Podcasting Craze Comes to K-12 Schools

Educators discover value of Internet audio programs.

By Rhea R. Borja
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The rustle of dry leaves on pavement. The syncopated claps of middle school cheerleaders. The shouts of soccer players at practice, and the resounding *thwump* of a black-and-white ball kicked down a field.

On a balmy November afternoon, Gunston Middle School 8th graders Elizabeth O'Neil and Timothy Touch recorded those typical after-school sounds here with an iPod, the wildly popular recording and listening device from Apple Computer Inc.

Using an iPod, 8th grader Elizabeth O'Neil records an interview with classmate Davis Tran as he works on the set design for a play at Gunston Middle School.
—Christopher Powers/Education Week

Afterward, they ambled into a stuffy computer lab at their suburban Washington school. They uploaded the sounds onto a computer, spliced and edited them, added music, and wrote and recorded an introduction. Then the students released the two-minute snippet over the Internet, to the world beyond their school walls.

Voila!: the newest edition of "Buzzwords," Gunston Middle's student-run podcast, a free, weekly audio show courtesy of the Internet.

Podcasting, a term derived from combining "iPod" and "broadcasting," is homegrown, 24/7-accessible Web radio for the masses. Listeners can subscribe via free "podcatching" software, which automatically delivers podcasts to their computers.

Podcasts exist on just about any subject under the sun: retro television shows, local politics, and marathon running. There's even "Copcast," a podcast "for cops, by cops." Now, a small but rapidly increasing number of K-12 schools are taking part in the trend, experts say.

Educators are starting to see how podcasting can help hone students' vocabulary, writing, editing, public speaking, and presentation skills, said Dan J. Schmit, an instructional-technology specialist at the University of Nebraska's college of education. Students can also learn skills that will be valuable in the working world, such as communication, time management, and problem-solving, he said.

Learning Curve

"I've been talking to people about podcasting for a year now, and before, they were like, 'What is it?' " said Mr. Schmit, who is also the author of *Kidcast: Podcasting in the Classroom*, published this year by Bloomington, Ind.-based FTC Publishing Co. "Now we're getting to the point where [teachers] can see the potential."

Others caution, though, that while podcasting is getting easier as the software and equipment for it becomes more user-friendly, teachers who aren't techies still need to carve out some time to negotiate podcasting's learning curve.

Many teachers interested in podcasting so far seem to be in English language arts, foreign languages, or social studies. They also tend to be technology mavens.

Podcasting Resources

How to create a podcast:

1: Record sound using a digital audio recorder or an MP3 player with a recording function, such as an iPod, and a microphone. Or, you can skip this step by recording directly onto a computer's hard drive via the machine's imbedded microphone.

2: Transfer the sound from your recording device to a computer.

3: Edit the sound and add music, voice-overs, or other audio elements using production software such as Sony Corp.'s Acid Music Studio, Apple Computer Inc.'s GarageBand, or the free, open-source software Audacity.

4: Compress the finished product into an MP3 format.

5: Post the audio on a Web server.

6: Create a Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, feed of the audio file through online services such as www.libsyn.com so listeners can subscribe to the podcast.

7: Submit your podcast to podcast directories such as Apple's iTunes Music Store and Podcast Alley.

A few online links for more information on podcasting:

• http://edtech.ocde.us/ learning/podcasting/

• www.apple.com/education/ podcasting/

• www.edupodder.com

• www.podsafeaudio.com

• http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ Podcasting-Education/

A few online links to podcasting software:

• http://audacity.sourceforge.net/

• www.apple.com/ilife/garageband

• www.sonymediasoftware.com

How to listen to podcasts:

Listeners can "subscribe" to podcasts via podcasting software, which uses RSS technology. When a new podcast comes out, the listener's computer automatically downloads it, then subscribers can

transfer it at their convenience to an MP3 player, such as an iPod or personal digital assistant (PDA).

