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FEATURE

Podcasting 101 for K–12 Librarians

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Our 21st-century school librarians can lead the way with innovative programming, new resources, and creative instruction. But first, they need to learn what podcasting is all about.

The New Oxford American Dictionary chose “podcast” as its 2005 Word of the Year over “persistent vegetative state,” “bird flu,” “sudoku,” “rootkit,” and “lifhack.”¹ During the past 2 years, podcasting has become increasingly familiar as a method of information sharing. Yet when I queried 100 librarians during my presentation on professional development at the American Association of School Librarians meeting in October 2005, not one hand went up to indicate that anyone had accessed or listened to a podcast. Most did not know what a podcast was, and no one had used a podcast with students, much less created one. I had just suggested podcasting as a cost-effective method of providing professional development to teachers. Afterward, participants wanted to know more about podcasting, including what it really is and how to find, use, and create podcasts. This experience motivated me to develop a Podcasting 101 overview and some sample podcasts to help school librarians understand the basics of podcasting and encourage their uses.

For more than 7 years, I have supported libraries for Edison Schools, Inc., a for-profit company that manages about 100 public schools in 20 states. I design, implement, and support a model for libraries that helps integrate information and technology resources with curriculum. Because I oversee program implementation in schools across the country, and since most of these schools are working with very tight budgets, I need to find creative solutions to deliver content and professional development to site staff.

When podcasting emerged in the communication revolution, I saw a unique opportunity to provide on-demand content in an easily accessible and cost-effective format. What began as an interest in using podcasting for professional development has now become an interest in exploring creative podcast use in K–12 libraries. When I first asked my librarians whether they used podcasts, two-thirds didn’t know what I was talking about. However, many of their students were already accessing and creating podcasts on their own. So I suggested that we brainstorm and plan how to turn podcasting into an opportunity to reach out to students and to affect learning.

Podcasting supports efforts to differentiate instruction in the library in accordance with No Child Left Behind requirements. The podcast is a viable alternative for delivering research content or lessons to students who need remedial or extended support. While auditory learners particularly benefit when podcasts are incorporated into the teaching model, librarians can help all students and staff find ways to creatively use podcasting. Sometimes new formats are the key to igniting interest. While creating podcasts, students learn to research, write, develop vocabulary, speak effectively, manage time, solve problems, and grab attention.

Just What Is a Podcast?

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines podcast as “a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player.”² In other words, it’s a digital audio file that’s created, shared, and heard.

Although many podcasts contain only music or only speaking, most are a creative mix of voice, music, and sounds. Some now include video or photos. There is a wide variety of content, such as National Public Radio programming, a university lecture, an international news update, a band’s newest music, or an individual’s enthusiastic view of a political issue. Podcasts range in length from a few minutes to several hours.

What’s so revolutionary about a podcast? MP3 files have been around for a while and were accessed easily from the Web. But the arrival of podcasting and its Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed means that you no longer have to go to the Web to get newly posted MP3 files or to download them to an MP3 player. Instead, you can subscribe to a podcast series. Anytime you log onto the Internet, the software reaches out and automatically downloads newly posted podcasts to which you’ve subscribed. The new files wait on your computer or MP3 player until you’re ready to listen.

In September 2004, when podcasting was in its infancy and a Google search of “podcast” brought up only 24 results,

Doc Searls of IT Garage said, “Podcasting will shift much of our time away from an old medium where we wait for what we might want to hear to a new medium where we choose what we want to hear, when we want to hear it, and how we want to give everybody else the option to listen to it.”³ Indeed, more and more we want information when we want it—whether it’s TV or radio programming or other information. We don’t want to wait. Podcasting gives the end user one more option for information access at the point of need.

Podcasts are portable. Although accessible via computers, they can also reside on MP3 players and go anywhere. This is a real plus. Librarians can capitalize on this portability by creating a walking library-orientation podcast for students to carry around on an MP3 player, following instructions as they learn about different areas and resources within the library. Or while doing research on a field trip, students can use a digital recorder to document interviews, observations, notes, and other information and then come back to the library to produce their own podcasts to share what they learned. Examples of this type of community research include the work of students from several primary schools in West Bromwich, U.K., who report on visits to special places in their community.⁴ Students from Mabry Middle School in Marietta, Ga., conducted oral history research by interviewing World War II veterans as a way of passing history from “one generation to another and enabling students to create digital representations of their new knowledge in a medium that is relevant to their teen culture.”⁵

Podcasts actively engage students in their own learning. Since they are already used to hand-held MP3 technology, integrating it with curricular content comes naturally. Students even become teachers as they help lead the way during implementation.

How to Access Podcasts

Before I attempted to create my first podcast, I listened to as many as possible. In the beginning, there were very few library-related podcasts, but now a search brings up many options.

