



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Pandemic Pedagogy and Creating Community With Podcasts

Pandemic pedagogy began in survival mode. An extra week of spring break quickly became a panicked full-course redesign as we took our face-to-face classes straight into an LMS while watching the news about the pandemic unfold live on the television. Most of us realized that our goals for that semester were reduced from our carefully planned learning objectives to surviving the shift and the pandemic. I stripped away many of my activities in order to focus on the major assignments required for course completion, and I know I wasn't alone. If only we had known right before that spring break spiral, we would have hugged our colleagues, helped our students figure out the LMS systems, and come up with a plan together. Instead, we went home, and we stayed there. The fear and isolation began to wear at us as that spring semester turned into the summer semester. By June, we knew we'd be online for another school year, and we couldn't just scrape by. We had to make some big changes if this was going to work and if our students were going to move forward with the knowledge and skills they needed to succeed.

It's hard to learn in isolation. While discussion groups can help students feel connected, an overabundance of these assignments makes them lose their effectiveness. Requirements are often needed to get students to interact with each other. "Please respond to at least two peers," is not the same as an in-person connection. Discussions in class rarely work like this. My students miss authentic conversations, and so do I.

In the midst of summer 2020, we brought on a new professor in our department. I can't imagine a harder time to be thrown to the wolves of academia than entering your first full-time, online classroom during a pandemic. We began exchanging emails, and then chatting on the phone. Oh, glorious! How I missed chatting with my colleagues! I missed these conversations with my students, too. I asked her if she'd like to record some of our conversations about composition and rhetoric and put them into a podcast for our students. Fortunately, she obliged, even though neither one of us had ever recorded a podcast.

Our first podcast discussed professional emails, but it felt like storytelling and authentic sharing. We talked about the worst emails we ever received, the best

ones, and why they matter. And that led to discussions about audiences and the fear we all have composing to someone in a position of power. Then we talked about some great tools that are out there to help us, and how we use Grammarly before sending an email off to the boss. The conversation felt more like friends getting to know each other and connecting over a discussion about business etiquette than two professors writing curricula.

My son was sheltering with us since his college classes were also online, and he reluctantly agreed to help me take the recording and turn it into a podcast. After he listened, he said, "This sounds like a real podcast." I had the approval of my curmudgeonly 19-year-old, and that was the golden approval I needed. We added in a short music introduction, took a picture of my cat for the cover, and sent it out to my students.

I was overwhelmed by their response. They loved it. A few students struggled to open the files, even with an adorable chubby cat promising them a break from the screen, but most of my students responded with enthusiasm. They felt like they belonged in a real college classroom, no longer completely isolated in online silos, a sentiment backed up by scholarship on podcasting (Lee and Chan, 2007).

Bringing Podcasts Into Your Pedagogy

Now, podcasting in the classroom isn't new. There have been many studies conducted on podcasts and the benefits and challenges of adding them to a classroom. One thing I have gleaned from using podcasts in the classroom for the past year is that podcasts should never replace your lecture. Instead, consider them similar to the informal conversations that take place organically in the classroom after a lecture, when students might discuss the material using some examples from the real world or pop culture. Natural conversations are important when podcasting, and this means while an outline is very helpful, you probably don't want a full script. And even more importantly, invite a co-host. In college, I relished opportunities to listen in on a panel of my professors discussing big topics. Through observation, I learned how academic conversations unfolded, how to ask good questions, and how to disagree with grace. In a sense, my colleague and I were modeling academic discussions for our students, while also sharing our enthusiasm for the subject.

Having the technology and creating podcasts isn't enough. A poorly produced podcast can be even more harmful than not using one at all, since it trains students to disregard the information you wish to cover. If we lack enthusiasm, why expect it from our students? If we are simply reading our lecture, why would a student who read the material find the podcast helpful? Give them something new. Students use podcasts to help gain a better understanding of the material, not as the main source of the material. Podcasts are a way to connect with your students and help them explore how your content fits into the bigger picture. This is about building relationships. Your students need a relationship with you to feel connected to a scholarly community in the midst of the pandemic. And you need your students to connect this course to their world-at-large.

Some studies show another problem with podcasting: Too much time is spent editing the material (Makina, 2020). I argue that you shouldn't focus too much time on editing. We aren't going for perfection, but progress. It's okay to be authentic with your students. Tell them you aren't Joe Rogan or Brene Brown and don't try to set your expectations too high. We want to make good use of our time, so quality matters. However, quality is not in the sound bites or the music intro. It's in the material, and it's in the way you connect with your audience. Your voice is so important to student success. In fact, it's one of the most important ways to inject personality into your classroom (Bell, Cockburn, Wingkvist, and Green, 2007). Audio gives us a way to convey our feelings, our attitudes, and our atmosphere. We remember more of how we feel than the smaller details, like who John Adam's Postmaster was, unless, of course, your story is about Joseph Habersham.

Pandemic pedagogy is isolating for instructors and students, but podcasts can help us reconnect. Reach out to your colleagues and see if you can find someone brave enough to try podcasting with you. You will connect with your colleague better. You will remember why you love academia. Your students will love listening to you. And you will create content that is usable and reusable, as long as your references and jokes are still relevant. I don't feel so isolated anymore and my students are breaking away from the computer, continuing their learning beyond the screen. They know I care about them and the world around them. And they realize they are also scholars making sense of the world in the midst of uncertainty. Invite them to the conversation and see how your students respond.

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