before my second year of teaching in a summer “Bridge” English class at Santa Monica Community College (SMC), I was asked to participate in a pilot podcasting program. I was told I would pair up with an instructor for a counseling course, we would share the same students, and we would use iPods with them.

“Sure, I'll do it. I've seen an iPod before; I think I've even touched one,” I answered. Little did I know that this experience in using technology would result in my students better understanding structure in academic writing.

The six-week summer Bridge program at SMC is designed to assist under-represented students of color to make the transition (or bridge) from high school to college. Students take two courses, and the instructors are expected to collaborate in order to develop connected curriculum and instruction. Another reason for pairing instructors is to help them to assist students who appear at risk of dropping out. My students took my English 21A course in the morning and attended the Counseling 20 course of my colleague, Jacqueline Seiden, afterwards.

Students were placed in my English 21A course based on their English reading and writing placement exam results. If students scored well on the exam, they were qualified to enroll in English 1, freshman composition. If students did not score as well, they were placed in foundational skills courses, of which English 21A is the middle level. While the students were of college-going age, they had the academic English skills of high school students. English 21A was designed to assist students in reading college-level text and writing academic, expository essays.

Before the start of classes, Ms. Seiden and I shared our syllabi, collaborated on assignments and exams, and met with the media support team who made the technological portion of podcasting possible.

By describing my experience using iPods in the summer Bridge classes, I hope to introduce podcasting to teachers who are unfamiliar with the technology and show that podcasts can scaffold conceptual understanding of academic compositions for all kinds of students. In trying to assist the college by volunteering for a pilot program using iPods and podcasting, I also inadvertently stumbled upon the realization that podcasting lends itself naturally to differentiating instruction.

What is Podcasting?

In defining the term “podcast,” it seems à propos to cite Wikipedia, which describes a podcast as “a digital media file, or a bunch of such files, that is distributed over the Internet using syndication feeds for playback on portable media player and personal computers” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcast>).

The most commonly known forms of podcasts are audio files (e.g., songs) and video files (e.g., television shows and movies). Individuals can also create slideshows, much like PowerPoint presentations, by using Apple's “Keynote” program. To add sound to the Keynote podcast, one can use Apple’s “Garage Band” program. (Examples of such podcasts can be found at <www.smc.edu/itunes> under “Photography 43”)

The term “podcast” is a combination of “iPod” and “broadcast,” with Apple's iPod being one of the more popular brands of the portable media player. What distinguishes podcasts from other forms of media is the ability of the podcast to be easily downloaded to an iPod after being downloaded onto a computer from a website or the Internet. Also, one can easily syndicate, subscribe to, and download podcasts. This suggests many possible uses for the teacher in the classroom as the medium allows easy transfer to students and/or other teachers.

The college had received a grant that allowed them to purchase enough iPods to loan to our 25 students. Each student's borrowed iPod with video screen had a number and the letter A or B. That letter corresponded to one of the two Apple computers from which the student needed to download each week's podcasts. The media support team was responsible for uploading the podcasts onto the computers each week. If the students used these loaned iPods to download any unsanctioned material from the Internet, the existing course-related podcasts were wiped clean from the iPod and students had to bring it back to the media support team to be re-set.

As I learned about iPods, the question that emerged seemed obvious: Why not use technology the students are already familiar with to scaffold learning in the classroom? The challenge for me, then, was to use iPods and podcasting in a meaningful manner by integrating them into the curriculum and/or instruction.

How Can Podcasting Be Used to Differentiate Instruction?

Ms. Seiden and I realized that for the podcasting to work well, we would have to make podcasts an integral part of our classes. We did not want merely to videotape our lectures and have them available for students to download, although that also would be a use of podcasts to support learning. We therefore looked over common topics in our curriculum and realized that we could find podcasts that would support conceptual understanding of these topics and/or build academic skills.

