

Podcast Project Overview

In regard to technology, today's students are light years ahead of their teachers. The Digital Era is their era. It's all they have ever known. Yet, often times during school hours students are prohibited from using the technology that intrigues and motivates them. Podcasting is one way to integrate current technology into the classroom and thereby increase student motivation and engagement.

For those of you unfamiliar with podcasting I turn to *Wikipedia-The Free Encyclopedia* for assistance defining this relatively new digital phenomenon. According to *Wikipedia*, a "podcast is a digital media file, or a series of such files, that is distributed over the internet...for playback on portable media players or personal computers." Basically podcasts are audio and sometimes video files that are posted on the internet and meant to be shared with others. Podcasts come in all forms and flavors. Some people create talk shows, while others post their own radio or comedy shows.

For this project students created *Natural Inquirer* podcasts. What follows is a detailed description of how the students began with an article from one of the many fantastic *Natural Inquirer* editions and ended up with a professional quality podcast.

Podcast Preparation

S.C.A.N. and R.U.N.

Before the students could begin creating their podcasts they had to have something to write about, which in this case meant they had to read an article from one of the many editions of the *Natural Inquirer*. Personally, I had small groups of students read different articles in different editions. By doing so I could ensure that I didn't end up with twenty-five different versions of the same podcast. (Note-If you wanted to create one class podcast for one article you could easily do so by having all students read the same article and then co-write the script for the podcast as a whole class.)

In an effort to facilitate student comprehension of the articles I created reading guides for each article they read. The **reading guides** were a modification of Salembier's (1999) S.C.A.N and R.U.N. If you don't have the time to create a unique reading guide for each article then don't worry. You can also use the generic **S.C.A.N. and R.U.N. reading guide** I prepared for the *Natural Inquirer*. It will work just fine with any article. For those of you who are not familiar with the S.C.A.N. and R.U.N. strategy take a closer look at the generic reading guide. It explains each step of this reading comprehension strategy in more detail. In the meantime, here's a quick overview.

The "S.C.A.N" portion of the strategy is meant for pre-reading. Students are asked to survey the selection, capture the visuals, attack the vocabulary, and note what they know. Essentially, students are asked to look at section titles, pictures, graphs, bolded vocabulary, etc... and make some educated guesses about the article. By "scanning" the article students are beginning to make connections to what they are about to read, which means they are setting the context for the article that is about to be read.

After students have “scanned” the article they are ready to “run” with it. In this case R.U.N. refers to reading for meaning, understanding what you read, and taking notes for later. In other words, students are asked to actively read the article by summarizing, synthesizing, and recalling what they read.

With completed S.C.A.N. and R.U.N. reading guides in hand students are now better equipped to discuss what they read. Typically, for a group of four students I allocate about eight minutes for the group to discuss their individual “findings”. During this time students compare notes to see if they all arrived at similar understandings of the text. After the group discussion I meet with the groups and have them share their group understanding of the text. If they don’t comprehend their article then I work with them by asking questions and referring them back to the article. If they comprehend their article then they are ready to advance to the next step of the podcast planning process.

Planning Guides

Upon reading and discussing their articles, student groups are ready to begin planning their podcast. The planning process can take on many forms and becomes easier after students have either heard example podcasts or made a previous podcast. To facilitate the planning process I provided my students with a **planning guide**. To facilitate student motivation I incorporated technology into this phase of the process by posting the planning guides on our school’s server as protected Microsoft Word documents. The students had to access the guides and then fill in the “gray boxes” (i.e., the text form fields). Granted, the planning process does not need to be done digitally, but I found that groups were more involved in the process if they had the opportunity to plan on the computer instead of with paper and pencil.

The planning guide begins with brainstorming ideas for the podcast. I explained to my students that brainstorming means that no idea is too ridiculous. Thus, I asked my students to type everything someone in their group said. I also told them that I was not concerned with spelling or grammar during this phase of the process. Instead, their only job is to think about what they read and talk about ways they can transform the article into a podcast. When groups had difficulty with this phase of the process I would ask them to simply brainstorm lists of words or ideas that they think of when they think about the article they just read. More times than not, this group brainstorming activity provided the group with the seed that would eventually blossom into an internet-worthy podcast.

