Screencasting as an Educational Tool
Anne Welsh, Information Officer – Bibliographic Services, DrugScope

Ever had to demonstrate a database? Deal with a failed Internet connection in the middle of a presentation? Be in two places at once? Screencasting – recording what's happening on your computer screen (with or without a voiceover) could well be the answer.

It was certainly the answer in October 2006, when the Elisad Gateway taxonomy training was scheduled in Bremen at the same time as I was giving a paper at International Librarian International 2006 (ironically enough on the Gateway). Using one of the many screencasting products on the market [1], I was able to record the presentations I'd been asked to give so that they could be broadcast in Bremen using nothing more sophisticated than a PC with (free) Micromedia flash installed on it. Under the terms of our license, we were also able to provide copies of the files to Gateway participants to use in cascade training other members of staff or reviewing what the training had covered.

Of course, I would rather have been there. It's far easier to pitch a presentation to an audience whose faces you can see to gauge if you're going too fast, too slow or are just plain boring. As Sharon Colvin highlights in her recent article on PowerPoint presentations [2], the best presentations are dynamic and interactive, focusing on the audience. It's almost impossible to achieve that with a presentation prepared several weeks in advance in an empty room. (Although, as ever, my DrugScope colleagues, Christine Goodair, Nicola Evans and Jackie Buckle, generously sat through the screencasts and gave great feedback – Nicola even put the files onto CD-Roms for you all).

However, it's not always a case of either or. Those of you who attended in Bremen or used the CD will remember that the presentations consisted of a recording of me cataloguing websites using the new taxonomy and describing what I was doing and why. Onscreen it looked like a PowerPoint presentation with links out to the web … except there was no waiting for screens to load or the presenter to laboriously type out entries. At least, there wasn't in the version you saw – when I made the screencast, I had to go through these processes, but, using the software I was able to edit out that wasted screentime. In fact, one of the things that I *love* about the software is that, thanks to it, I will never need to give real-time live internet demonstrations again: I can pre-record and edit those demos and, instead of flicking from my PowerPoints to the web, I can embed my flash-files (the format the screencasts are stored in) within them. Much quicker, much more organised, much less stressful.

And, on the subject of demos, we've used the software to create online examples of how to search our catalogue [3], and, for staff use, how to create basic entries on our databases. It's also been a real boon for showing people how to do things *ad hoc*. For example, when people have asked me how to create blog posts, instead of writing a list of instructions or try to describe what to click over the phone, I've been able to just quickly create a sample entry, record what I'm doing, and send it to them – they can see what to click or highlight and / or which fields to use, because they can see my mouse action. In other words, it's like them sitting next to me at my computer, watching what I do.

Within the information sector, screencasting is taking off in a big way. This year I have been involved in *5 Weeks to a Social Library*, "the first free, grassroots, completely online course devoted to teaching librarians about social software and how to use it in their libraries." [4] Presenters and participants come from different countries and time zones, and most of the presentations are delivered through screencasts [5]. To facilitate interaction, presenters host web chats, either in the chatroom on the site, or through Internet Messenger. The course organizers also run weekly chatroom-based tutorials, and everyone involved contributes to the course blogs [6] and wiki [7] to encourage as much discussion as possible.

Preparing my presentation for the course [8], I again faced the limitation I experienced preparing for Elisad in October 2006, of essentially delivering a paper to an empty room, but this time, I had the reassurance that each participant could control the pace of their viewing somewhat – by fast-forwarding or rewinding to the points that interested them. It was also useful to be able to demonstrate DrugScope-specific software (our library management system), which is not available on or through the Internet – I was able to capture the actions I wanted at work and then edit them into my presentation.

So, would I do it again? Would I recommend it to you? Well, as with all technologies for remote working, my conclusion is that screencasting is a useful tool, though no substitute for working or meeting together in the real world. However, it is a *huge* step forward from writing procedures and step-by-step or cutting and pastin screen-shots and I would recommend it to anyone who has to share database- or web-based information in both formal and informal situations.

References
1. There's a good list on Wikipedia at
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Screencast#Software_for_Screencasting
2. Colvin, Sharon (2007) 'How to keep the audience awake and learning'. *Information Outlook* 11(2): 24-27.
3. Accessible from our library homepage,
http://www.drugscope.org.uk/library/librarysection/libraryhome.asp#
4. http://www.sociallibraries.com/course/about accessed 23/02/2007.
5. See http://www.sociallibraries.com/course/week1#present for the first week's activities.
6. http://www.sociallibraries.com/course/blog
7. http://www.sociallibraries.com/course/wiki
8. Welsh, Anne (2007) From writer's block to library blog. *Five Weeks to a Social Library*: http://mirror.video.blip.tv/Sociallibrary-FromWritersBlockToLibraryBlog148.swf