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Podcasting: A Beginner's Guide to Technology's Latest Trend

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Technology Feature

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Podcasting: A Beginner's Guide to Technology's Latest Trend

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Abstract

This article provides a starting place for teachers wanting to dabble with the latest trend in technology—podcasting. The authors present a general overview of a tool that will most likely be part of the teaching vernacular, if not now, in the very near future. We offer a short tutorial on podcasting as well as perspectives on how teachers might incorporate podcasts into their curricula. We also summarize the value and limitations of podcasts, and perhaps most importantly, we include a resource guide to some of the more intriguing and useful podcasts currently available.

Introduction

Are you a history teacher studying the Great Depression? Why not bring in Stanford University professor, David Kennedy, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1999 for his book, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*? Are you working on your unit focused on Women's Suffrage? Why not incorporate a rendition of Susan B. Anthony's speech on a woman's right to vote from *Great Speeches in History*? Want to get your students motivated about studying the topography of Ancient Rome? How about taking them on a walking tour of the city with Rudy Maxa in National Geographic Traveler magazine's selection of the world's greatest walking tours? Leveraging the popularity of *iPods* and mp3 players, web-based audio and video podcasts can create opportunities for social studies teachers to supplement existing curricula with audio/visual document sources on virtually any topic.

As former high school social studies teachers, however, we are well aware of the questions that may be running through your mind: What is a podcast? How can I possibly do one more thing this year in my already jam-packed curriculum? Where do I even start? Do I have the right equipment for podcasting? Where do I find credible podcasts on the web? How is podcasting different than a plain video? The existing scholarship on podcasting and, in particular, the documented costs and benefits of incorporating into the middle and high school setting, is minimal. Nonetheless, this article provides a starting place—a general overview of a tool that will most likely be part of the teaching vernacular, if not now, in the very near future. We offer a short tutorial on podcasting as well as provide ideas of how teachers might incorporate podcasts into their curricula. We also summarize the value and limitations of podcasts, and perhaps most importantly, we include a resource guide to some of the more intriguing and useful podcasts currently available.

What is a Podcast?

Podcasting is a means of publishing audio and video content on the Web as a series of episodes with a common theme (Deal, 2007). This audio content is distributed over the Internet, enabling playback on a computer or portable audio device. In essence, an individual or organization hosts one or more audio files (usually in mp3 or mp4 format) on a Web site that enables visitors to listen to a file online or download it to their computer. This means of hosting audio files on the Web has been possible for years. The concept of a podcast, however, is more recent. According to the Wikipedia, "A podcast is distinguished from other digital media formats by its ability to be syndicated, subscribed to, and downloaded automatically when new content is added" (www.wikipedia.com). In order to subscribe to a selected podcast, listeners must first download and install free "podcatching" software such as *iTunes*, *iPodder*, or *podcatcher* to a computer. Once the software is installed, participants select the podcasts (either from the producer's webpage or simply from the software provider's index) of interest. New episodes are then automatically downloaded to the listeners' computer as they become available. If the user synchronizes a portable media player (e.g., iPod), the podcast episodes are automatically transferred. Subscribers can then listen to the episode at their convenience. The fact that the media comes directly to the user has powerful implications for classroom teachers. Rather than having to visit a Web site multiple times to check for new audio or video files, a one-time, free subscription to a podcast keeps users up to date automatically.

