

3,000 Podcasts a Year: Teaching and Administering New Media Composition in a First-Year Writing Program

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This roundtable shares our experiences designing, implementing, and teaching a podcast episode as a required new media assignment across our entire first-year writing program. We start with the rationale for this new media assignment and concerns around teacher preparation and then turn to more specific teaching experiences focusing on students' research questions in a post-truth era, scaffolding the assignment for students, approaches to teaching a new media assignment in a low-tech classroom, teaching academic discourse through podcasts, and transcripts and accessibility.

In spring 2017, our department chair mandated a major overhaul of our First-Year Writing (FYW) program in response to negative narratives about the program on campus, low retention and success rates, and budgetary concerns. This overhaul necessitated designing new delivery models for our two-course sequence, a new curriculum, new teacher preparation and professional development, and new assessment efforts. Regarding curriculum, the previous model of FYW was designed around a scaffolded, yet quite stale, writing sequence that involved no new media or multimodal composition. The administrative team viewed it as imperative to incorporate multimodality into the new curriculum in meaningful and purposeful ways. One way that we addressed this exigence was by designing and implementing a required podcast episode as the final assignment in English 1301, the first course in our two-course sequence.

This roundtable shares our experiences designing, implementing, and teaching this assignment. This implementation ultimately equated to over 50

instructors teaching podcasts to over 3,000 students in the 2018–2019 academic year (the inaugural year for the program-wide podcast assignment).

Michael J. Faris: The WPA's Perspective: Rationale for a Podcast Episode and Supporting Teachers

For inspiration for a required multimodal assignment, we used Jeremy Cushman and Shannon Kelly's (2018) podcast episode assignment at Western Washington University as a model for the prompt and scaffolding. As the writing program administrator, I had various reasons for privileging a podcast episode instead of another multimodal assignment.

First, podcasts are an inquiry-driven medium, and because they are a new mode of composing for students, they can defamiliarize research and writing practices. First-year students transitioning into college often carry with them expectations for formulaic genres and research practices (e.g., thesis chasing), but teaching with new media “invites students to see writing in a new way” (Sady, 2018, p. 259). Assigning an inquiry-based new media assignment could encourage students to consider how to ask research questions, incorporate research, play with arrangement, enact rhetoric as more than merely logical argument, and attend to audience expectations in new ways.

Second, podcasts can center accessibility and disability. This claim may seem counter-intuitive, as most podcasts are not accessible because they lack transcripts and require a hearing audience. However, we designed this assignment with accessibility in mind. The prompt is written in a way that a Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing student can create a podcast: students are asked to start with a question, to make intentional audio choices (which can include silence), to include more than one voice in their project, and to incorporate research. With this flexibility, students could create a silent video using sign language and captions (for example) and meet the expectations (see Buckner & Daley, 2018, on accessibility and teaching with sound). Further, assigning podcasts affords teachers the opportunity to teach for and about accessibility. The assignment requires a transcript that includes descriptions of sounds, which encourages students to consider diverse audiences, issues of access, and how transcripts and the descriptions of sounds are rhetorical (Zdenek, 2009, 2015; see Heilig's discussion below). This assignment design further provides teachers the opportunity to discuss with students the ethics of creating accessible projects.

Third, as with many new media assignments, a podcast episode helps students to attend to composing choices. For our assignment, we required students to write a reflective explanation of their personal and rhetorical goals and the choices they made in the podcast episode by adapting what Jody Ship-

ka (2011) called a statement of goals and choices. This aspect of the assignment requires “students [to] assume responsibility for describing, evaluating, and sharing with others the purposes and potentials of their work” (p. 112).

Having a standard new media assignment presents challenges for preparing teachers, especially inexperienced teachers who are learning to teach writing for the first time and likely have little experience with new media composing. For new teachers, teaching a podcast episode can be cognitive overload: they are teaching inquiry, refining research questions, research practices (including interviewing), new media composing, the affordances of audio, intellectual property, and more. However, one benefit of a standardized assignment is that it “drives inexperienced instructors beyond their comfort zones, *compelling* (rather than merely encouraging) them to experiment with models and strategies” (Dively, 2010). We supported new teachers through this process in a variety of ways: exploring pedagogical problems and approaches together in our required practicum; workshops for teachers and students hosted by the department’s Media Lab; and teaching guides with suggestions for scaffolding and in-class activities. We stressed that the goal with this assignment was not becoming a master with sound editing but rather to practice transferable rhetorical skills around inquiry, research, audience, arrangement, and intentional and effective composing choices—an approach advocated by Tarez Samra Graban, Colin Charlton, and Jonikka Charlton (2013) that focuses on exploration, play, inquiry, and risk taking rather than technological mastery, for both teachers and students.