You can search and manually download a podcast from a Web site or subscribe to a syndicated podcast that automatically downloads updated installments. Podcast subscription directories use RSS technology to help you find, subscribe to, and download podcasts. There are many to choose from. (See the [Podcast Directories sidebar](#) on page 20.)

To listen to a podcast, you can use most devices that play digital audio files, including personal MP3 players like the iPod or the Sony Psyc. Or you can use a computer with an audio player application, such as Windows Media Player, iTunes, or QuickTime.

Reasons to Use Podcasts in School Libraries

When new forms of technology arrive, consider the reasons for their use. The fact that the podcast is a new format isn’t reason enough to use it in a school library. Instead, ask questions. Is a portable audio format the best format for this task? How does the podcast support my goals? How does a podcast enhance student learning?

There are two basic types of podcast use, each valid in the K–12 library (or classroom) setting: to retrieve information (accessing podcasts created by others) and to disseminate information (creating and sharing podcasts).

I’m convinced that the real power of podcasting is twofold: It gives learners point-of-need access to information, and it disseminates information in exciting new ways. Students eagerly and actively participate in the creation of content-rich podcasts, and those who publish their podcasts publicly are quickly connected to the world community in ways never before possible.⁶

In fall 2005, I spoke with librarians and searched the literature and Internet to get examples of podcast usage in school libraries. While most of the librarians I work with are in the very beginning stages of podcast understanding and implementation, they eagerly embrace the concept. And after hearing examples from my research, they’re quick to think of their own creative applications.

Many librarians help students and teachers retrieve podcasts to supplement curricular needs, particularly to get news and information for research. (See the sidebar [Podcast Content for Library Research](#) on page 19.) But because the body of publicly accessible K–12-appropriate podcasts has been limited (though quickly growing), most librarians were more focused on helping students (and teachers) author their own podcasts. I have used the following examples as catalysts to help Edison librarians brainstorm simple ways of incorporating podcasts into their own library programming. Below are my examples along with some suggested projects for each application:

- Promoting the library—I found some examples of schools that are helping their communities learn about available library programming, especially reading and book promotion. Grandview Elementary School in Monsey, N.Y., provides storytelling, a library newsletter, and creative writing podcasts.⁷ Isinglass High School and Middle School in Contoocook, N.H., offers library book talks on the Teen Read Award nominees.⁸ You can also use podcasts for book reviews, reading incentive program overviews, and connecting librarians to student achievements.
- Using student products to share learning—An end product of student research can be a paper, poster, or even a

podcast. Two of the most compelling examples I found of student-produced podcasts are from Willowdale Elementary School in Omaha, Neb., where Radio WillowWeb ⁹ offers informative and entertaining culminations of studies, and Longfellow School in La Crosse, Wis., where Coulee Kids Podcasts ¹⁰ provide subscribers with chronicles of ongoing research. The students' observations and excitement for learning are infectious. Now the entire world can listen in on their learning. ^{11, 12} Student podcasts can include interviews, dramatizations of students' creative writing, readings of book passages to demonstrate skills, and observations about the learning process.

- **Sharing school news**—The librarian can be a leader in the use of technology to disseminate information and to increase community involvement beyond the library walls. Examples of what's possible include Minneapolis Public Schools' audio publication of school board meetings ¹³ and an interview with a principal in the Dubuque (Iowa) Community School District. ¹⁴ This technique can also be used to advertise upcoming concerts or to replay highlights of a basketball game.
- **Providing professional development**—The first podcast I created was a short 10-minute session for site librarians that helped them write book reviews and become involved in a book review program. The second was a 20-minute podcast about the Top 10 presentation tips for librarians. The podcast format for professional development is compelling: Create content once and it's always accessible for review. Professional development podcasts can also include on-demand tutorials, copyright discussions, book group discussion guides, overviews of new services or policies, presentations by outside professionals, or introductory discussions of educational issues.

Create Your Own Podcast

Once you're comfortable navigating directories and subscribing to podcasts, it's time to become a creative podcast author to support the wider use of podcasting for learning. The process can be quite simple. Think "radio show." If the content lends itself to a radio show format, it should also work as a podcast. I've broken the process down into eight steps.