Podcasting for Social Studies

The emergence of sites such as *YouTube* may lead to the question of whether popularity and usefulness are mutually exclusive website descriptors. Fortunately, for social studies educators, some of the “big names” and most frequently visited history websites also provide access to relevant and applicable podcasting series. Gilder Lehrman’s *Historian’s Forum*, for example, features podcasts led by well-known scholars, historians, and authors including Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gordon Wood (www.gilderlehrman.org). While these lectures may not capture the interest of the typical high school history student, the episodes give educators an opportunity to enhance their own knowledge of historical events and can keep them up to date on the latest historical scholarship. In addition, the Gilder Lehrman site also includes lesson plan ideas, professional development opportunities, and student research guides for use in conjunction with their podcasts. *Teaching American History*, a site specifically designed for U.S. History instructors, allows visitors to download one-two hour lectures categorized by the following eras: Founding, Expansion, Civil War, Progressive, Post WWII, and General Resources. While the lectures provide additional expertise to instructors, the lectures can also inspire interesting guiding questions and discussion topics for classroom use. Entire lessons could be planned around episode titles such as “What is Citizenship” or “Republicanism: Cynicism and Nobility in Theory and Practice” (www.teachingamericanhistory.org). *The History News Network* also features interviews with historians, press briefings, and conference presentations that might be of interest to educators, particularly those with an interest in political science. The episodes reflect and examine recent trends in scholarship and range in focus from Pamela Cochran’s lecture on “Biblical Feminism” to David Greenberg’s, “The Conservative Invention of the Liberal Media” to Michael Burlingame’s, “Did Lincoln Lie Us into War in 1861?” (www.hnn.us).

Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of podcasting is the access this tool provides to downloadable audio and visual primary sources. As a supplement to traditional textbook material, primary source podcasts give students an opportunity to feel as though they are actually experiencing, rather than simply studying, seminal moments in history. Imagine how powerful it would be for students to actually listen to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, “I Have a Dream”, speech when studying the Civil Rights Movement (www.LearnOutLoud.com). *Great Speeches in History, Learn Out Loud*, or *History Podcast* gives students a chance to listen to, and in some cases, watch audio/video podcasts by various politicians, religious leaders, social activists, and sports figures, both past and present. An additional source is *Presidential Archives Uncovered*, which is updated monthly, broadcasts clips from the National Archives collection and allows subscribers to listen and read the transcripts of speeches and briefings from President Hoover through President Clinton. The episodes reflect both policy decisions as well as informal communications. While a Government/Civics instructor might have their students listen to President Eisenhower’s decision to send federal troops to Central High School, a U.S. History or World Civilization teacher could access President Truman’s address to the American public regarding the atomic bomb or a discussion between President and First Lady Nixon regarding Nixon’s trip to China in 1972 (www.archives.gov/presidentiallibraries/research/podcasts).

Ranging from *Great Speeches in History* to *CNN Student News* to historical biographies, podcasts also have the potential to “bring history alive” for middle and secondary students. In so doing, podcasts may also have the added benefit of providing an alternative framework of historical interpretation. By exposing students to new or previously marginalized voices (both literal and figurative), perspectives, or story-lines that supplement, enhance, or perhaps even

challenge standard textbook material, podcasts may encourage students to reevaluate social and/or historical norms that have historically grounded educational inequalities. *The Educational Podcast Network (EPN)*, a general podcast clearinghouse that is produced and updated largely by high school educators, provides access to oral histories, public service announcements, radio programs, and global news reports. Because of the producers' teaching backgrounds, high school educators, in particular, will find highly applicable connections to national standards. For example, the oral histories included in the "Rise and Fall of Jim Crow" episodes have the potential to bring to life a period in American history that textbooks often present from only one perspective (www.epnweb.org).

In an era of budget restrictions and preparation for high-stakes tests, the phrase "field trip" has become an antiquated notion in many high schools. While virtual field trips pale in comparison to actually visiting historical sites, podcasts such as *Colonial Williamsburg* allow students to travel back in time. Students can watch as journeymen make saddles and tools, listen to costume curators speak on 18th century clothing, or study the role of religion in the colonies with religious specialist, John Turner (www.history.org/media/podcasts). With easily navigable and high-quality episodes that include pictures, slide-shows, videos, lecturers, maps, and music, the Colonial Williamsburg site sets a precedent for other travel site podcasts that will likely flood the Web in the upcoming months.

Podcasting is also a way for educators and students alike to keep up-to-date with news briefings, recently published literature, and scholarship trends. How often have you heard students ask, "Why do I need to know this?" or "Why does what happened in 1800 matter to me?" Instructors can demonstrate the significance of the past by positioning current events within historical frameworks. As such, it is particularly important for educators to have access to those current events that directly relate to classroom material. The *President's Weekly Radio Address* (www.whitehouse.gov/rss/) or *CNN News Update* (www.cnn.com) can be used to provide bellringer activities, discussion prompts, or homework assignments in Government/Civics classes. Additionally, *History News Network*, as previously mentioned, features noted historians discussing both past and present political controversies. Otis Graham's, "The Immigration Crisis and Robert Dreyfuss's" and "Why Hamas's Victory Is a Disaster" are merely two of the lectures that could spark discussion in a high school World Civilization class (www.hnn.us).

