

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note Podcasts in an Alternative High School

by Jack Murphy



PHOTO BY NEONBRAND

The students of my writing class are often surprised and delighted to find that their final project will not involve another paper. After five months of personal narratives, profiles, short stories, and poems (plus daily writing practice and prompts), the process has understandably started to grow a bit tiresome. Instead, they are challenged to use the skills and concepts we have honed over the course of the semester to create an audio product—a podcast.

Podcasts have proliferated at a rapid pace over the last decade, in large part due to the unprecedented accessibility of the tools required to create them and the networks necessary to distribute them. Soundcloud and iTunes are now stocked to the brim with professional and amateur podcasts covering an absolutely endless variety of topics, and the most popular among these programs boast hundreds of thousands of loyal listeners. The biggest shows of 2017, *Serial*, *S-Town*, and *This American Life*, count their downloads in the tens of millions. In the case of my classroom, however, it is not the medium's capacity for mega-popularity that makes it an appealing and powerful project; in fact, it is the capacity for *smallness*, the intense intimacy, that makes it special.

The students in my classes are aged 16 to 21 and all are returning to school seeking a high school degree after dropping out of Chicago Public Schools. Of the 200 students enrolled, 90% are African-American or Hispanic, 18% are considered homeless, and 100% qualify for free lunch. While each student takes their own path to us, there are some extremely common challenges: many have a child of their own to take care of, most have a full-time job outside of school, and some have gotten caught up in the criminal justice system. For these reasons, poor attendance and tardiness are rampant— it's not uncommon for a student to stumble in several hours late having gotten home from bussing tables the night before well past midnight or else to disappear altogether after several weeks of excellent work.

We base our podcast on *This American Life*, where each week various stories are presented around a common theme. The theme in our case is simply "Truman Middle College," the name of our school, and students in groups are free to choose any topic that can be connected even tenuously. In a five-minute segment, then, incorporating an intro and outro, interviews with at least three people outside their group, and background music and sound effects, each group contributes one story to our show.

While few students in my experience have arrived as fans of podcasts, the tools required to create them are often very much a part of their lives. The easiest program is GarageBand, which comes standard on all MacBooks and iOS devices. Rarely have I been able to provide this program, but there are free, web-based tools which work nearly as well, the best being Audacity. All programs are simple enough that the necessary production elements can be taught in 30 minutes. Indeed, I often have students, aspiring rappers in their free time, who have already mastered the programs and production techniques; this leads to the happy circumstance where these students, often (but not always) disengaged throughout earlier

assignments and projects, become rejuvenated as in-demand experts offering help to their fellow classmates and teacher.

This to me is an ideal use of technology, as it facilitates working and planning together in the real world (with students using their smartphones to make field recordings and conduct interviews), as opposed to the prevalent and very negative classroom tech tools which suck individuals into a screen. This also makes explicit the collaborative nature of creation, essentially hidden in the professional context and maybe even nonexistent in classrooms, as students very often are set to work on an individual writing assignment or, worse, a quiz or test. Students see very clearly that while the narrator is the most featured in the finished product, there would not *be* a finished product without the producers who conducted the interviews, the writers who wrote the intro and conclusion, or the editor who spliced together all the different audio files. Often, each student has a hand in all aspects of production.

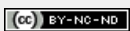
While students are frequently dismayed at hearing the theme, perhaps fairly assuming they will be forced to create a sanitized infomercial for the school, they quickly find that almost any element of their life can be incorporated into their segment. On the one hand, typical topics embody what Noam Chomsky calls the essence of discovery, that being the practice of "puzzling over simple things." These simple things in the past have meant interviewing every student who goes to school with a sibling and exploring the implications of that situation; inquiring into the various living situations of classmates, teachers, and administrators and comparing the troubles and joys therein; and investigating how various students spend their lunch period, which at our school includes "off-campus" privileges. These segments often lead to the development of a natural solidarity among students, as they discover the similar struggles, successes, fears, and dreams heretofore hidden beneath the social networks they ordinarily relate by.

On the other hand, topics of a more socially conscious sort are also common. This typically begins with the desire to challenge school officials on policies ranging from tardies and uniforms to their relationship with the school security guards. The dean and principal have many times been interviewed and taken to task on what students consider to be unfair practices. Beyond that, students have pushed back on the narrative they know exists on what it means to be a student at an alternative high school. Our school is housed within a community college and one group approached the many college students and professors in the building and questioned their perceptions of the high school "dropouts" they share space with. These segments are deeply inspiring, as the students are manifestly *not* a part of a robust democratic institution— the adults in the building have almost complete control over their lives, and it goes without saying that school officials and policies are not subject to any kind of referendum or student consent whatsoever. To ask difficult questions of these people will hopefully contribute skills and confidence to challenge students' nominally accountable representatives, including Rahm Emanuel and Donald Trump. At the very least, it

installs the expectation that powerful people ought to answer for the policies they espouse.

The podcast project typically inspires some of the best, most exciting work my students produce all semester. And while the finished product bears little superficial resemblance to more traditional writing assignments we've explored, this project truly does utilize the concepts we have studied over the course of the semester (among these, interviewing, storytelling, figurative language, showing and not telling) and applies them in a fresh context in service of an authentic product. Beyond this, the podcasts over time stand as a historical document,

capturing a wide-range of emotions, sounds, and voices in what will be remembered as a truly calamitous and truly vibrant time to be a young Chicagoan.



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