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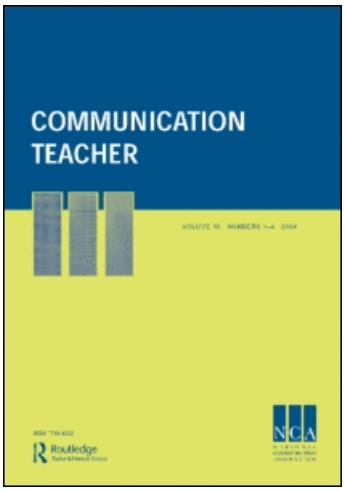

Communication Teacher
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713695733

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 2009

To cite this Article McArthur, John(2009)'Composing Podcasts: Engaging Digital Natives in the Communication Classroom',Communication Teacher,23:1,15 — 18
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17404620802592957
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17404620802592957

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Communication Teacher
Vol. 23, No. 1, January 2009, pp. 15–18

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Composing Podcasts: Engaging Digital Natives in the Communication Classroom

John McArthur

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Courses: *Small Group Communication, Organizational Communication, Interpersonal Communication*
Objectives: *Students will apply theories and concepts to specific small groups; practice media literacy skills; acquire effective interviewing skills; and demonstrate effective public presentation skills*

Rationale

Podcasting is no longer reserved only for tech-savvy students or mass media courses. As today's "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) enter college classrooms, instructors must engage students in ways that embrace their technologically nuanced skills. Although incorporating technology into instruction can be challenging, doing so is both necessary and exciting (Okojie & Olinzock, 2006). Instructors must design activities that complement course subject matter and provide opportunities for students to engage with a variety of media. Podcasting is one means in which these aims converge.

This activity assists instructors who may be hesitant to incorporate such projects into their courses. It offers students the opportunity to compose texts in audio form and gives instructors the tools necessary to design and implement audio-based assignments in their classrooms. Podcasting has become an increasingly important skill for instructors to master as (1) the number of high schools and colleges offering podcast lectures is growing (Read, 2007) and (2) podcasting is becoming ubiquitous as an aural media form in American education and society (Lum, 2006; Selingo, 2006, Tremel & Jesson, 2007). Moreover, this activity aims to engage students in observation, interview, and interaction with functional small groups outside the classroom. This assignment can be used in place of a written paper, helping students understand the techniques of composing arguments in different mediated forms. Such assignments can also develop students' media literacy skills (Rubin, 1998). While this activity is designed for small group courses, it can be modified for

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ISSN 1740-4622 (print)/ISSN 1740-4630 (online) © 2009 National Communication Association
DOI: 10.1080/17404620802592957

interpersonal, organizational, and other courses. Instructors can incorporate this activity while keeping the core aims of their assignments intact.

Activity

Instructors assign the project in two parts: literature review and audio project. First, students investigate a small group concept or theory (e.g., conflict management, symbolic language, women's social groups, etc.) and report their findings in a literature review. Then, they are asked to confirm or reject the findings of their literature review through podcasts based on interviews they conduct with a small group in the community.

After completing their literature reviews, students draft appropriate interview questions which can be developed in a homework assignment or an in-class activity. At this point, instructors ought to engage students in a discussion of ethical media portrayals and educate them on their responsibilities as interviewers. This includes a discussion about when and why it is necessary to obtain IRB (Internal Review Board) approval.

Each student then conducts on-site observations of an identified small group and individual interviews with members of it. For example, a student who wrote a literature review on conflict management interviewed a set of roommates. A student who did a literature review of symbolic language interviewed members of a basketball team, and a student who considered women's social groups interviewed a ladies' bridge club. Students engage the group in discussion about group process and record these interactions within the group setting. To record these interviews, students need audio recorders or computers with microphones. While many computers have built-in microphones, students are encouraged to purchase headsets; inexpensive equipment which clearly record and playback audio files.

Then, students create a well-designed narrative framework for the podcast, using the interview recordings as supporting material. Using editing software, students create audio files that (a) introduce the audience to the small group theory researched in the literature review and (b) focus on the specific small group that was observed and interviewed. *Audacity* is one user-friendly, free sound editing software from http://audacity.sourceforge.net, which offers web-based tutorials for creating audio files. In addition to learning this software, students experience storyboarding/outlining, interviewing, writing/composing, creating verbal transitions, and using special/editing effects. Thus, the digital nature of audio editing allows students to learn this immediate skill that can develop into authoring skills in other media forms.

The following guidelines have been helpful for students:

- The goal is to present a quality, edited, and unified podcast about a specific small group that explores an aspect of small group communication.
- Storyboard (outline) ideas. Presentations should include an attention-getter, thesis, main ideas with supporting material, and conclusion.

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- Interview a small group or team that is working together. Examples include: corporate work groups, sports teams, web-based group/team, families, etc. No two podcasts should use the same small group.
- The podcast should be 4–5 minutes long. This time requirement suggests that your goal is to present the most pertinent information and data clearly and concisely.
- The podcast should not use copyrighted material except in compliance with "fair use" guidelines (Vogele & Garlick, 2007).
- Be creative.

Two additional instructional strategies will help students complete the project successfully. First, devote a class session to audio editing. Instructors should create a podcast as an example. Audacity's online tutorials are an effective, user-friendly tool for learning how to do so. Second, create a timeline for students that divides the project into manageable parts (e.g., literature review completed before midterm; interviews completed 2 weeks before presentation; peer-critiques before presentation).

On the presentation date, students could play completed projects in class or post them to a private class Website for peer review as an out-of-class assignment. Sharing the podcasts allows students to display their work and allows the class to benefit from the breadth of information studied by others in the class.

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Debriefing

To debrief, students should respond to the following questions addressing both course content and media literacy:

1. How did this project help you understand small groups?
2. How was the group that you interviewed similar/different from your expectations based on your literature review?
3. How did your audio portrayal of the group maintain or change the characteristics of the group?
4. What were the strengths/weaknesses of your podcast?
5. How did you decide what/what not to include?
6. How did construction of a podcast influence your ability to be a consumer of mediated messages?

Appraisal

This project affords students an opportunity to investigate small group theories, interact with functioning groups, and author texts in audio form by engaging course material with media technologies. This process also provides students an opportunity to practice their oral communication skills without sacrificing course time. One additional benefit of this assignment is public presentation of student work. Not only do students hear about a breadth of information concerning course material, but students also take pride in completing a digital assignment. Although students might

initially resist this type of assignment, they will appreciate the end result. One student commented that, "This assignment took us out of our comfort zone as communication majors, but it is good for our futures." Another student remarked, "I loved the podcast . . . I didn't like the idea at first, but looking back, it was a really cool assignment."

One limitation of this assignment is that students must have either institutional or personal access to a computer and microphone. The suggested microphone headsets cost between $10 and $20. In addition, instructors must put forth some effort to learn about audio editing, ideally by creating an example of a successful podcast.

Many students suggest that this project teaches a beneficial skill and that it is creative, valuable, and fun. It challenges them to think critically about small groups by creating projects that intersect communication theories with media literacy, writing, and oral communication competence.

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