Podcasting with Purpose

“You’re listening to Room 208!”

That’s how my students introduce their podcast. Since April 2004, my third- and fourth-grade students have put together an entertaining weekly audio magazine that highlights their learning and experiences, showcases their writing and research, and opens a virtual window to our classroom that anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can look through.

Podcasts are online radio shows that are available either by subscription-based software (called aggregators) or through Web browsers. They are prerecorded MP3 files hosted on a Web server, ready to be downloaded at the listeners’ leisure. In my experience, podcasts have proved to be an ideal tool for motivating students to write for an authentic audience of families, friends, and the global community. Each show is about 20 minutes long and students choose the topics they want to write about.

It’s Not About the Technology

The weekly Room 208 podcast has created a purpose to the writing being done in our classroom. Students now work harder and produce higher quality pieces to share with a real audience in an entertaining format. Knowing that their work is literally being heard all over the world has greatly increased their confidence. Whether it’s poetry, narrative, or expository writing, they are motivated by the knowledge that they are not writing in a vacuum, but rather to communicate, publish, and engage.

Students have created pieces such as “Weird Fact of the Week,” “Math Corner,” and “Bry’s Animal Corner” for the podcasts, reflecting their individual passions and interests. Writing lessons be-

come authentic learning opportunities because pieces must be polished before being broadcast. Since the creation of the podcast, there has been commitment to editing and revision from students that I had not previously witnessed.

When a local television news crew recently came to Room 208 to film the students working on a podcast, it spent the entire morning recording the preparation but was surprised that the podcast itself needed only a few minutes.

Creating Their Own Learning

Recently, my students told me they enjoy the school day more, now that we podcast. As one of them said, “It doesn’t even feel like we’re going to school.” I pressed for an explanation by asking them what had changed. “After all,” I said, “we’re still writing, we’re still reading, we’re still researching. What’s so different?”

“Yeah,” one student replied, “but it’s about stuff that we want to do.” Another student added, “We’re creating our own learning.”

With podcasting, students have an opportunity to become managers of their own learning because they are the ones deciding what topics to research and write about. My role of teacher has changed to that of a facilitator and supporter. For instance, though I use direct instruction to teach grammar, my students are now getting the benefits of a podcast section called “Emily’s Writing Corner.” This is written by a student who independently decided to take my classroom lessons and reteach them.

Today, more than ever before, we need to help create self-directed learners who can think inventively and creatively, solve problems, understand how to find and evaluate information, and communicate effectively. As my students search for “podcasting moments” in their school day, they are aware that they must understand what they are learning in order to articulate and demonstrate the knowledge they wish to communicate. Before they get in front of the microphone, they make sure that they have a solid understanding of their topics because they realize...
that they are being listened to and assessed by a much larger audience than just their teacher.

Creating a Global Classroom

In a time when parents are busier than ever, the podcasts allow them to share their children’s classroom experiences and learning from the comfort of their homes (or even their cars if they have an MP3 player hooked up to the tape deck). Gone are the days when parents ask their child what he or she has done in school and receive the proverbial “Nothing.” By listening to the podcasts, parents can “tune in” to their child’s day. The podcasts serve as weekly progress reports on classroom events, skills learned, and learning expectations. Parents are even able to virtually join their children on field trips!

In addition to sharing learning with family members, students are also becoming fully aware of the global community they live in. Our world has grown beyond Room 208 in Wells, Maine, into a larger world that has interacted with my students and provided feedback and assessment. For instance, they recently received an “audio e-mail” from a man in Sweden who complimented the students’ work and sent along some questions for them to reflect on and answer in a future podcast.

How to Do It

Creating a podcast is easy. All you need is a means to record (or transfer) audio into an MP3 format. Most computers already have built-in microphones and there is free software available to record and edit audio (Audacity is definitely one to consider). After that, the files simply need to be hosted on an online server and there are many free options out there (check out www.ourmedia.org or www.archive.org). Files could be accessed from any Web browser or downloaded to podcast aggregators by use of Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds. (This is what makes them podcasts rather than simply MP3 files on a Web page.) There are many free options to create RSS feeds (e.g., www.feedburner.com), as well as to listen to podcasts that have been hosted with feeds (e.g., Apple iTunes).

Podcasts can be as simple or as elaborate as teachers and students decide. They can be quick and impromptu reflections on learning, students reading their poetry, or weekly newsletter-type shows. No matter what you decide, podcasts can provide an open window to your classrooms, allowing students the opportunity to write for an authentic, worldwide audience—and take control of their own learning.

We invite you to learn more about Room 208’s podcast by visiting us at www.bobsprankle.com, or e-mailing us at room208podcast@gmail.com.

Bob Sprankle teaches a multiage class of third and fourth graders at Wells Elementary School in Wells, Maine. His e-mail address is bob@bobsprankle.com.

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