

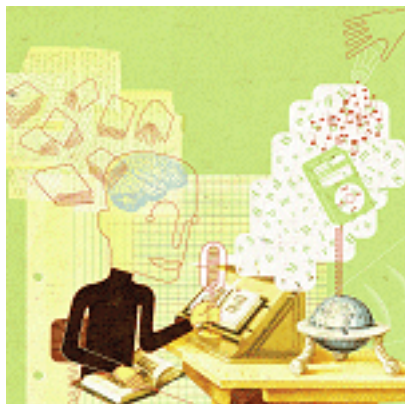
THE Journal

January 2008 — Features

Building a Better Podcast

by Matt Villano

Everything you wanted to know—plus a few things you hadn't even thought to ask—on how to best bring the technology into K-12 curriculum.



STEVE JOBS GOT IT RIGHT. When the Apple CEO introduced the company's iPod in October 2001, it was the first portable media player of its kind, and he predicted the technology would change the educational landscape forever. Today, more than six years later, a growing number of educators are using the iPod and a bevy of other tools to supplement lessons with that digital file-sharing activity, podcasting.

Still, while anyone can podcast, creating podcasts with true academic value can be tough. How can K-12 educators make the content unique, and relevant to teaching and learning? Technology coordinators from districts all over the country say there are nuances to making worthwhile podcasts, and simple tools that can empower teachers to turn run-of-the-mill podcasts into compelling educational exercises.

Be Prepared

Content-wise, podcasting is a lot like speechwriting. Educators must train students to know their audience, pick a theme, research talking points, and practice. Organization is key too. Like speeches, podcasts require a beginning, middle, and conclusion. Many K-12 podcasts suffer from lack of focus, with content that rambles and is difficult to follow, says Raleigh, NC-based educator and technologist David Warlick.

"You can't just plop kids down in front of a microphone and say, 'Okay, now it's time to talk about this' or 'Read this,'" says Warlick, who runs the Education Podcast Network, a database of education-related podcasts. "When you spend time up front preparing them for what the podcast is all about, the better

your podcast ultimately will be."

In most cases, podcast preparation begins with a standard lesson. Beyond that, Warlick says educators can develop special curricula or games that enable students to find additional information. In many cases, podcasts are the result of a day or two in the library, where students are encouraged to research a particular subject as they would for a term paper. For example, a history class is studying Martin Luther King Jr. in advance of MLK Day. The teacher has his students research King in the library, talk to people about him, then record a podcast on the subject and put it online. The difference, of course, is that in researching and preparing a podcast, unlike a term paper, students are required to work together and the finished product is a presentation.

Interestingly, much of podcasting's educational value comes from this research process. Yes, the medium is fun, but by researching material well enough to present it via podcast, students are receiving a broader educational experience. Tim Tyson, principal of **Mabry Middle School** in Marietta, GA, and a podcasting maven, says the editing and revision processes help students internalize the content, and adds that podcasting can be an excellent example of beginning with the end in mind—a strategy also known as backward design.

"When students have planned adequately for the actual final product, making the podcast is far less time-consuming, and the focus remains on learning, not on technology," Tyson says. "By the time students have produced a finished product, they have edited the script, the storyboard, the actual podcast itself—and, perhaps without even realizing it, have mastered the curriculum content in the process."

Podcasting can be used in other ways, too. Some teachers simply have hung an iPod around their neck with a microphone attached to record a lesson for students who were out of school due to extended illness. Capturing significant campus events—a celebration of a school's 25th anniversary, for example—is another use. Tyson says that technology coordinators even can help educators use podcasts to convey complex information that would be less interesting if it merely appeared in print.



site seeing

Australian educator and technology consultant Keith Lightbody offers teachers a how-to guide on the use of digital cameras in the classroom, including tips on choosing the right kind of camera.

Focus on Sound

Tackling content and the educational relevance of podcasts is only half the equation; dealing with the

technology is also important. Because most podcasts are nothing more than large audio files, it's critical that all presenters sound good. On the surface, this would seem to require simply using reliable microphones, such as the C-1 from Behringer, or the CC12 from Stageworks, both of which sell for \$50. Another option is PodcastPeople, an online recording studio.

Still, because classrooms are in schools, and schools are noisy, it's important to take steps to filter out background noise. The best way for technology coordinators to do this is to go low-tech and fashion a recording studio out of a wooden box and egg-crate insulation. Another resourceful option: Stretch pantyhose over a coat hanger and stick the hanger in front of the microphone. Tools like the ASVS6GB Microphone Pop Filter from On-Stage Stands (a division of The Music People), which retails for \$19.95, also work.

Audio involves other challenges, too. Because presenters usually speak at different volumes, some voices on the podcast can be louder than others are. Software solutions exist to smooth out these discrepancies. Perhaps the best solution to even out the volume is The Levelator from The Conversations Network, a listener-supported nonprofit podcast network. To use the software, simply drag podcast files into the Levelator icon onto your desktop.

Just as National Public Radio uses music to transition between segments, so too do the very best podcasts boast musical interludes notifying listeners that one topic is ending and another is about to begin. Bob Sprankle, technology integrator at Maine's **Wells-Ogunquit Community School District**, likens these snippets of music to the ginger provided between courses at a sushi restaurant—filler that helps to cleanse the palate as users pause to reflect on one offering before moving on to the next.

"It's like a marker or a signal that says, 'Hey, time to move on,'" says Sprankle, who created podcasts himself for years before being promoted to district technology integrator. "This tiny addition can go a long way to making a podcast user-friendly."