Callie F. Kostelich: Teaching Podcasts in a Post-Truth Era

As the assistant professor of practice for First-Year Writing at Texas Tech, I teach three large lecture FYW courses each semester. At the beginning of the podcast unit in English 1301, I introduced the assignment guidelines in lecture, and graduate instructors worked with students in their discussion sections to brainstorm and formulate inquiry questions. We had a significant number of students wanting to take on such issues as “Who really shot JFK” to more recent topics stemming from the 2016 election. Admittedly, this focus on “truth” took me by surprise. While I was aware that we would teach research skills in the podcast unit, it struck me that we would need to address how students see themselves as ethical participants in the construction of content, particularly digital content that has wide reaching implications.

In a timely December 2018 post to the WPA Listserv, John Duffy wrote of the importance of our work in this post-truth era: “Every day, more or less, we tell students that their claims must be truthful, that assertions require relevant evidence, and that when making arguments they should consider other

points of view.” In light of Duffy’s advice, the podcast serves as a fertile place for doing this important work. It is a unit that encourages students to use their own voices, to embark on primary and secondary research, to conduct interviews, and to make strategic rhetorical choices in the construction of their podcasts. We teach crucial skills in this unit that allow students to develop a toolkit to better process and vet the information they receive, as well as to consider themselves as rhetors within the information cycle.

Granted, these are skills that we teach through various forms in FYW classes and are not limited to the podcast. The podcast, however, provides an opportunity for students to use the “unique rhetorical capacities that sound offers to us as a medium” (Greene, 2018, p. 145). Through sound, specifically vocalization and rhetorical listening processes, students learn to consider the rhetorical concepts we teach—ethos, pathos, logos, kairos, rhetorical distance, and so forth—as they craft their podcasts. Students have to think about what content they are including, why they selected this content, and how they will convey it solely as a sonic text. While students certainly have a voice in and ownership of their written work, podcasts are innately personal. In this regard, sound is “an embodied event,” one that allows students the distinct experience of having a literal say in their work, of processing and articulating their composition using sound to convey emotion, increase listener engagement, articulate the power of strong logos, craft a sense of urgency in response to a kairotic moment (Greene, 2018, p. 145). Additionally, podcasts encourage students to not only engage in a conversation but to see themselves in it as rhetors entering a larger conversation. Working with sound can, as described by Bump Halbritter and Julie Lindquist (2018), “help not only to foreground listening as an ethical practice for researchers but also to conceive occasions for experiential learning.” Because podcast creation is often new for our students, they are more willing to take risks with their work. Their goals often become less about mastery of content (i.e., I am right about this topic or I know best) and more inquiry-driven because the process of creation is inquiry based. In essence, learning how to create a podcast provides opportunities for students to think about learning something new with their topic, as well.

Finally, as students craft their podcasts, they get to experience how “sound works as an affective mode” (Ceraso, 2014, p. 115). Podcasts serve as an avenue for students to process not only what an audience may experience and learn from listening to the recording but what the students themselves experience from creating it. Through the distinct use of sound, podcasts provide an avenue for students to connect directly with their subjects, to peel back the layers of abstraction, and to deeply engage, inquire, and reflect. It is, at least, a notable start for our students.

Tanner Walsh: Scaffolding for a Podcast Episode

While I had prior experience as a teaching assistant in philosophy, fall 2018 was my first time teaching FYW. I led two discussion sections of English 1301 consisting of mostly first-semester college students. Because the podcast assignment was a new project for many students that went beyond the traditional written assignment, and because we wanted to emphasize the importance of putting rhetoric into practice, it was necessary to provide useful scaffolding for students throughout the unit. My approach to scaffolding was largely based on the scaffolding provided by the program. While there are different existing models for scaffolding audio production—like Eric Detweiler’s (2019) adaptation of the *progymnasmata*—our program’s model follows Cushman and Kelly’s (2018) scaffolding for their program-wide podcast episode. I employed a sequence of four practices to carry out this assignment: 1) analyzing examples of podcast episodes; 2) narrowing broad student topics; 3) developing students’ plans of action; and 4) workshopping during class.

