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Podcasting's Possibilities

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By Mimi Leonard

As a community-college instructor of developmental English, I had never thought much about my students' speaking and listening skills. My teaching priorities are focused on instilling good print literacy habits during a semester. Nevertheless, I have begun thinking that there is a place for developing oral competencies in my classroom.

In the fall of 2005, my institution underwent a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) re-accreditation process that required teaching faculty to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) addressing genuine student-learning needs. As we thought about our options, we were drawn to the area of soft skills. Faculty recognized that our graduates will be working in a new, often international service economy and believed that we needed to focus our QEP on improving student employability.

Our most popular programs are in the healthcare fields. On any given day, graduates of these programs talk to patients, physicians, pharmaceutical representatives, and hospital executives. New and anticipated workplaces in our area include a Fortune 500 company, a customer call-in support center for satellite radio, and a medium security prison. Working in such environments necessitates more than an associate's degree; it requires interacting with people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and speaking accurately and clearly. Hence, the teaching faculty narrowed our QEP focus from soft skills in general to the particularized skill of how well our students are able to communicate interpersonally.

Once SACS approved our *Learning to Communicate* QEP proposal, developing these oral-communication competencies became an institutional priority. The three QEP objectives state that students shall "interact effectively and appropriately in an interpersonal context," "construct and deliver an extended message," and "listen effectively and appropriately" (2005, p. 21-22). Five specific outcomes are associated with each learning objective, so each can be addressed in a variety of ways. Altering my methodologies by developing new practice

activities and homework assignments is one way I could contribute toward our collegiate goal without diminishing developmental English instructional priorities.

I began to think seriously about addressing the QEP goals by using technology while taking a course in pedagogy and instructional design. The professor required us to review freeware or shareware (software that is available at no cost), reasoning that budget constraints are a reality but need not hinder classroom activities. He urged us to ground our explorations in our teaching situations, so I was drawn to find a computer application that linked composition to orality.

From PCs to Podcasting

DeVoss, Johansen, Selfe, and Williams (2003) developed a piece on computer-mediated composition and concluded that educators must not “ignore, exclude or devalue new-media texts,” lest we “run the risk of our curriculum holding declining relevance for students who are communicating in increasingly expansive, networked environments” (p. 169-170). Their work reminded me of how important it is to meet students where they are. Bull (2005) was even more specific about which technology to incorporate when he endorsed podcasting in education and in English education specifically. He wrote:

Janet Swenson, past president of the National Council of Teachers of English Conference on English Education, recently joined her colleagues at a retreat to consider the future of English education in light of technological advances. She observes that the use of the term *writing* to encompass multimodal compositions such as digital storytelling and podcasting is now “essentially uncontested” within her discipline. (p. 25)

These insights assured me that I could link developmental English assignments to our QEP priorities, using podcasting as a bridge.

What Is Podcasting?

Podcasting is “an automated technology that allows listeners to subscribe to and listen to digitally recorded audio shows” (Flanagan & Calandra, 2005, p. 20). It is similar to TiVO in that the audience chooses what to hear and when; it is dissimilar in that TiVO doesn’t allow the subscriber to create his or her own broadcast and upload that content.

I learned that through podcasting students could make and post a spoken assignment using the microphones and personal computers that are readily available on campus. A learner could likewise listen to content that the instructor

uploaded. Either activity has a direct correspondence to our QEP learning outcomes.

Podcasting is not brand new to higher education. This technology has been used successfully at a number of colleges. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, these included American University, Drexel University, Purdue University, St. Mary's College, Texas A&M, the University of Houston, and the University of Texas (Read, 2005). Duke University issued iPods to matriculating freshmen in August 2004, determining that academic uses fell into five areas:

- course content dissemination,
- classroom recording,
- field recording,
- study support, and
- file storage and transfer (Belanger, 2005).

The University of Missouri identified other academic uses, including campus-news broadcasting and development of student recruiting materials (Meng, 2005). Jackson, a professor at American University, likes using podcasting not only because of what he calls its “hip factor,” but also because “sending lectures or clips from other sources to students via the Internet allows him to devote more class time to informed discussions, readings, and one-on-one student assistance” (as cited in Marselas, 2005, p. 3).