While the groups were brainstorming, I also had one student (or sometimes all students) take notes. By taking notes the group would have something to refer back to when they began writing their podcast script. In addition, the notes helped me help the students move forward with their planning process. If students were completely stuck I referred them to the Factivity section of the article they read. Often times the Factivity would provide them with the spark they needed to begin writing their podcast script.

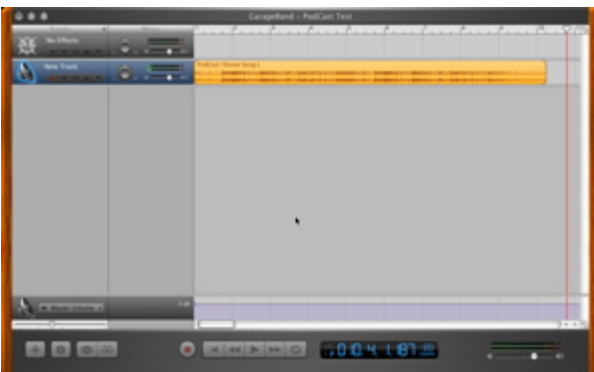
Once students had an idea of how they wanted to present their article they were ready to begin writing a rough draft. Once again, I informed the students that I was not too

heavily concerned about grammar and spelling. Instead, I wanted them to “stay true” to their plan. In other words, if a group planned on writing a news alert then they shouldn’t spend their time writing dialogue for a talk show. Once a group thought they had a rough draft script for their podcast they would present it to me. After providing any necessary feedback I then informed the group to make any appropriate adjustments and to practice their script. I explained to the group that the next time they shared their script with me it should sound just like they want it to sound. In other words, everyone should be able to read their part confidently and there should be no unnecessary stumbling over words or giggling. By setting these standards, I better prepared the students for the recording process, which can be a waste of time and effort if a group is not ready.

Podcast Production

With the final script in hand students are now ready to begin recording the vocal tracks for their podcast. Several different methods can be used to record these tracks. I used two methods that I will refer to as being either teacher driven recording or student vocal collection.

Teacher Driven Recording- Initially, I operated all of the recording equipment by myself. To record the vocal tracks I used a Snowball Blue Microphone (<http://www.bluemic.com/>) and a G4 Powerbook by Macintosh (<http://store.apple.com>). The Snowball is a USB plug and play, cardioid microphone, which means it’s easy to use and it produces a professional quality vocal track. I used the Snowball because it can be placed in the center of a table and pick up voices coming from all directions. In other words, the microphone has a three hundred and eighty degree recording diameter. This makes it an excellent choice for recording multiple voices at one time without moving people or microphones around.



I recorded the tracks into a program called GarageBand, which is an audio recording program that comes with any relatively new Macintosh computer. I chose to use GarageBand because it allows you to very easily record, cut, paste, edit, layer, and alter vocal and musical tracks. The best part is that there are tons of free user guides and tutorials on the internet. What follows herein is merely an overview of how I used

GarageBand. For a complete tutorial, go to the following Apple website (<http://www.apple.com/ilife/tutorials/garageband/>), or Google “garageband tutorial”.

To begin recording I first plugged in the Snowball microphone and opened up GarageBand on the G4 laptop. Next, I asked the group to practice a dry run. The purpose of the dry run was twofold—it helped reduce any nervousness the students had and it allowed me to set the recording level. Setting the recording level is simple. While students practiced I watched the level monitor (see picture above). When GarageBand senses vocal inputs it displays them on the input monitor which contains three colors: green, yellow, and red. When recording, you should stay in the green and yellow regions. If you go into the red you might end up with a distorted vocal track. If students speak too quietly turn up the volume input, which is done by moving the silver circle underneath the input monitor. If they speak too loudly, turn down the input level.