Analyzing example podcasts provided a frame of reference for students who had little to no knowledge of what podcasts are capable of. In class, I played example student-produced podcasts, pausing them frequently to discuss with students the choices creators made—for example, the use of mashup interviews, background music, audio transitions, and introductions for issues and interviewees. During each pause, we discussed which choices seemed to be rhetorically effective for the audience and why.

Second, although most students had in mind important issues they wanted to tackle, their issues were too broad for a short podcast episode (e.g., obesity in America). We used class time to narrow their issues to specific aspects and perspectives. In one class session, I asked students to write about their podcast topic before we workshopped a few topics as a class to narrow the scope through various sub-aspects of the issue. After modeling this sort of brainstorming activity, students worked in small groups to generate ways to narrow their focuses.

Next I had the class create a plan of action by mapping out their respective rhetorical situations: their audiences, exigences, and purposes. Then, we discussed rhetorical choices (e.g., cheery music to complement a humorous episode or solemn music for a more serious effect) that would help to have certain effects on listeners. We subsequently developed goals and timelines so that students could identify manageable tasks and be accountable to themselves. In subsequent class meetings, we talked about if the goals were met and how to overcome the obstacles they faced.

Last, I devoted some class sessions to workshopping so that students could have a dedicated space to work. During workshops, I was available to answer

questions, help troubleshoot software issues, discuss rhetorical choices they were making, assist in finding royalty-free audio, and provide advice on crediting sources. (A particular challenge I faced was that students were using a variety of software and devices to record and edit their episodes; I showed some features of Audacity and tried to help students transfer that knowledge to other software.)

The assignment was a success. Students created unique podcast episodes touching on different issues, such as answering questions about why people are distracted while driving, how a student personally overcame obesity, and how legalizing marijuana affects the U.S. economy. Some students paired up and started a dialogue, having guest interviews come on their show. Another student wanted to avoid the risk of using copyrighted sounds and music, so he vocalized all the sound effects himself for comedic effect.

Overall, because of how I implemented our program's scaffolding for the podcast unit, the students produced creative and compelling podcast episodes. Analyzing existing podcast episodes helped students understand conventions of podcast episodes and potential possibilities for how to design and arrange a podcast episode. Having the freedom to investigate their own issues engendered a passion for the project. Planning out the rhetorical situation and production of the episodes made it easier to bring the students' abstract ideas to concrete sounds. And devoting class time to workshops allowed for time for troubleshooting and fine-tuning final touches to their episodes. Thus, I am proud of what my students accomplished and the obstacles they overcame, and I believe they were surprised by their own achievements.

Sierra Sinor: Teaching New Media in a Low-Technology Classroom: Mistakes Were Made

In fall 2018 I was a new master's student in the Technical Communication and Rhetoric program at Texas Tech. I taught two English 1301 discussion sections, each with 25 students, most of whom were first-semester college students and over half of whom were first-generation college students. Neither of my classrooms had a computer, reliable outlets, or any real access to recent technologies—we had chalkboards and chalk. Instead of relying on digital technologies to teach my students, I used interactive lessons and games to build an environment that encouraged exploration, risk-taking, and mistakes that translated to confidence, creativity, and self-sufficiency in their final podcast assignment. While many in the field might believe we need high-tech classrooms “where more direct teaching and learning with digital technologies could occur” (Adsanatham et al., 2013, p. 285), I follow Douglas M. Walls, Scott Schopieray, and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss (2009) in understanding classroom spaces as interfaces

that can be “hacked” by instructors who “can make that space useful and more pedagogically appropriate in the context of that class and that semester” (p. 275).

Because I wasn’t familiar with podcasts, I had to Google “what is a podcast?” To my surprise, it was not a thing an injured green bean wears. Vegetable-based medical care might have been easier for me to grapple with emotionally as a teacher who was preparing to confront the complicated prospect of teaching a technology-based assignment in a classroom devoid of modern technology. I couldn’t draw on personal past experiences or effectively demonstrate the use of the platforms (given my classroom), but I do know what a medical plaster cast looks like.

