Educator's Podcast Guide

Bard Williams

Finally—a technology that helps bridge the gap between content delivery and today's "digital native" students. Podcasting is a method of making audio or video content available regularly via the Web. It blends topical research and knowledge collection with a radio- or TV-style presentation that's perfect for the attention span and learning style of today's students. Part user manual, part curriculum planning tool, and part implementation survival guide, The Educator's Podcast Guide is an essential resource for any educator who would like to integrate this exciting new tool into the classroom.

In this excerpt, Bard Williams discusses how to choose the right podcasts for your classroom.

Choosing the Right Podcasts for Your Classroom

Every evening in most major markets there are more than 200 television shows airing on different regular and cable channels at one time. As anyone with a remote will tell you, often you surf through the channels and find that there's "nothing on." Either the content isn't compelling, or, more often, what's offered is of low quality.

Evaluating podcasts created by your students or by others is not an exact science. Besides looking at overall content and production value, things like the source are important too.

Even though we've taken steps to qualify the podcasts in this book, as with any resource that enters your classroom, you'll want to screen and evaluate the content to make sure it meets school and community standards before recommending or using the podcast in your classroom. Since creating a podcast is easy, and the Nintendo generation loves to explore, you'll find a sizeable (and growing) number of podcasts that probably are not appropriate for classroom use. Many young (and older) folks are using podcasts as audio or video blogs (Web logs) that chronicle their lives or offer opportunities to express opinions. It is very important that you screen any podcast, but especially those created and served up as blogs. Like surfing the Web for other content, you just never know what might pop up in a podcast blog.

Top 10 questions to ask as you evaluate podcasts for classroom use:

1. Is the content appropriate for your current area of study?

Back in the days when desktop computers were introduced into schools, we often felt compelled to use the technology because so many taxpayer resources went into funding them. There was sometimes a notion that if we didn't use computers every day or provide equity of access across the school that we weren't justifying the investment. In so many cases we trotted the class down to the computer lab "because it was Tuesday" and not because it necessarily fit well into what we were teaching at the time. Kids left language arts classes to "do spreadsheets" or we scheduled seat time in the lab to appease a watchful PTA. OK. Not

everyone really did that, but some of us did because we understood both the power and limitations of computer technology in schools.

With podcasts it's kind of the same process. We'll be tempted to grab podcasts off the Web or assign students to search out podcasts because everyone's talking about them and so they must be good. The reality is that podcasts are more like resource materials, or, if you're teaching how to make a

> » | **TIP**
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> **EXAMPLE PODCASTS**
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> Grab two or three examples of exemplary podcasts and burn them to a CD to distribute to other teachers in your school or district. You might also corral other teachers in your subject area and develop lesson plans that logically integrate podcasts.

podcast, an exercise in technology awareness and skill building. When you browse the podcasts in this book, make sure to think about how appropriate the content in that podcast is for the knowledge needs and grade level of your students.

2. Does the podcast add to or enhance your current lesson plan?

As with any resource, you'll find that podcast content can be an excellent way to turbocharge many activities. If you're a foreign language teacher, for example, you're highly likely to find a good quality audio or video podcast in your language of choice—perfect for students to use to learn, hone, or review skills. Of course, the trick is to listen to the podcast yourself first and direct the learner toward a goal (some way to demonstrate learning).

3. Does the content and production of the podcast meet school and community standards for acceptable use in your school?

Freedom of speech is a wonderful and treasured thing. You'll find examples of people speaking their mind all over the Web in the form of all kinds of digital content. Many people have discovered that they'd rather speak their mind than type their minds and are launching diaries, blogs, and diatribes in the form of podcasts in record numbers. That means, of course, that you're likely to be able to find and listen to or view just about anything you can imagine (and many things

you couldn't imagine) as podcasts. It usually takes about 45 seconds to determine if something just doesn't feel right for your classroom. Content might be littered with expletives, present ideas uncomfortable or inappropriate for your school or just content that's non-factual.

There's also the need to watch for the production value of the podcast. If the audio or video is garbled, the speaker speaks too quickly, the volume is impossibly low, there's background noise that distracts or other annoyances, it's probably a good clue that you should move on to select another podcast resource. Not to say that all useful podcasts are jazzy Hollywood productions with professional intro music and syrupy-voiced hosts. Some of the best podcasts I've heard were very simply presented.

A word to the wise is to carefully evaluate the source, credibility, content and presentation of a podcast or podcast provider before you assign the podcast as required or optional listening.