Once the levels are set you are ready to record. To begin recording, simply click on the record button. The recording button is the red circular button at the bottom of the screen. Once you click record, the students are ready to begin reading their script. As they read you will see that GarageBand creates a visual representation of the vocal track you are recording (see picture below). Don't worry if

students stumble over a few words or skip a word or two. In GarageBand it is easy to add and delete sections to vocal tracks.

If multiple students are going to speak on the podcast you can record them in several ways. The easiest way is to record all of the voices on one track by having the students read their parts in succession. Once again, if a student messes up his or her part and the other students do fine, you won't have to delete the entire track. Instead, you'll simply need to highlight the part of the track that contains the mistake and delete it (See track highlighted in blue in the picture to the right). If students are having a difficult time getting through the entire podcast you can also try recording the podcast in smaller pieces. For this method you start and stop recording before and after each student reads their portion of the podcast. If you want to get even more advanced you can record each student on a different track, but I wouldn't suggest doing that until you get a better handle on how to use GarageBand.



Student Vocal Collection

Student vocal collection is yet another method I used for recording vocal tracks. This method requires a few more steps but it allows the students to record their tracks anywhere, any time. For this method you'll need an iPod (at least a 20G) and an iPod adaptor made by Griffin called iTalk (<http://www.griffintechology.com/products/italk/>).



The iTalk adaptor plugs right into the bottom of the iPod and immediately converts the iPod into a portable voice recorder. To record a track, students simply need to plug the adaptor into the iPod and then click on the record button on the adaptor. The iPod does the rest for you. When using this

method I suggest that students record multiple tracks until they think they have finally recorded a “perfect” version. If one student is recording her own podcast, she can listen back to the recording via headphones. However, if multiple students are working together and using the iPod to record a group podcast, they will need something better than one set of headphones to play back the recorded vocal tracks. In this case we used JBL Onstage II iPod speakers. To listen to the tracks students unplug the iTalk adaptor, slip the iPod into the docking station on the JBL speakers, and click play on the iPod. Now students can listen to all of their recorded tracks and decide which one they like the best. To get their recorded track into GarageBand I hooked the iPod up to the G4 Powerbook and located them in iTunes. I then copy, dragged, and dropped the track into GarageBand.



Adding Background Sounds

Once you're done recording the student vocal tracks you are ready to create some background sounds. In my experience this is students' favorite part. To create a



background track you'll need to reveal the loop sample menu by clicking on the blue eye in the bottom left hand corner of the GarageBand screen. Once you click on the blue eye a menu appears (see picture to the left). Take a look at the many different loop samples and then decide what kind of music, sound, or instrument you want to start with and click on the corresponding button.

GarageBand will then reveal tons of different types of loop samples. You can click on the loop samples to hear what they sound like. Once you find one you like click, drag, and drop it right below the vocal track you recorded earlier. Continue this procedure until you have the background sounds/music you want, but beware this part of the process is very addictive!

Finalizing the Podcast

After all vocal tracks and background tracks are recorded you'll need to finalize the podcast so it can be posted on the internet. This is perhaps the easiest step of the process. All you have to do is go to "file" and "Export to iTunes." The computer will then convert all of your tracks into one audio file that can be emailed, shared, and/or uploaded. In my case I played the final drafts on the JBL speaker set to make sure everything sounded just like the students wanted it to sound. With their final approval I emailed the final copies to the kind folks at the *Natural Inquirer* who then uploaded the files to their website.

Podcast Documents Appendix

Reading Guides:

"Don't Be So Fuelish" – Urban Forest Edition
"Smoke and Mirrors" – Wildland Fire Edition
"What You See is Not What You Get" – Urban Forest Edition
Generic S.C.A.N and R.U.N.

Planning Guides and Drafts:

"Moving Spore-adically" Planning Guide
"Moving Spore-adically" Final Copy (Sudden Oak Death)
"Tag, You're It!" – Planning Guide (Asian Long Horned Beetle)
"Tag, You're It!" Final Copy
"What You See is Not What You Get" Planning Guide
"What You See is Not What You Get" – Final Copy

References

Wikipedia-The Free Encyclopedia
<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

Salembier, G.B. (1999, February). S.C.A.N and R.U.N: A reading comprehension strategy that works. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 42(5), 386-394.