- 1. Gather the required hardware and software.** Different configurations will work, but the easiest is a computer with a microphone and speakers and an application that records sound. The computer's microphone can be built in, but for better quality, use an external microphone with a USB connection. The sound-recording application can be a simple digital audio recorder or a podcasting software application that allows editing and the addition of music and sound effects. (See the Podcast Recording Software sidebar on page 20.)
- 2. Decide on the content.** Its quality will keep people coming back for more installments. If it's part of a series, create a template and choose theme music to increase listener recognition and to maintain consistency. Create engaging text with an appropriate introduction, breaks, and a conclusion. Also, consider additional features. Music or sound effects can signal a page turn, generate interest, and keep listeners engaged. Use accompanying images, album art, outlines, or notes if the software allows it. You must also make sure you're copyright-compliant. When incorporating music or images into a public podcast, you must request and receive rights to use those songs and images. Or you can use items that are in the public domain or that have already been licensed for noncommercial distribution. If you're making the podcast for curricular use at the school and not for publication, follow fair use guidelines as outlined in Digital Millennium Copyright Act.
- 3. Practice.** For instance, practice speaking until you're confident and the session flows smoothly in a natural, conversational style. Practice adding music and sound elements until you're comfortable with moves and transitions.
- 4. Record the podcast.** Use software that generates an MP3 audio file. Following instructions that came with the software, add and mix text, music, and sound elements.
- 5. Test the podcast.** Listen to it and share it with peers. If you don't like what you hear, redo all or part of it until it's the best you can do. Students are often motivated to excel if they realize a public posting of their podcasts means that people from all around the world could be listening. (Be sure to follow your school's privacy guidelines for student safety.)
- 6. Publish the podcast to share your good work.** Link the audio file to a Web site with an RSS feed ¹⁵ so people can subscribe. Or simply link the file for manual download. (However, it's then considered a linkrf audio file rather than a true podcast.) Submit the audio file for public posting on a podcast directory service such as iTunes Music Store, Podcast.net, OurMedia.org, Podcast Alley, or PodcastPickle. Test the access to make sure it really works.
- 7. Promote the podcast.** Advertise within your school community and encourage parents, students, and teachers to subscribe. Students can be the best word-of-mouth promoters, but the quality and timeliness of the podcast(s) will be what keeps subscribers coming back for more.
- 8. Evaluate and learn from your mistakes.** Be prepared to adjust your template or make changes to procedures for future podcasts. You want the end product to be the best that you can make it.

Librarians Are Learning

Twenty-first-century school librarians can lead the way with innovative programming, new resources, and creative instruction. But first, they need to learn what it's all about.

In my survey of Edison library media specialists and technology integration specialists, I found that several are implementing student-produced school newscasts as a starting point. Karen A., a respondent from Washington, D.C., is finalizing production of both video and podcast news.

Overwhelmingly, the respondents showed a thirst for knowledge and an eagerness to learn: Laura B. from San Francisco said: "I am always interested in anything that makes the dissemination of information easier. I look forward to learning more." Karen T. from St. Louis responded, "I want to start a student newscast, and this will be perfect." Carol R. from Peoria, Ill., said: "I don't have any experience with this process nor do any of the staff here. But I know many of the students have players, so if there are ways to use them for educational purposes, it would be a great new venue to use." Claudia C. from Las Vegas responded similarly. "I'm not too sure what you are talking about, but it sounds interesting," she said. "Send me all you know, starting with the basics."

It's my job to help with this learning process, and I eagerly await the growing results. With care, creativity, and encouragement, librarians who embrace podcasting and other emerging technologies can foster enhanced student learning, teacher participation, and collaboration. The possibilities are limited only by our imaginations and those of our students.

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Further Reading

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Web Sites

Apple Education Solutions

<http://www.apple.com/education/podcasting>

Educational Technology: What Is a Podcast?

<http://edtech.ocde.us/learning/podcasting>

Wikipedia "Podcasting"

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting>

Free Government Information

<http://freegovinfo.info/node/174>

Podcast Content for Library Research

CNN News Updates

<http://www.cnn.com/services/podcasting>

History According to Bob

<http://www.summahistorica.com>

The New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/multimedia/podcasts.html>

National Public Radio

http://www.npr.org/rss/podcast/podcast_directory.php

PBS American Experience

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/podcasts.html>

Presidential Radio Addresses

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/radio>

Podcast Directories

The Education Podcast Network: <http://epnweb.org/index.php>

iTunes: <http://www.apple.com/itunes> (Free; go to Music Store and search for Podcasts.)

OurMedia.org: <http://www.ourmedia.org> (offers free syndication)

Podcast Alley: <http://www.podcastalley.com>

Podcast.net: <http://www.podcast.net>

PodcastPickle: <http://www.podcastpickle.com>

Podcasting News (Education): http://www.podcastingnews.com/forum/link_6.htm

Podcast Recording Software

CastBlaster: <http://www.castblaster.com> (offers free trial)

Apple's GarageBand: <http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband>

Audacity (free, open source): <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

Sony's Acid Music Studio: <http://www.sonymediasoftware.com>

Podifier (free): <http://www.podifier.com>

Podcast Factory: http://www.m-audio.com/products/en_us/PodcastFactory-main.html (contains software, microphone, USB audio interface)

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