Podcasting

Scenario
For more than a decade, Rudi Gonzales has taught art and art history. His studio work focuses on sculpture, and his art history courses are centered around carvings, ceramics, and similar artifacts of Native American artists and ancient cultures of Central America. On a few occasions, he tried to incorporate digital technology into his curriculum, without much discernible benefit for the students, so he abandoned it and stuck with studio work and term papers.

This semester, two blind students and one deaf student sign up for his art history course. He has had deaf students before. Never a blind student. And never more than one student with a documented disability in the same course. Meanwhile, the university library recently opened a multimedia studio with sophisticated easy-to-use audio and video equipment, and Rudi sees in this confluence of circumstances an opportunity to do something different. In previous semesters, he assigned podcasts about art as part of the “reading” for his course, and he decides that this semester, his students will write and produce podcasts as part of their art history coursework.

Rudi works with the center for teaching and learning and an instructor of writing and rhetoric to develop assignments that will challenge his students to apply what they learn about Incan art. Having blind students in his course will help the other students understand what it means to conceptualize and describe physical objects that podcast listeners won’t see. At the same time, ensuring that their podcasts include transcripts for users who are deaf will force the students to wrestle with writing for reading versus writing for listening and how to balance different audiences.

Rudi knows that many students take his art history course because it fulfills a general education requirement—few of them pursue art as a major. Broadening his course to be more interdisciplinary strikes him as a bonus, and his students seem to agree. Several of them had dabbled with podcasting in other courses, and they are all excited to try out the new multimedia studio. By the end of the term, Rudi sees that the podcasting component has stretched the students’ understanding of the art curriculum while also serving as an exercise in accessibility, exposing them to the principles of expanded access and to individuals with different abilities who use technology to understand and experience the world in ways the other students find both unexpected and completely familiar.

1 What is it?
In its most basic sense, a podcast is an audio file. When the term was introduced in 2004—derived from the Apple iPod, at the time still a novel portable music player—podcast referred to audio content that employed RSS technology to allow users to subscribe to serialized content that is automatically downloaded and synchronized whenever it is updated. Purists would insist that those requirements still apply—that a podcast must be serialized content available through an RSS feed. In common usage, however, the term has become much looser and is now often used to describe essentially any audio file, whether it is part of a program or a one-off, and even audio content available on a website but not syndicated. It can replace or augment written material, such as textbooks or similar resources. Other podcasts consist of poetry or fiction or are venues for entertainment. Podcasting is enjoying a resurgence, in part because of the penetration of smartphones. People can listen to podcasts during their commutes, while exercising or washing the dishes, or in countless other times and places.

2 How does it work?
Consuming a podcast can be as simple as finding an audio resource online and listening to it. This could be from an organization that produces podcasts and puts them on its website, or it could be through a podcasting service, such as Stitcher, Pandora, Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts, or others. These services organize podcasts, letting users search for and discover podcasts, organized by type, and subscribe to them, often through a mobile app. Meanwhile, tools and services used to create podcasts have become increasingly affordable and easy to use. Using a sophisticated studio will improve the quality of the final product, but many podcasts are created using simple devices such as recording apps on a laptop, tablet, or mobile phone.

3 Who’s doing it?
People and organizations of all types and sizes create podcasts to inform, educate, tell stories, and entertain. Much of the material in podcasts is nonfiction and sometimes is timely, based on news and current events. In higher education, some institutions have courses on podcasting (how to do it, for media-production studies, journalism, or other disciplines), and in other cases, podcasting is a learning resource or a way to...
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demonstrate learning. In these ways, podcasting can be the topic, a learning activity, the means of assessment, or all three. The University of Notre Dame, for example, hosts an extensive set of podcasts that showcase the life and work of the university, and the institution has created an extensive guide for students and faculty about how to create podcasts. The University of British Columbia has long offered a course on storytelling that teaches students how to use podcasts to present academic content in compelling audio formats. The Ohio State University produces the Agronomy and Farm Management Podcast, which is directed at farmers across the state and covers agricultural issues.

4 Why is it significant?
Media literacy has become an important skill, in large part because the tools of content production and distribution allow almost anyone to create relatively sophisticated content in various formats. Podcasts and other multimedia formats are part of that dynamic, and the opportunities to experience the world through audio continue to expand. As scientific and technical knowledge becomes increasingly important, the ability to explain complex topics to a lay audience is especially valuable. The activity of writing and creating a podcast pushes students and faculty into new domains, asking them to think differently about how to convey a message through oral communication and oral representation. Podcasting can be an important element of the knowledge creation in a course, and media-based assignments develop storytelling skills that can extend across many disciplines and can be a valuable skill in many jobs. Podcasts have a role for writing and rhetoric, as well, by stretching those skills into a different venue with different rules, rhythms, and processes. Podcasting also provides new ways for faculty to develop content for asynchronous teaching, as well as opportunities to share content with communities beyond the institutional context.

5 What are the downsides?
As an audio format, podcasts are inaccessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing unless transcripts are provided, and in at least one instance, a podcast producer has been sued for failing to provide closed captions. Many podcast producers do not include transcripts, and even when they do, some use automated services, some of which provide notoriously poor transcripts. High-quality transcription can be more expensive that some podcasters are willing to support. Translating podcasts into different languages presents other obstacles. Creating good podcasts is much more difficult than most people imagine. Although some excellent podcasts are created using simple, readily available tools, most of the well-known podcasts—the ones people think of as a model for what they want to create—are highly produced resources, with considerable time devoted to writing, recording, editing, and incorporating music. Many would-be podcasters are unaware of copyright and other intellectual property considerations that arise.

6 Where is it going?
Although podcasting has been around for more than 15 years, the past few years have seen a considerable swell of interest in the medium. Research indicates that at least 500,000 podcasts are actively being produced, with tens of millions of individual episodes available. Between one-third and one-half of US households regularly listen to podcasts. In 2019, Spotify acquired two podcast startups, Gimlet and Anchor, and the company said it would pursue similar acquisitions in the near future. Those involved with podcasting efforts on college and university campuses are, in many cases, busier than ever, fielding inquiries from faculty interested in adding podcasts to their curricula and students looking to explore the medium. Some institutions are building podcasting studios on campus to meet the increasing demand. Meanwhile, consumer technologies that support podcasting are becoming less expensive and easier to use.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?
Podcasting supports skills and competencies that are increasingly valuable for students, faculty, and those in the workforce—communication across various media to diverse audiences and being a critical creator and consumer of content. Effective audio content has the potential to be more impactful by inviting listeners to use their imagination to visualize what’s being described. Understanding and applying this can be valuable for students and faculty. Many institutions have a campus radio station, and podcasting activities are a natural complement to radio and broadcasting. Given the flexibility and convenience of consuming content on smartphones, many students prefer audio content for entertainment and education. Due to commitments such as family and work responsibilities, other students depend on the kind of mobile, self-paced, and asynchronous learning that podcasts can facilitate. Compared to video content, podcasts can be easier to create, and because the files are smaller, they are easier to download for users with limited bandwidth. In these ways, podcasting can increase equity by allowing students with a wide range of needs and resources to participate in educational activities.