</sup> The project to produce these resources was named the *Hobbes Project* after the subject of the first VAR produced (rather than any suggestion that the VARs were nasty, brutish and short). Part of the purpose of this project was to provide a technological template for other academic areas of the university to follow, as relatively simple and accessible technologies were used. As such the *Hobbes Project* was a practical rather theoretical project to see what could be achieved with existing equipment available in most university departments.

### **Purpose:**

Political philosophy and the history of political thought can prove tricky to students when embarking on their first year of studies on a politics degree. Generally speaking it is

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank their colleagues at the University of Huddersfield for their support, without which, this project would have been very hard; and Dan Rafferty and Andrew Crines, without which it would have been impossible.

<sup>2</sup> The VARs and worksheets may be viewed at: <http://hhsdbs.hud.ac.uk/resources/polphil/>

different from the political studies that they will have been faced with prior to university, and therefore it often proves a shock to students embarking on their studies to face their first lecture on Plato or Socrates. When students have started to get to grips with the history of political philosophy they relish it as ‘it provides them with a space in which to reflect on their own, previously unexamined, but cherished, views on what politics is for’ (Coleman, 2000: 152), however sometimes students need to be nurtured in the early part of their studies to get to this point. Other methods of making political philosophy accessible have been tried (see for example Schaap (2005), Woodcock (2006) and Woodcock (2008)), and this project follows in this vein of using informal means to help students engage with political ideas. Increasingly, students attending university will be used to downloading podcasts from the internet, and will be used to watching instructional VARs online. *You Tube* is an obvious example of a place where students will have watched VARs, but also increasingly companies place VARs on their websites to give instructions on how to use their products.

The purpose of the *Hobbes Project* was, therefore, to produce some reasonable quality Reusable Learning Objects (in the form of VARs combined with worksheets) to help teach the history of political philosophy, to host these VARs and worksheets on the University’s website, and to make them available in a variety of different formats to ensure that they could be easily accessible. The VARs took the form of a mini-lecture on each of the thinkers discussed in the module in question, a mini lecture that was to be approximately ten minutes in length. Each mini lecture was simply a ‘talking head’ shot of the module leader (Pete Woodcock), filmed in a static format in order to (a) keep filming simple, and (b) avoid making the file size too large so as to ensure successful hosting on the web.

Each mini lecture was accompanied with a worksheet designed so that students did not simply watch the video (or listen to the MP3 file available), but undertook an activity whilst using the VAR. Whereas it is noted that VARs of the like produced by the *Hobbes Project* generally support a transmission mode of education which has been much criticised recently, the addition of the worksheets was aimed to make the VARs

interactive in a manner that was simple to host and simple to use. The worksheets were deliberately designed to start with relative straight forward questions at the beginning so that learners would concentrate on the VAR; but built towards more complicated questions near the end so as to expand on the learner's knowledge.

Figure one: Example of worksheet

**Machiavelli Worksheet**

- Where and when was Machiavelli born?

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- How old was Machiavelli when he became second Chancellor to the republic of Florence? Why did he lose his position?

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- What is meant by 'advice books to princes'? How did Machiavelli's *The Prince* differ from other advice books?

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- Why should princes not keep the Christian virtues according to Machiavelli

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- What should the prince do to attract fortune?

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- What is the difference between virtù and the virtues?

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- Why is history so important to Machiavelli? How is it linked to glory?

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Even if the worksheets were ignored by the students, a number of benefits exist with mini-lectures in video or audio format even if one regards them as simple extensions of the transmission form of education. Firstly students may use them as an *aide de memoire* after a lecture, to recap the key ideas which may have slipped their minds since the lecture (note that the VARs produced by the *Hobbes Project* supplemented the existing lecture and seminar programme of this module rather than being intended to replace any part of it). Secondly, students can pause and rewind a VAR in a manner they cannot in a lecture. Thirdly, and this was the benefit stressed to students on the module at the beginning, these VARs could be used in addition to reading to prepare for the seminar discussions on these thinkers.

### **Technical aspects of the project**

As mentioned above, the *Hobbes Project* intended not only to create a number of VARs for the *Introduction to Political Philosophy* module, but also to provide a template of production and distribution that could be used across the University for other Lecturers to create similar resources. A manner of producing and creating these resources was sought which would be cost effective, therefore all the equipment and software used already existed in the Department of Behavioural Sciences (where the politics undergraduate courses are located). Recordings were distributed to students via the University's web site in a number of formats – Flash video, MP4 video and MP3 audio (different formats were included deliberately to aid accessibility). Work sheets were also posted on the site to accompany the video and audio resources.

Recordings were done using relatively simple equipment; a consumer style camcorder (Panasonic NV-GS280) was used for filming, which was mounted on a tripod and positioned approximately six feet away from the person presenting to achieve a simple 'talking head' shot. The camcorder uses miniDV cassettes to record digital video, a format that is a good option if editing is to take place (as was often the case in the *Hobbes Project*). There are a number of other recording formats for camcorders such as DVD or

MPEG-2, however these make the editing process more complicated. A high definition hard disk camera would have made the editing process easier still, and may well be used for future projects of this type rather than miniDV, however this was not available to us when starting this project.