Because of their many applications for social studies, we suspect that podcasting is not a fad but a reinvention of existing teaching strategies as outlined above—the guest speaker, the field trip and the primary source. For a summary of some of the sites used within this article, please refer to the following table:

Table 1. Access to Podcasts Referenced in Text

<u>Podcast Provider</u>	<u>Website</u>
Gilder Lehrman	www.gilderlehrman.org
Learn Out Loud	www.LearnOutLoud.com
National Geographic	www.nationalgeographic.com
Teaching American History	www.teachingamericanhistory.org

History News Network	www.hnn.us
History Podcast	www.historyonair.com
Presidential Archives Uncovered	www.archives.gov/presidentiallibraries/research/podcasts
CNN Student News/News Update	www.cnn.com
The Educational Podcast Network	www.epnweb.org
Colonial Williamsburg	www.history.org/media/podcasts
President’s Weekly Radio Address	www.whitehouse.gov/rss/

Teaching with Podcasts

As with any resource taken from the Web, some podcasts are more credible and relevant for history classrooms than others; therefore, we include within the instructional discussion a brief review of the methods recommended by the Center for Media Literacy (CML) when vetting any media—in this case helping you and your students evaluate the veracity of podcasts. To begin, the CML focuses on five dimensions of media: authorship, format, audience, content, and purpose as well as provides corresponding key concepts and questions to help guide the inquiry. See Table 2. *Framework for Media Literacy* for a summary.

Table 2. Framework for Media Literacy

Key Word	Five Key Concepts	Five Key Questions
Authorship	All messages are constructions.	Who created this message?
Format	Messages are not representations of social realities.	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
Audience	Individuals negotiate meaning by interacting with messages.	How might different people understand this message differently than me?
Content	Messages have economic, political, social, and aesthetic purposes.	What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
Purpose	Each form of communication has unique characteristics.	Why is this message being sent?

The nature of podcasting is much like other media on the Internet—some reputable, some less so and some in between. The use of any Internet resource requires a heightened sense of media literacy or an awareness of the hidden curriculums that might underlie otherwise relevant or seemingly useful texts. We suggest that as you use media, like podcasts, in your social studies classroom, you incorporate the five key concepts and five key questions outlined in the above table. For example, as you introduce any podcast—even ones from sites like Gilder Lehrman or the National Archives—it would be useful to direct students to the perspectival nature of any document source, asking questions such as follows: (a) What is the perspective of this historian of historical figure? (b) How do we know this? (c) What biases does this person have, and how are they evident in the document? For more resources and lesson plans to help you and your students appropriately question media messages, please reference the Center for Media Literacy (http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article677.html).

Lastly, like all tools we teachers use, podcasts are only as effective as we make them. Podcasts, when used effectively, involve good scaffolding, timing, questioning, and connecting. Essentially, podcasts require many of the same considerations as the old social studies staple: the video tape. For example, as engaging as a two-hour lecture on Lincoln's death, Republicanism, or the media might be, it is still a two-hour lecture and should be given the same pedagogical considerations that a video tape of the same subject would be given. With a little technological skill and free audio editing software (e.g. *Audacity*), a teacher may choose to crop the audio file to a smaller, more targeted segment. Teachers may also consider the same kinds of strategies and scaffolds to keep students engaged that they might use with videos or in-class lectures. Teachers might develop their own concept maps or questions for students to work through or one of the excellent resources provide by the National Archives in the section entitled, "Teaching with Documents" resources (<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/index.html>). On this site, teachers can download document analysis worksheets, including ones for sound recordings that can be used in conjunction with podcasts. Within this analysis, students ask a variety of questions: What kind of document is this? What is the perspective of the author of the podcast? What questions does the author of the podcast raise? These analyses worksheets are available free to educators and can be downloaded as a pdf document. The important point is clear: Podcasts don't teach, teachers do.