I was transparent with my students about my inexperience with podcasts and related composing technologies and shared with them when I struggled with technologies, too. I reinforced that messing up was not a death sentence but never trying was. My classrooms became a place to reduce the stigma around mistake-making and to collaboratively normalize failure. To cultivate this environment, I implemented various practices to get my students both physically and mentally engaged in their learning.

One strategy was to have students write their podcast/technology problems on the chalkboards; I asked everyone to stand by issues representing their top frustration. Often another student in class had the answer for these issues and could explain the solution. If no one could explain it, a team of volunteers would research the answer using their phones or personal laptops and then explain the solution to the class. This sort of classroom “hacking” (Walls, Schopieray, & DeVoss, 2009) encouraged students’ initiative and problem-solving that then translated to their work outside of the classroom on their podcasts. They were finding answers for themselves and each other. They were claiming ownership of their learning process and taking the initiative to find solutions.

I made our lessons interactive: instead of lecturing about rhetorical situations, which they needed to consider as they structured their podcasts for a selected audience, I provided each group creative prompts and asked them to build responses and deliver them to the class with their justifications. In playing with these diverse prompts, students gained familiarity with oral delivery of their information as required in their podcasts, as well as thought through their choices and made mistakes in an environment that was supportive and safe.

These kinds of interactive activities in class allowed me to push students to ask questions, defend their claims, and become confident in their work. These were games we played in class. In games, sometimes you make mistakes. Instead of this being a shameful experience, within this environment we could laugh and then ask, “What would make this better?”

This lack of recent technology in my classroom—which initially terrified me—led to these “hacks” and practices that cultivated a classroom environ-

ment which encouraged my students to get up and get involved in their own learning. I got to be a part of an environment that didn't just accept mistakes but also sparked risk-taking, confidence, and self-efficacy. I learned that the people in my class were good humans, and they were perfectly capable of accomplishing the goals that I put in front of them. Yes, they made mistakes, but mistakes, in a supportive environment, are essential to learning both individually and collectively. As much as I wanted to, I could not simply transmit information to them or force them to do the work. However, I was straightforward and clear with what I expected from them, and I upheld those standards. I trusted them to do their work in and outside of my classrooms, and dammit if that isn't exactly what they did.

Michelle Flahive: Disrupting Appropriateness Approaches in FYW with Podcasts

During the 2018–2019 year, I taught two sections of FYW per semester as a first-year Ph.D. student. One challenge that students had in this unit was deciding how to select tone and voice for their podcast episode. Not only was the genre itself new to many students, but the blending of the podcast genre with inquiry and research left students unsure of whether they should (as the episode hosts and researchers) enact the voices of podcast hosts or scientific researchers. To help students strategize for selecting tone, voice, and style, I built activities into our unit which drew students' attention to the commonplaces of genre and audience awareness in academic discourse—particularly by relying on students' own discursive practices. Activities that denaturalize standardized linguistic practices work to disrupt appropriateness pedagogies—pedagogies that devalue the discourse practices of minority students by using U.S. dominant linguistic forms as a standard of appropriate discourse in academia (Flores & Rosa, 2015). One of my goals with the activity I describe below, then, was to help students see voice “as a phenomenon that has import . . . in being a *thing* heard, perceived, and reconstructed” (Royster, 1996, p. 30).

Activity

An example of a three-part activity, meant to draw student attention to genre choices, took most of one class period in this unit. At this point, students had already drafted a driving inquiry question. The activity followed a three-part sequence in which students practiced guided reflection through free-writing, engaged in collaborative discussion in a group activity, and participated in a class discussion:

1. **Free-Write:** Students reflected on our previous three assignments and the choices that they made in tone and style for each assignment and how those choices affected their audiences.
2. **Group Discussion:** Students shared their examples and were challenged to ask questions about and/or contribute to each other's examples. Then, I asked students to imagine that they had to convey this same purpose to a different audience orally (e.g., friends, family, classmates in a history or biology class) and give three examples of changes that they would make in their message (like choices in vocabulary, sentence structure, length, etc.).
3. **Class Discussion:** I asked each group to give examples from their discussion of the difference audiences to whom their messages were directed. As students listed audiences, I listed them on the board. I then asked for examples of changes students would make to their message in order to present an oral argument to each audience. As a class, we discussed why we would make changes to tone and style by reviewing ethos as a relationship between the rhetor and the audience and exploring the implications of those changes for being heard and listened to.