In the first instance a boundary microphone was used to record the audio. This was the ATR-97 boundary microphone by Audio Technica, which plugs directly into the mic socket of the camera, and provides a relatively cheap option. This provided reasonable results in terms of audio, but it was felt that there was room for improvement, so later on in the project, the microphone setup was altered to achieve better results. A Sony UWP-C2 radio microphone was mounted on a small tripod and placed on a desk near the presenter and the receiver was plugged into the camcorder, which provided an improved audio track. Again, equipment such as a Sony tie clip radio microphone (Sony UWP-V1) may have improved the quality of the audio track still further; however we did not have this technology at the time of production.

Two modelling lamps, which were fitted with umbrella style diffusers, were also used for extra lighting whilst filming. This extra lighting was not absolutely necessary, as reasonable 'fit for purpose' filming was produced without it, but they did provide a little uplighting to reduce shadows under the chin of the presenter.

For each mini lecture, approximately ten minutes of footage was recorded in total, however each of these was designed to be split into sections of approximately two minutes. The rationale for this was as this was a pilot project, there was some uncertainty as to how well the download process would work for students, so clips were kept short to reduce download times for each section.

Once the recording had been made the next step was to edit the clips, a process which involved the inclusion of and cutting the raw footage into the shorter two minute sections, and the inclusion of section titles. To achieve this, the footage was transferred from the miniDV cassette to a PC with a Matrox RTX video capture card, a process which was



achieved using a Firewire cable linking the PC to a miniDV deck; however a connection from the PC to the camcorder using Firewire would have also worked. The editing was done using Adobe Premiere Pro. Once the editing and titling was complete, the shorter sections of each clip and the ten minute clip for each topic were exported as MPEG1 files. An audio clip for each of the topics was also exported in MP3 format. The editing and importing is perhaps the most labour intensive part of the project, and for this we employed students with editing experience (increasingly available given the widespread use of VARs in popular culture), however this could have also been done by technical or academic staff on the project.

Two formats were chosen for distribution of the video files. These were Flash video and MP4 video. Flash video has in recent times come to dominate video distribution on the web due to its ease of use and relatively low costs. In the past video on the web suffered from long download times and complicated set up procedures, however Flash video can be used with 'progressive download' to deliver the video over the internet via a standard web server, as opposed to a potentially costly and complicated streaming video server. Using progressive download, the clip will begin as soon as enough information has been received to play the first few seconds, as opposed to having to wait for the whole file to download.

To create these Flash video files, each of the shorter two minute MPEG1 clips was loaded into the Adobe Flash CS3 Video Encoder and re-exported as Flash video with progressive download. The clips were exported as fairly small videos in terms of dimensions – 300 pixels x 240 pixels – to minimise download times. These clips were around 3 Mb per minute in file size. With a basic broadband connection of 2 Mbps the clips began to play within a second or two of clicking the link.

Each of the MPEG1 files was also turned into MPEG4 videos in case students wanted to download them to an MPEG4 player such as an iPod. This was achieved using a simple conversion program called Jodix Free iPod Video Converter which is freely available on the web.

For each of the topics a separate page was set up to display the Flash video. To achieve this a template was set up using Adobe Flash CS3 and for each topic a new page was created from this template. On each of these pages the relevant video files were linked to the buttons on the page and section titles were typed in next to the buttons. Another button was provided labelled 'play whole clip'. By clicking this button a script was activated which would string the short two minute clips together into a longer clip for the whole topic.

Once this Flash template had been created the process of creating new pages for each of the topics was quick and easy. Anyone with some basic knowledge of Flash and a minimal instruction on using the template should be able to create these pages. The template acts as a shell for distributing Flash video. It was designed to be generic in terms of discipline areas, and a number of other disciplines in the School are planning to use the template for distribution of their own video files.

All of these VARs and the worksheets were then linked to a set of index pages. This took the form of a web page located on the University web site. Students could access this site from the relevant module area in the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment. The index pages were produced using Adobe Dreamweaver.

One final technological issue relating to *The Hobbes Project* relates to our assumptions about student knowledge on how to access these resources. It was noted above that production and reception of such VARs are increasingly common in contemporary culture; however we should not assume that all students will have the necessary technical know-how to access these resources. Indeed, Guertin *et al* (2007: 139) rightly suggest in their study of podcasts that students need guidance on 'how to make the most effective use of this technological tool.' To this end, in the induction session on the *Introduction to Political Philosophy* module we spent some time explaining to students how to access and use the VARs. Guidance notes on the use of the pages were also, of course, placed on the web pages themselves.

### **Presenting the VARs:**

As we were limited to approximately ten minutes per topic (which in the first instance meant one mini lecture per thinker studied on the module), the subject needed to focus on the key ideas of that thinker. Scripts were not produced for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, it is impossible to read a script whilst looking at the camera (essential if you wish to engage students who will be viewing the videos) without expensive autocue equipment. This is a downside, of course, to producing video resources as opposed to merely audio ones. Secondly, reading, it is often thought, prevents a video from appearing lively, fresh and engaging.