Possibilities

The textbook used for developmental reading includes a section on pronunciation keys. To practice and reinforce that content, students could create a podcast since one QEP objective is to “demonstrate the ability to use pronunciation that is understood by others” (2005, p. 23). Making a podcast also is a compelling option because many students lack confidence in their speaking abilities and dread standing up in front of an audience. Like radio broadcasters, podcasters are invisible to their listeners. To reinforce the objective of “demonstrate the ability to understand a person’s suggestions for improving one’s abilities, being able to transfer them beyond the current situation” (2005, p. 25), I could post graded-assignment commentaries by the same means.

Other podcasting activity ideas come from the English as a Second Language (ESL) discipline. I was interested to read Boyle (1993), who affirmed the QEP philosophy when she noted, “in learning situations where the opportunities for oral practice are much fewer than for listening, more attention should be given in teaching to exercises that can also serve as springboards for oral

practice” (p.36). She created audiotapes for her students in Hong Kong and then used them for interviews, transcriptions, cloze (fill-in-the-blank), and shadow-reading exercises. A similar activity could be done with podcasts, perhaps as a spelling exercise.

Dalton, an ESL teacher, recognizes that his work includes both production and reception of the proper sounds – the QEP’s speaking and listening competencies – so his assignments feature each aspect of oral communication. After teaching long and short vowel sounds, Dalton associates the target sounds with the numbers zero through nine and then quizzes learners by reading a phone number aloud to identify misunderstood phonetic combinations. To modify this assignment in my situation, I could associate the pronunciation key symbols with a number. For homework, they would create a podcast for my ears only. Their assignment would be to take their student identification number and sound it out for me using the number-symbol key I provided.

TalkShoe

Though the college administration would need to approve the installation of podcasting software, expense would not necessarily be a barrier because there is freeware that allows individuals to create and share podcasts. As part of my graduate class, I reviewed TalkShoe, a program that permits public or private podcasts. This software allows anyone with an internet connection and a telephone to host and moderate an interactive podcast and generates a unique identifier that allows the content to be heard by the public or a host-defined private audience.

I found the TalkShoe application by searching www.tucows.com to find virus-checked freeware. TalkShoe had not been vetted by that service, nor rated by customers, but a link was offered. Reviews in *Podcast User Magazine* (Anderson, 2007) and *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* (Shropshire, 2006) documented the program’s niche and business model, so I downloaded the 13 MB program from www.talkshoe.com. The installation went smoothly, and I have had no trouble using the program, so I am confident in recommending its use.

Podcasting Pitfalls

Podcasting is not without its challenges. The most obvious in my instructional situation is that the activities I have proposed do not require direct interaction with others. While it might be a good way to build speaking and listening skills, podcasting cannot substitute for face-to-face interactions if we are to meet our QEP

objectives. If podcasting were to be used extensively, it might in fact undermine QEP objectives because of its solitary nature.

Other concerns are the nature of our student body and rural location. Many of our students work full time and attend school part time. A significant number do not have personal computers at home, and the rural infrastructure means that dial-up internet access is the norm whereas up-to-date hardware and robust internet access are recommended for podcasters. While the college does provide public-access computers, they are in an open-laboratory setting, which presents other issues. First, the student would have to get to the resource center during regular hours, which could conflict with family and work schedules. Secondly, the recording quality would almost certainly be negatively affected by ambient noise in the lab. Finally, other students could distract or interrupt the podcaster. Because of ongoing campus renovations and growth in enrollment, it would be difficult to create a private dedicated podcasting space at this time.

Early adopters of podcasts also have concerns about how it impacts teaching and learning. As Northern Illinois University began making arrangements to upgrade campus servers to accommodate instructor-generated podcasts, a student reporter praised the idea effusively, in part because it would permit her to study at her leisure, without attending classes. A theatre professor was dismayed, likening his classroom to a stage: "Such events can't be recorded, abstracted, time delayed, or transmitted in any form without losing their quality of liveness" (Schneider, 2006, p. 2). Podcasting may be enticing, but it should complement rather than replace a dynamic learning environment.

Final Thoughts

As I have explored ways to integrate speaking and listening competencies into developmental English classes, I have become intrigued by the possibilities of podcasting. My younger students would almost certainly respond enthusiastically to podcasting, and the literature validates use of this instructional technology in a variety of settings. While the potential of podcasting is apparent, I am not yet ready to revise all my classroom activities or assignments to use it. Instead, I am planning a gradual implementation, beginning with a pronunciation unit. I think podcasting may be a wonderful homework supplement and believe that using this technology will help my students communicate across the curriculum.

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