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Podcasts

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PODCASTS



Podcasts are a flexible digital means of sharing information. A podcast is usually an audio file that is saved as an MP3.

By Dr. Shelley Kinash

The production usually has audio chapters, which may be thought of as tracks on a music CD. Podcasts are usually shared through a computer. They may be listened to directly from the computer speakers. They may also be downloaded and loaded onto an MP3 player such as an iPod through a USB connection. Podcasts may also be downloaded from the computer and burned onto a CDROM or DVD and played on an external player.

MP3 players with video capability are now readily available. Some people are producing podcasts that have both audio and video. Officially, productions with both audio and video are called vodcasts, as the 'v' stands for video. However, audio-only and audio-video productions are called podcasts.

As the principal researcher on a project with Flagstone Creek State School in 2008 I supported one of the child-research teams in their production of a podcast. They started with conversations about wonder. What, then, did they wonder about? The majority of this group of eight primary students had spent most, if not all, of their lives in the Lockyer Valley on rural properties. They had all experienced drought, and some of the older children had also experienced floods, which had impacted on both themselves and their families. The children all shared a passion for animals and they wondered about how the drought and floods had affected the local wildlife. Thus, their research question was – "What is the impact of flood and drought on local wild and domestic animals?" They began their research on the Internet, and soon decided to invite in local experts. With school support, the children placed an advertisement in

a local community newspaper asking for people who knew about water and animals and received multiple responses. One of the most significant came from Nicola Mead, a University of Southern Queensland honours student who was studying water usage in the local homes. She came in to show the students devices such as a water metre and artefacts such as water quality samples. The other highly informative response came from Kay Montgomery, who is the Science and Education Coordinator for South-East Queensland Catchments. She spent a day and a half with the children teaching them how to read aerial water maps and how to make plaster casts of footprints to see what animals had frequented waterway banks. She led the children on a full-day excursion down the Flagstone Creek bed, for which their school was named. Due to the drought there was no water in the creek and the children explored the empty weir collecting artefacts such as feathers and abandoned nests.

Ms. Mead and Ms. Montgomery wore wireless microphones while the children recorded their voices and the other sounds of the excursion through video camera. Later, they extracted the audio from the video and saved the audio as .wav files. The children had also recorded bird sounds on their MP3 players which they played back and selected engaging extracts from. For example, they kept an extract from the creek bed excursion in which Ms. Montgomery and the children found a cane toad in a burrow and explored how to differentiate between frogs and toads. The children wrote a script to introduce themselves, describe the project, and construct a narrative thread between the audio extracts. They rendered their podcast in various formats so that it could be accessed through the school website, and on CDROM and DVD. Several of the children also brought in their personal MP3 players and loaded their own podcast in their galleries.

There are numerous benefits of podcasts for everyone involved -

The Children Producing the Podcast:

- Practised choice and decision-making
- Built vocabulary

- Reinforced listening and narrative skills
- Developed skills in public speaking, including pacing, volume, and expressiveness
- Experienced pride of production and self-efficacy
- Established skills in information and communications technology (ICT)
- Generated competence in the digital age
- Contributed to generation of learning resources
- Celebrated learning as fun.

The Children Accessing the Podcast:

- Built vocabulary
- Accessed information about other contexts and environments
- Developed listening skills
- Have role models to inspire growth and development (research shows that self-efficacy is promoted when children experience modelling from other children rather than adults)
- Established skills in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) tools
- Generated competence in the digital age
- Celebrated learning as fun.

The Teachers:

- Documented explicit learning outcomes, promoting measurable growth and development over time
- Integrated skill development into enjoyable, cross-curricular materials
- Facilitated student-driven learning
- Fostered cooperation and a positive school dynamic
- Established skills in information and communications technology (ICT)
- Generated competence in the digital age
- Built a library of literacy resources
- Celebrated learning as fun.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Producing a Podcast

1. Organize the children into groups. You may want to do this according to research interests. You will also want to pay attention to group dynamics. For example, will these particular children be able to

work through personality differences to promote group consensus?

2. Facilitate sharing sessions prior to the commencement of the podcast working sessions. Provide discussion starters to initiate conversations about wonder.

3. Support the children to frame their research question and/or questions. Facilitate conversations to focus their questions. For example, researching Our History requires focusing on something like, "Who are some of the past graduates of our school?"

4. Help the children plan their research. Now that they have determined their research question, how will they gather their data? Will they conduct their research on the Internet? Will they research using library books? Are there local experts who might guide their exploration? Expertise is effectively gathered through family networking. Ask the children whether they have parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts or neighbours who might know about their particular topic.

5. Plan how the children are going to record their research. If going on an excursion, you may want to bring a digital video camera. Make sure that you use an external microphone. Remember that you are relying on the audio to carry your entire production. This means that you need high-quality audio. The internal video camera microphone will not pick up the quality of sound that you will need for your podcast.

6. Back-up your audio files. Connect your video camera to your computer through high-speed USB or through firewire and save your audio files on a computer.

7. Select a software program with which to produce the podcast.

Ensure That The software:

a. is relatively inexpensive and is therefore affordable to schools

b. is intuitive and user-friendly, and was designed for school children

c. is stable and seldom crashes (ensure that you have downloaded all the patches to update from earlier versions)

d. Has creative features that work well for podcasts, including multiple sound tracks, and a built-in script function.

8. Decide how many chapters the children are going to produce. Most software works best when chapter sizes are kept to reasonable file sizes. Bite-size chapters also make for more navigable listening pleasure.

For example, the children might want to frame five chapters.

a. Introduction (themselves, their school, their project)

b. Children's introduction to excursion

c. Facilitator's introduction to excursion

d. Audio files from excursion

e. Conclusion (what we learned)

9. Write a script. The script may be created directly in podcast software.

10. Record the introduction directly into the podcast software. Plug a hand-held microphone into the personal computer. Click on the record button. Scroll along with the script. The colours will cue the speakers. Have a circle of chairs positioned around the computer. Remind the children to sit quietly in their chairs so that there is no noise in the background of the recordings. Encourage the children to watch the vertical sound bars to ensure that they are making nice big waves with their voices. It is easy to record over segments when errors are made.

11. Record the children's introduction to the excursion as for point 10 above.

12. Import the audio file for the facilitator's introduction to the excursion. The audio file may be kept within a size that will maintain the listeners' attentions by highlighting and deleting text, or in other words trimming the ends.

13. Import and edit audio files from the excursion as you did for point 12 above.

14. Record the children's conclusion to the excursion as for point 10 above.

15. Click on the export icon. This will save your pod cast as an MP3 file.

16. Load your pod cast onto your school Website, on CDs and DVDs. Invite the children to bring in their personal MP3 players and mobile phones (with their USB cords) to download their podcast onto their files.

Remember to keep a copy for your library!
Enjoy! ■

Dr. Shelley Kinash is an Academic in Higher Education Teaching and Learning Services at Bond University. She was previously employed in the Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland and in Educational Technology at the University of Calgary in Canada.

Dr. Kinash passionately grounds her teaching and learning in an inquiry-based pedagogical stance through infused technologies. Dr. Kinash can be contacted via email skinash@bond.edu.au