

eTools: Using Podcasts in the Classroom

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Introduction

In many college classrooms, the written word on the textbook page remains the foundation of classroom dialogue. Podcasts, however, offer instructors the opportunity to not only augment text-based course material in ways that engage students creatively and heuristically, but also literally adds a vocal layer to class material. Podcasts can help students engage course material on different levels and provides instructors with a way to lead class discussions on how different communication mediums contribute to dialogue.

What is a Podcast?

The easiest way to describe a podcast is that it is an on-demand web-based radio show, but instead of tuning your radio to a station, you stream or download an audio file. While the general structure of a podcast resembles a radio show, its' web-based format differs from a radio show in three ways. The differences are (1) you do not need to "tune in" at a certain time because a podcast accommodates your schedule; (2) a podcast is not geographically bound the way a radio station is, which means that accessibility allows for more niche programming; and (3) unlike a radio show, there is no gatekeeper monitoring the podcast. Anyone can produce and distribute a podcast and because it is much cheaper to produce, there are fewer commercial constraints.

How can I access, record and upload a Podcast?

Accessing podcasts is easy and free. If you have an iPhone, you can download the Apple podcast application. Other popular podcast applications are Overcast, Stitcher Radio, Podbean, and iCatcher. These services pull a RSS feed from a website that contains the audio content. Although the website can be directly accessed, these applications offer greater flexibility.

Recording your own audio for a podcast also is easy. If your students are using a Mac, the application Garageband already is installed on the computer; if your students are using a PC, they can download Audacity for free online. Both of these programs will record using the computer's microphone and will accept imported audio if students want to record a podcast on their phones. Once the audio is recorded or imported, these systems allow for intuitive sound editing as any sound file can be dragged, clipped, or dropped.

How can I use a Podcast in the classroom?

Podcasts are useful in the classroom in three ways. Specifically, they can be used as:

1. *course material*. I regularly assign podcasts as course material to supplement a reading assignment. Because I listen to podcasts regularly, if I hear a podcast that relates to something I know I will be teaching, I save it and assign it with reading. For example, when teaching Organizational Culture, I assign *This American Life's* episode on car

manufacturing plants in Japan vs. Detroit (Reed, 2015) to discuss cultural differences in work environments. For Social Exchange Theory, I assign a *Planet Money* episode that covers the economics of falling in love (Vidal, 2014). When teaching leadership, I will assign the *TED Radio Hour* Podcast on "Disruptive Leadership" (Raz, 2014). These podcasts all offer grounded examples with which the entire class already is familiar. Class discussion then can focus on making the connection between the podcast and the assigned course reading. Often, I ask students to interpret what they have *heard* through what they have *read*.

2. *a group final assignment.* This assignment requires students to work in groups digitally and to practice many of the skills that communication students should have in the 21st century. Because I use podcasts extensively in class, students are familiar with the form, so they know what a good podcast sounds like. In several courses (particularly those courses that are skills-based), I have turned the final project into a podcast. Instead of a group presentation or a paper, I assign students to groups of 4-5 members in which they are required to record and produce a 20-25 minute podcast based on a topic related to the course material. Initially, students complete a contract identifying the tasks that will be fulfilled by each group member (e.g., some students are good at the technical aspects of podcasting, others students are better at the artistic aspects of podcasting) and I encourage students to divide the labor based on their talents and inform them that while not everyone needs to do the same job (e.g., one student may

do the editing, another student may act as the host), they all must complete the same amount of labor. I stress to students that the podcast must be produced and consist of individual segments (they cannot simply talk into a microphone for 20 minutes)--which may consist of expert interviews, roundtables, role-playing, "person on the street" interviews, or storytelling--and these segments must be connected by clear and consistent transitions with sound effects. Their podcasts are graded not only on content, but also on aesthetics (e.g., Were the voices blended? Were there clear transitions? Was it interesting to listen to? Were the sound effects appropriate?). I also assign a 2-page paper (including a References page for the podcast) in which students explain the choices they made.

3. *an opportunity to get students to engage each other's final projects.* Rather than a final project that comes to me alone, students get to share their work with each other. Once the final podcasts have been submitted (usually due the week before the semester ends), I upload all of them to soundcloud.com (which is free if you do not use too much space; otherwise, there is a nominal fee if you want to create a Pro Account) and provide students with access to the entire class's podcasts through the site. I then dedicate one class session to discussing each student's podcast as regular course material, with all students being quizzed (for a grade) over the material of the podcasts. (These are easy questions just to make sure they listened). Students seem to appreciate the feedback loop that this assignment provides.

Conclusion

Accessing, producing, and disseminating the recorded voice has never been easier. Students appreciate the element of voice to the written word because it adds some color to the black and white of the page. Also, at the end of the semester, students have an audio file that showcases their technical and aesthetic abilities that often fits quite well into a digital resume.

References

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