A few examples of K-12 podcasts:

• "Kids in the Coulee"

• "Buzzwords"

• "Radio WillowWeb"

• "Music Appreciation Podcasts"

Some links where you can find and subscribe to podcasts:

• www.apple.com/itunes/podcasts/

• www.podcasts.yahoo.com/

• www.podcastalley.com/

• www.odeo.com/

• www.thepodcastnetwork.com/

—Rhea Borja

"There's no one-click solution yet," said Robert Craven, the coordinator for instructional technology for the Costa Mesa, Calif.-based Orange County Department of Education, which works with 28 school districts. "That's holding teachers back a bit."

The potential for reaching a larger audience, the creative possibilities of the technology, and students' ease with new technology has sparked widespread enthusiasm for podcasting among Gunston Middle School students, who work on "Buzzwords" after the school day ends.

Like many of the schools that podcast, Gunston has only a handful of iPods for student use. A $1,200 Arlington County grant paid for three iPods and microphones, and students produce the podcasts on computers loaded with music-recording software.

"This is another form of expression," said language arts teacher John P. Stewart, the head of Gunston's "Buzzwords" podcast. "I already run a quasi-underground literary magazine for students. This … takes it to the next level."

The term podcast is somewhat misleading, because an actual iPod isn't needed. Another name for this cultural phenomenon is "audioblog"—an aural version of Web logs, another sign of the technology zeitgeist.

Anyone with a digital audio recorder, an Internet-connected computer, a microphone, and cheap or free recording software can create a podcast.

Consequently, the number of education podcasts has exploded over the past year. In Apple's "iTunes Music Store," almost 1,000 secondary and higher education podcasts exist. Yahoo.com listed 625 education podcasts last month, and PodcastAlley.com has 360 podcasts in its "education" genre.

"The growth has been phenomenal," said Stan C. Ng, the iPod product marketing director for Apple, based in Cupertino, Calif. "We've seen a lot of interest in [K-12] education."

In fact, interest in podcasting was so great at a K-12 educational technology conference in Philadelphia this past summer that a standing-room-only crowd of 200 teachers attended an Apple-sponsored seminar on the subject—and another 200 had to be turned away, said an Apple spokesman. He added that the company held a second workshop to accommodate the remaining teachers.

Many education-related podcasts are aimed at college or graduate students, but a growing number are created for and by precollegiate students.

Seventh graders at Longfellow Middle School in LaCrosse, Wis., recorded essays and music on their "hopes and dreams," and photo presentations on crayfish dissection and mealworms' life cycle in their "Kids in the Coulee" podcasts (www. lacrosseschools.com/longfellow/sc/New/).

Students at Willowdale Elementary School in Millard, Neb., wrote and recorded a play on the Revolutionary War on their weekly "Willowcast" podcast.

And music-appreciation students at North High School in St. Paul, Minn., waxed enthusiastic on their podcasts about the local heavy-metal music scene and musicians of the 1960s and '70s.

'Something Incredible'

A potential audience of millions inspires the 7th graders at Longfellow Middle School to spend hours of their own time writing, editing, and splicing their podcasts, said language arts teacher Jeanne Halderson, who works with the students in class, at lunch, and after school.

"I feel that something incredible is happening here," she said. "I have kids who want a pass every day for lunch so they can work on their podcasts. So far, there has been no grade or credit for this."

She began the "Kids in the Coulee"—French for "hills"—podcast in September with just a few computers. The students spoke directly into the microphones imbedded in the computers.

Since then, the podcast project has become so popular that she ordered 10 iPods, and the class is crafting handmade greeting cards as a fund-raiser to pay for them. Many of the students don't have their own iPods, which typically retail from $99 to $399. The ones who do own them, keep them at home so they won't get lost or stolen, several students said.

Longfellow 7th grader Alyssa M. Gilbertson described the appeal of creating a podcast. "When you're writing an essay," she said, "you don't try your hardest because after you're done, you throw it away or put it in a box."

But with podcasts, she said, "now we try a lot harder because we want other people to know that we [can] do more. We want people to hear us."