The final project assignment for the counseling course was the one in which I saw the students make the connection between podcasting and essay structure. The culminating task for the counseling course required students to create their own podcasts about the services
available to students at the college. These podcasts would then be used by the counseling center to inform other SMC students about the resources available to them. The counseling center already had three podcasts created, and they served as models. (Some examples can be found on the SMC website at <www.smc.edu/itunes/> under “Counseling 20”)

While Ms. Seiden would be responsible for grading the podcasts, I was responsible for assisting students as they created a plan and script for these projects. After the students downloaded the model podcasts and viewed them as homework, I played them on a television in class by plugging my own iPod into the adapter connected to the television. As we viewed the model podcasts together and discussed the necessary parts of a good informational podcast in class, students realized that the organizational structure in the podcasts could be applied in other contexts. When I asked which podcasts were easier to follow and understand, students named one particular example. I asked why, and a student said, “Because it has an intro.” I said, “Yes, so what’s the job of an introduction? Why do we also need such a thing in our essays?”

Other students pointed out that one model podcast with a speaker who made a point and then followed up with examples was easier to follow, especially since the examples were bulleted in writing on the screen. When I asked what that sounded suspiciously similar to, another student said, “Oh. It’s like a topic sentence and then supporting details.” Students also saw the need for a conclusion rather than just ending the podcast abruptly. I made sure to assist them in connecting that idea to their essays, which needed some sort of closure as well.

Overall, the class began to see how creating a useful, understandable podcast was conceptually much like writing a good expository essay. In having to share information in a logical manner, students saw how their own essays should also have logical presentation of ideas.

Unsurprisingly, the results from the survey the college conducted on the pilot podcasting program show that 95% of students felt that the podcasting and iPods had added to their classroom experience. Ninety percent felt that podcasting had helped them learn the curriculum better.

How Podcasting is Differentiated Instruction

Even for those of us who believe that differentiating instruction is central to good teaching, “the challenge lies in translating that belief into action” (Willis and Mann, 2000, p. 2). While I had not started out this endeavor as a means to differentiate instruction through podcasting, after my SMC experience and in comparing that to my high school teaching experience, I realized how well podcasting had lent itself to differentiated instruction.

I’ve tried to use videos in my classes before and found the whole process difficult. To introduce the concept of comparison and contrast essays for a 9th grade English class, I brought in a videotape with two different music videos by the same artist. We viewed them in class in order to discuss what and how students might compare and contrast. While this was appealing for the class, it was a logistical nightmare. Some students needed to view the videos several times; other students only needed to see the video once or twice. Having the video on “play” indefinitely was not an option. Then, the next day, the students who had been absent came back to class and had missed the lesson. Loaning out the videotape to each student for home viewing became unmanageable. I had the same problems when I tried using videotaped commercials for my persuasion unit. If only I had had iPods back then! With each student viewing his or her own iPod as many or as few times as necessary, and with absent students downloading the material as soon as they returned to school, many of the logistical challenges would have disappeared.

In addition, podcasts lend themselves well to addressing multiple modalities at the same time. At SMC, I was able to have students view and listen to a podcast while they wrote. I provided graphic organizers for some of the model college services podcasts and had the students fill them out the second time they viewed the podcast on their iPods in class. Some students paused the podcast to fill out the graphic organizer and therefore viewed the podcast fewer times, while others continuously wrote and viewed the same podcast several times. The medium of the podcast allowed them that flexibility and differentiation.

The portability of the iPod lends itself to flexibility. The students who spent hours taking the bus said that they were able to do homework with the podcasts while traveling. With so many of our students living busy lives and shouldering heavy job responsibilities, any homework that accommodates students’ needs means that that homework will have a far greater chance of getting done.

How Can Podcasts Differentiate Instruction for English Language Learners?

Because of the benefits described above, podcasts seem natural in assisting English Language Learners (ELLs). Providing visuals and audio support can only help comprehension. Rather than have the class sit through all of Franco Zeffirelli’s Romeo and Juliet, the students who need the assistance can download select clips of the movie the better to comprehend the play before reading certain scenes. While the whole class might benefit from watching the clips, ELLs may have to watch more than once. The iPod provides that flexibility.