Conclusion

Like any new instructional resource, podcasts provide both challenges and opportunities for classroom teachers. Finding and evaluating a podcast closely connected with your curriculum can be time consuming and difficult. Then, you must determine how to use a particular podcast in the classroom. Downloading and installing "podcatching" software on a classroom computer may require authorization by a technology specialist, and even listening to a podcast in a classroom setting may require additional external speakers. However, the variety of podcasts available, the ease of subscription, and the versatility for playback provide educators with easy access to a wealth of digital material and offer a convincing argument for teachers to consider the options. As new podcasts become available weekly and as educators become adept at selecting and employing podcasts in their teaching, this seems like one trend that may gain traction in history classrooms in the not-too-distant future.

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Annotated Bibliography

To research podcasting further, we have provided the following articles and books to help you get started.

- Bull, G. (2005). Podcasting and the long tail. *Learning and Leading with Technology*, 33(3), 24-25.

This theoretical analysis provides a concise definition of what podcasting is, the possible benefits of using podcasts in the classroom, and the accessibility factor that ultimately determines use. While this article is not a "how-to" paper (those interested in setting up their own podcasts should review some of the other sources listed below), Bull does provide a clear and convincing rationale for incorporating podcasts into existing curricula.

- Bull, G., Hammond, T., & Grimes, P. (In press). Podcasting in the social studies classroom. In Bennett, L., & Berson, M. (Eds.), *NCSS bulletin: Exemplary social studies lessons that infuse technology*. Washington, DC: National Council for Social Studies.

As the title suggests, this article is of particular interest to social studies teachers. After a brief introduction explaining the "so what" factor of podcasting, Bull, Hammond and Grimes provide a step-by-step guide as to how to subscribe to a podcast, how to select and examples of

appropriate podcasts for varying grade levels, as well as how to create and distribute one's own podcasting series. The article concludes by suggesting ways in which podcasts can be used in conjunction with existing social studies curricula or particular school or community activities.

Deal, A. (2007). A teaching with technology white paper: Podcasting. *Teaching with Technology*, [volume], 1-15.

This instructional guide explains the what, why, and how of podcasting. Particularly useful for teachers who want to create their own podcasts, Deal follows an in-depth explanation of podcasting and the possible inclusion in the classroom setting, with two university-based case studies. Deal also includes an extensive reference list and detailed charts as well as a list of related websites that teachers will find helpful.

Flanagan, B., & Calandra, B. (2005). Podcasting in the classroom. *Learning and Leading with Technology*, 33(3), 20-23.

This article, which was published in the same edition as Bull's, Long Tail article, provides a nice complement to the theoretical approach of the latter. Flanagan and Calandra provide an overview of the possible benefits of incorporating podcasts into classroom environments. Listing detailed steps for both receiving and creating podcasts and/or vodcasts (podcast + video), the article is a reference guide for beginning podcasters as well as those ready to create their own productions. The reference list provided in the conclusion is also quite useful, directing readers to over 25 podcasting websites.

Vincent, T., & Hooft, M. (2007). For kids, by kids: Our city podcasts. *Social Education*, 71(3), 125-129.

This article is geared toward elementary and middle school teachers interested in student-created podcasts. Although the point of reference is a third-grade classroom in Nebraska, the article provides a useful mix of both theoretical benefits and usage options of podcasts with case study examples of what works most effectively. Vincent and Hooft also provide an explanation as to how teachers can submit their respective class's created podcasts to the Our City Podcast series, episodes that reflect, reference, and exhibit products of various school communities across the country.

Williams, B. (2007). *Educator's podcast guide*. United States: International Society for Technology in Education.

Excerpts from chapter three, Evaluating Podcasts for Classroom Use, are particularly useful for teachers concerned with the overall legitimacy and accessibility of available podcasting series. Williams' answer the top 10 questions teachers need to consider before incorporating a podcast into their own curriculum. In so doing, Williams' encourages teachers to create a checklist that addresses the standards to which podcasts should meet levels of appropriateness, credibility, and functionality.