Because artists own the copyright to most music, selecting music that doesn't warrant permission to incorporate into a podcast can be tricky. It behooves technology coordinators, then, to provide educators with safe places to grab their tunes. Sites that abound with these royalty-free sounds and jingles include Soundzabout, RoyaltyFreeMusic.com, and The Music Bakery.

Edit Wisely

As tempting as it might be for teachers to edit speaking errors as their students are recording a podcast, it generally is better to record first and edit later, keeping disruptions to a minimum and forcing students to stay on task. When teachers do have to edit, they should check files for length, as few K-12 listeners have the patience to sit through more than 10 to 15 minutes at a time.

"If your podcast is for other teachers," says Kathy Schrock, technology administrator at **Nauset Public Schools** in Orleans, MA, "that's about the only time I'd say it's acceptable to publish something 30

minutes or longer. If you want students to sit through the podcast in one sitting, it needs to be under 15 minutes and you must edit wisely."

To edit, most educators use Apple's popular GarageBand—which comes free with Macs—and Audacity, also free. Another popular software tool is VoiceThread, which offers free premium accounts to educators and unlimited bandwidth, and lets students comment from home, via audio or text, about pictures and documents.

Part and parcel of the editing process is selecting a name, and in the world of podcasting, names are critical. Because most listeners search podcasts on the internet, a clever name can be the difference between catching the eye—and then the ear—of a prospective audience member and, well, losing that person to something else. Good names usually incorporate the school mascot or something special about a hometown. A podcast about New York City, for instance, might be called "Bytes of the Big Apple."

Once a name is conceived, adding a slogan for each individual episode helps too. Tony Vincent, president of Learning in Hand, an educational technology consulting firm in Omaha, NE, says slogans "give listeners something to remember" and help explain the overarching theme. The trouble is that creating unique, compelling names and slogans can be challenging.

To help with this, Vincent recommends that tech coordinators inform educators about a number of useful web resources, such as the Sloganizer, Slogan4u, and The PCman Website's Free Slogan Creator. Most of these sites are free.

False Alarm

TEACHERS' FEARS OF PODCASTING ARE UNWARRANTED—AND EASILY PUT TO REST.

IN THE K-12 ENVIRONMENT, perhaps the biggest threat to podcasting is fear—on the part of teachers who know about the technology, but haven't the foggiest notion how to use it. To confront and overcome this obstacle, some educators have developed podcasts geared for those of their colleagues who might not understand exactly how podcasting works.

For example, there's Kathy Schrock, technology administrator at **Nauset Public Schools** in Orleans, MA. Schrock's podcasts include short interviews with teachers and administrators about such things as how they use technology in their classrooms. This spring, she also held workshops for teachers. "Just the word podcast scares teachers away," she says. "There are a lot of misconceptions."

David Warlick, whose website, Landmarks for Schools, provides educators with a rich resource of teaching and learning tools, has experienced some of these misconceptions firsthand. Warlick says that when he sees teachers grow agitated over adopting podcasting, he focuses on explaining how easy it is for them to use.

"All you need is a computer, access to the internet, and a microphone that you can buy at Toys 'R' Us," he says. "These days, despite what the word podcasting might suggest, you don't even need an iPod to make it work."

Be Consistent

With good sound, well-edited content, and a catchy slogan, educators are ready to upload their student podcasts for distribution on the World Wide Web. One popular means of doing this is the free site Feedburner (recently acquired by Google), which sends more than 1.1 million "feeds" to nearly 600,000 users. Recent statistics from Nielsen/NetRatings, a market research firm, indicate that Feedburner is growing faster than MySpace and Digg.

Through these feeds, any educator at any given school can sign up to keep tabs on what's happening in any other classroom across the country. Nauset Public Schools' Schrock says Feedburner enables K-12 users—students and teachers—to establish recurring relationships with their peers and counterparts at other schools all around the world.

"You might end up having a school in Australia or New Zealand listening to the podcast to see what's going on here," says Schrock, who notes that local parents and administrators also can sign up. "That's the beauty of it—you simply never know who will sign up."

Of course, contributing to a podcast feed requires consistency—which means educators must be convinced to produce podcasts more than once a year. Wells-Ogunquit's Sprankle says that those educators who make only one podcast usually don't have much success with it. To make the most of the technology, he explains, IT coordinators must do their best to help educators incorporate podcasting into the classroom routine and motivate their students to produce podcasts regularly.

"One podcast is neat and fun, a unique diversion," Sprankle says. "Do a bunch of podcasts and it becomes something the students look forward to."

The easiest way for educators to weave podcasts into the curriculum is to commit to recording a certain number of them during the year, and to include them with lesson development. Technology coordinators can help by providing access to podcasting technology all year long. This enables educators to highlight at the beginning of the school year which parts of their curriculum might lend themselves to podcasts.

Follow the Leaders

The best way to stay on top of the latest innovations in podcasting is to study what others are doing. The Education Podcast Network is a great place to find other K-12 podcasts, and Feedburner users can search for files from other schools as well. Even Google Reader has a feature through which the news aggregator plays back podcasts and gathers together entries from newsfeeds.

It is relatively simple to download individual podcasts and transfer them to a school's intranet or personal listening device. If a technology coordinator wants to automate this process, a school can subscribe to podcasts using podcatching software and RSS feeds. Use podcatching software to specify particular podcasts that you want to receive regularly, and have the software download the files automatically to a folder or directly to your listening device. Some of the better programs include Juice, Doppler, jPodder, and iTunes.

Of course, the best way to "catch" podcasts is to ask friends and colleagues which ones they're listening to. In a burgeoning business like this one, word of mouth can be the best form of advertisement. Apple, which has sold nearly 125 million iPods since 2001, can attest to that.

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