Discussion

Implementing activities like the one described above provided space to discuss strategies for selecting tone, voice, and style by exploring examples that were authentic to students' own experiences. During discussion, students identified changes they would make in vocabulary, diction, and style based on context and how those choices affect trust and credibility among students' various discourse communities. Students gave examples of idioms, slang, vocabulary, and grammatical structures that they use in different contexts and discussed how they make those choices. Practicing tone, voice, and style selection in a low-stakes environment also provided the opportunity for students to carefully consider who their podcast audiences might be and which types of choices would best reach those audiences. Examples of student podcast episodes with statement of goals and choices in these sections reflected thoughtful consideration of audience expectations. By implementing these types of activities, I was able to provide opportunities for students to tap into their own experiences as social capital, thereby bringing authentic context to the classroom while valuing students' discursive practices.

Leah Heilig: Transcription as Play

My first experience teaching podcasts was in fall 2018, when I was a fourth-

year Ph.D. student teaching English 1301 and serving as Assistant Director in the program. With this assignment, I wanted to emphasize the importance of accessible content. A quick formula to describe disability is “ability + barrier = disability” (Horton & Quesenbery, 2014, p. 3). Individual impairment is a false construct made by barriers that are built to exclude. Podcasts have a clear barrier to accessibility: they rely on sound for access. When they are assigned in composition classrooms, instructors have a responsibility to account for podcasts’ ostracizing nature.

Sean Zdenek’s (2009) work, as well as a collective response posted to the WPA Listserv (Brueggemann et al., 2018), made it clear transcription improves accessibility. But when made mandatory in my class, transcripts were not always well received. I’m not going to say my students didn’t care about transcripts. Many are more aware of transcription’s importance than I am. The impressions I’m about to outline aren’t from student apathy. They’re from frustration, stress, and poor communication on my part. Transcription felt redundant to students: why ask for a document saying the same thing as their podcasts? They saw it as extra work that overwhelmed them when they already had many other demands on their time. Transcription is often a new skill added onto a complex assignment. I can’t offer infallible pedagogies for resolving these concerns. Transcriptions are hard. There’s no way to mitigate their time-intensive nature. But I do think we can make them less redundant. I offer the frame of creative play as one way to do that.

“Play” is centered on observational discovery, allowing flexible guidelines for problem-solving (Gruber, 2017). To make transcription playful, I experimented with what I’m calling ADEPT: Analyze, Design, Experiment, Prioritize, and Translate.

Analyze

Creating transcripts is assumed to be just for Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing people, but their accessibility has wider impact. Technology fails. Someone forgets headphones. Maybe a listener hates someone’s voice. Determining who transcripts are for therefore requires not only an audience analysis, but an analysis of the contexts in which these audiences “listen.” Repositioning transcripts in terms of *situation* transforms transcripts from a retrofitted document to having rhetorical merit.

Design, Experiment, and Prioritize

Transcripts are also a site to **Experiment** and **Design** BEcauSe TYpE **af-facts~! TONE**. Transcripts are often considered flat or boring, rein-

forced when transcripts are divorced from audience. **Comic Sans, for instance, elicits immediate associations.** Transcripts can work *with* audio-based projects. When prioritized, they allow for experimentation, playing with rhetorical choices—such as music and structure—before committing to the time-intensive work of editing audio. Transcripts are low-fidelity; they save time.

Translate

Transcription decisions are not divorced from cultural knowledge. An exercise I've used, adapted from a similar exercise given to me as a graduate student in a web accessibility class taught by Sean Zdenek, is to ask for a description of “The Imperial March” from *Star Wars* to someone who has never heard it. What results are questions regarding context. Who hasn't seen *Star Wars*? Why does someone need it? Sometimes, even, what is “The Imperial March”? These questions facilitate a range of answers—experiments. The prompt may seem basic, but it highlights translation: who is the audience? Why are they listening? Where might descriptions be unclear or contested?

A more inclusive pedagogy ascribes value to transcription. Transcription can be **MALLEABLE**, emphasizing rhetoricity. Play, hopefully, makes transcription less redundant and more intentional.

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