For culminating tasks, in addition to a more traditional writing assignment, another option might be for students to produce podcasts. While the video and audio production might be challenging (although many of our students today are already experts with such technology), through the use of Keynote, students can create collages and montages that convey comprehension, synthesis of ideas, and creation of new products; such projects could show content understanding with less language demands for those students not yet ready.

After such projects are finished, sharing them with classmates becomes easier with podcasting. In an earlier article for California English, Rebecca DeLaRosa (2007) lamented how the school computers’ firewall wouldn’t allow a student to share her MySpace project depicting her original digital movie summary of The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. With iPods, sharing students’ digital work is easier.
Student can upload a podcast to a classroom computer and other students would then download to their iPods. Alternatively, the teacher could send out the podcast to students’ home computers via mail and have the students download them to their iPods and bring them to class the next day for an in-class activity.

Tips for New Podcasters

Although podcasting can be excellent for learning purposes, the technique presents serious technological challenges. Apart from the obvious challenge of access, there is the whole conundrum of what to do if one is technologically inept and not lucky enough to have a media support team. While buying movies and television show episodes are relatively easy on iTunes, and downloading other material from the Internet has become a commonplace skill, cropping such materials does require a certain amount of knowledge. Also, instructors should use Keynote and Garage Band themselves a bit before creating culminating tasks that require students to use them.

Instructors that do put in the time to learn, however, tell me that they (eventually) enjoy the technology and that their own lecture slideshows (PowerPoint, Keynote, or otherwise) are far superior to what they used to present to students. In addition, teachers rave that the podcast projects that students produce are remarkably creative and often thought-provoking.

Another concern in using commercial podcasts (e.g., movies, television shows, and music/music videos) is the issue of copyright. As long as the appropriate copyright laws are obeyed, however, commercial podcasts can be used for classroom instruction. At SMC, the media support team created three clips from less than 10% of a movie; the clips were for educational application in the classroom, and they were stored on two specifically controlled computers. The computers were password-protected and access could only be gained by the media staff, course instructors and students in the class. On a weekly basis, the students came into the Media Center and downloaded their podcast assignment(s) onto the iPods that had been issued to them. The students did not have the ability to upload the content from their iPods onto a computer or any other device. All the content was erased following the instructional podcast project. Information concerning the permissible use of media for educational purposes can be found at <http://www.utsystem.edu/ogc/intellectualproperty/ccmcguid.htm>.

A last warning involves the bonding of Apple iPods with only one computer at a time. While other portable podcast players may not have this characteristic, Apple iPods will only download from one computer. If a student regularly downloads podcasts from a home computer, it will not be easy to download from a classroom computer without losing all of the podcasts already on the iPod. Unless navigating the copyright laws for commercial materials, one way around this bonding issue is for the teacher to send the podcasts to the students’ home computers and have the students download from home.

Conclusion

While podcasts are certainly not a panacea and can be quite demanding for the technologically-challenged, they are an effective instructional tool in meeting the multiple needs and interests of students. I appreciated my summer using them, especially as I saw the way in which podcasts scaffolded the conceptual understanding of composition structure with developing skills students. And, for the students, learning with iPods was fun, not work.

Bibliography


About the Author:

Mira Pak is on faculty at the California State University, Northridge in the Secondary Education Department in the Michael D. Eisner College of Education. She has taught high school English classes and served as a literacy coach in LAUSD.

---

This poem was the winning entry in the Grades 7&8 category of the CATE 2009 Creative Writing Contest. The author, Lauren Weiser, is in the seventh grade at Brandeis Hillel Day School in San Francisco. Her teacher is Sarah Shulman.

The Beginning

I learned there: a big strip of ABC’s on the wall.
I grew there: pencil marks climbed the door,
I loved there, that place of passing,
I fought there: tears on the floor over nothing,
I grew there: learning to leave home in the morning, and not wanting to come back.
I shared everything there, that place of passing.
I remembered there: writing before words,
I wondered there: about life as a grown-up.

The only thing I never did there was I never left there, that place of passing.
I carry memories, and they carry me.

---