4. Is the content of the podcast well organized and easy to follow?

A good Web site offers content that is logically organized and always lets the site visitor know where they are in the site structure. Like great Web sites, the best examples of podcasts offer digital signposts such as a specific introduction announcing the topic, date, audience and other information and, in the case of a longer podcast (an hour), several "you're listening to a podcast from ABC Elementary School, Anywhere, USA" breaks. In addition, if your podcast is over about 15 minutes long, you should probably subdivide your content into logical units and provide an audio table of contents to kick things off.

If you're evaluating rather than creating podcasts, listen for those "digital signposts" and for rambling content. Think about how audio

books are presented (if you've not tried audio books, you're missing something—visit www.audible.com for some free and commercial titles) and try to choose podcasts that employ some of the same organizational methods (chapters, outlines, etc.).

5. Is the content of the podcast compelling enough to hold the attention of your audience?

It's no secret that the attention span of our students, just like most of us, seems to be decreasing with time. In this age of immediate information gratification, we're not used to waiting for anything and we're not likely to tolerate material that we think is boring. Like most other audio or video media, podcasts span the continuum from can't get enough to deadly boring. It's a highly subjective evaluation of course, since something you consider boring might be positively addictive for others. A general rule of thumb is to listen to the podcast and balance your evaluation between the importance of the content and the delivery. Every educational podcast, like every education film, won't be Top Gun but at least you can toss the ones that drone on more like the teacher in Ferris Bueller's Day Off... "anyone, anyone?"

6. Is the podcast in a digital format that works for your classroom?

Most of the downloadable podcasts are MP3 files, the same kind of files you're used to downloading for your iPod or other MP3 player. There are podcasts that are in other formats such as MOV (QuickTime), MPEG or even AVI. MP3 files are most compatible with the largest number of desktop and mobile devices, and the tools used to create, edit and share podcasts. Stick with MP3 as a format and you should have an easier introduction to podcasting.

7. Was the podcast produced by a source you consider credible?

Because you're using (assigning?) podcasts as a replacement or enhancement of other classroom curriculum resources, it is your role to ensure that the content presented is factual and aligned to your classroom and district's goals and objectives, meets curriculum standards, and that the information doesn't confuse (or enrage) learners.

Just like any article you research in the library or download from the Web, you should always consider the source when selecting a podcast. Tried and true sources like the NEA, CSPAN, CNN, and the Discovery Channel are probably safer than "Todd's podcast." That's not to say that "Todd's podcast" isn't good and factual, it's just a caveat emptor situation. You can assess the credibility of the source by looking at the hosting site (the place you go to actually download the podcast), the author, the group backing the podcast, and the resources cited during the podcast if the podcast is instructional in nature.

8. Is listening to the podcast the best method of learning about this topic for your students?

As an educator you have the wonderful option of many different ways to convey information. We use video, the Web, textbooks, and even (gasp!) paper handouts. Podcasts, presented in the proper context in a learning environment, are a great way to deliver information, especially for auditory (or visual if it's a video podcast) learners. The ability to stop, start and replay also makes for a tool appropriate for students with special learning needs or challenges—as well as everyone else who wishes to learn by repetition. As you listen to and review podcasts for use in your classroom, take special care to think about all the tools available and resist the "just because it's cool" temptation. Podcasts can enrich the learning environment—when they are selected as the right tool for the right job.

9. Is the podcast supported by additional online content (a Web site with further resources or archives, for example)?

As podcasting takes hold on the Net, you'll find more and more examples of content-rich Web sites that provide more information about the content you hear in a podcast. In other cases, the Web site gives basic information and the podcast gives you the "advanced" content.

Many sites, especially those hosting education-related podcasts, offer rich libraries of print and multimedia content that provide opportunities to broaden learning.

10. Does the podcast include any usage rights that limit the broadcast or distribution of content?

Like radio and TV, podcast content is subject to digital rights management. While the majority of podcasts are distributed as "freeware" (free subscription), some media outlets and professional content providers are beginning to offer podcast content as a paid subscription. That means, of course, that it's up to you to police the use and distribution of that content. Check the hosting Web site to see if there are any restrictions beyond fair use that might dictate what you do with the podcast content.

If you or your students create your own podcasts and wish to establish usage rights, check out Creative Commons (http://creativecommons.org/podcasting/) for a free option for tagging your podcasts to legally protect content. This site offers a set of common sense rules for sharing content (music, blog info, podcasts).

Let Bard Williams introduce you to a smorgasbord of education-related podcasts sorted by curriculum area! Order now by phone, by fax, or online. Single copy price is $31.95. ISTE member price is $28.75. Special bulk pricing is available. Call 1.800.336.5191 or go to **www.iste.org/edpod1/.**