Rather than preparing a script whilst filming the *Hobbes Project* VARs, we found it helpful to prepare an overall structure of what was intended to be said that could be reviewed prior to filming each section to refresh the presenter's mind. Occasionally bits of paper with cues were taped underneath the camera so that it could be read with negligible eye movement away from the camera. Also, sections of text were often read out, reading from a book out of camera shot; this seems acceptable so long as they are kept to a minimum. As the videos were filmed in two minute chunks, one could overestimate how hard it is to present information to camera without appearing tongue tied, and with a little preparation, this can be achieved by any teacher. As Laing *et al* (2006: 514) has noted, the best way to produce resources is not to read from a script but to 'be informal, be personal, be yourself, [and] use your passion for the subject to enthuse and motivate your audience.'

### **Student Feedback:**

Students on the *Introduction to Political Philosophy* module were given a feedback sheet midway through the module to give their opinions on the VARs and worksheets, and even though only 15 students (out of a potential 32) returned the forms, the feedback was still interesting. The general tone of the feedback was positive, with comments including

that the files were ‘very very helpful’, and perhaps more interesting that they were ‘helpful when recapping lectures’; illustrating that students did use the VARs for this purpose. Of the 15 respondents, everyone had used at least one VAR (illustrating, at least, that there were no technological problems preventing them from doing this), and seven students had accessed them all. There can be little doubt from this feedback, therefore, that the resources were used by students.

In one seminar session a student, when in group discussion, was obviously having difficulties coming up with an answer to a particular question. The student in question choose to take her iPod out of her bag, turn on a mini lecture, and come up with the answer to the question by watching part of a VAR despite the fact that the seminar leader (who had recorded the mini lecture) was standing right next to her. This type of use of the mini-lectures, however, seems to be the exception rather than the rule as perhaps the major point of pedagogical interest from the general student feedback was the format in which the students choose to watch the videos. Of the 15 students who returned feedback, only two had watched the videos on an external device (iPod or other MP3/MP4 device), with the other thirteen having watched them on a PC as a progressive download video. Indeed, one of the students who used an external device choose not to watch them at all, instead downloading the MP3 file. This student suggested that as the videos were static (that is to say they provided simply a ‘talking head’ visual), there was no need to watch them:

I feel as you are static during the video there is little benefit to me watching them. So I have put them on my MP3. I really like them on this format, it also enables me to listen to them on the move.

Reasons given for using the PC rather than an external device ranged from having no such device, to the fact that as one had to use a PC to access the resource, you might as well view them on this. Perhaps another reason for the fact that students did not use external devices is that students may not wish to use their iPods for academic use; they may (understandably) like to keep their entertainment separate from their academic work. Consequently allowing students to view the VARs in progressive download video format

seems like a happy compromise, as it allows all students, whether on or off campus, to access these resources without feeling that they have to compromise their personal belongings.

Fewer students had used the worksheets than had used the VARs; however they had still been relatively well used. Of the respondents, four had used all of them, seven most of them, one had used one of them, but three had not used any. One comment on the worksheet was telling, and will inform our future practice on this issue:

Make them more interactive while you are actually going through the lecture. Try to explain why you may have got a question wrong and help you in that particular way.

If we have understood this comment correctly, it is referring to the fact that after students had filled in the worksheet, little future reference was made to them in lectures or seminars as they were intended to support rather than replace previous practice. And this is a good point. When we created the worksheets, the purpose of them was to give students tasks to complete whilst using the VARs, and that this activity would then prepare students for seminar discussion. The worksheets were not, however, generally referred to in seminars or lectures; they were not integrated into the module wholly which obviously caused some frustration to the student. This then shows the value of feedback such as this, as this will allow future seminar construction to allow time to go over the worksheets for this purpose.

One student suggested that the ‘talking head’ format of the lectures needed to be readdressed, suggesting that we ‘liven them up a bit.’ Again this is a good point, however when producing VARs, a balance has to be struck between ease of production and hosting on the one hand, and visual impact on the other. If files were produced with varied settings and backdrops it would have undoubtedly made the videos more interesting to watch and would have made them closer to broadcast quality. They would, however, have increased the production time and cost plus increased the file sizes, making them take up more space on the university website and on student’s devices.

## **Conclusions:**

*The Hobbes Project* has shown that, with little funding and commercially available equipment (perhaps already possessed by most university departments), reasonable quality VARs can be produced and hosted that can support teaching and learning on any module. It also has shown that these VARs are used and appreciated by students. However the student feedback also hints at a number of issues that should be addressed by academics wishing to create such VARs. Firstly, that if worksheets are made to accompany these VARs (and they do make them more interactive), then discussion of these completed worksheets should be included in seminars or group discussion so that students are sure that they have answered them correctly. Secondly, students need to be made aware of why ‘talking head’ formats are used for these VARs rather than more broadcast quality filmings. Thirdly and finally, students appear (when given the choice) to access VARs via progressive download on their PC rather than as MP4 files on their iPods. Consequently, to readdress the title of this paper, perhaps, when creating VARs for the history of political philosophy (or any other subject for that matter) we should be thinking less of iPod therefore I am, and more of iStream therefore I am.

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