Podcasting Assignments

THE McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning

Podcasting has been around a long time but has recently been discovered by educators as an attractive and flexible medium for class assignments. Podcasting assignments can encourage creativity, collaboration, and provide a sense of community in your course while at the same time, giving students opportunities to practice writing and presentation skills, and providing valuable experience expressing themselves through multimedia. Practically speaking, podcasting is also an attractive way to integrate technology into the curriculum because the tools involved are generally open source, easy to use, and present a very low barrier to entry.

Considerations

Start with an outline - composing a podcast is very similar to producing other types of academic work. A podcast needs an introduction, body and conclusion. Most successful podcast assignments consist of a sequence of activities in which students collect and curate materials, do research, and draft and review scripts. In addition to the overall structure of the piece, students should also think about enhancing the flow of their narrative through the use of supporting materials such as interspersed interview clips, sound effects, or music clips.

Longer is not better. If podcasts are done individually, expect a podcast in the range of 3-4 minutes. If the students are working in groups and can delegate tasks, you could expect a podcast to be about 6-8 minutes. There may very well of course be genres that are better suited to longer form, but ....

Some students may be ‘microphone-shy’ or may be skeptical of the relevance of a podcasting assignment. As with other activities, it is often useful to test the water through a very short, perhaps ungraded exploratory assignment. Have students record themselves reading a pre-defined text. Perhaps have the recordings peer reviewed rather than graded. This may also underscore the importance of making the actual recording the final step of a writing assignment.

As with other media, podcasts can reflect many different genres. Podcasts might contain interviews, conversations, scripted audio dramas, news documentaries, or film or music reviews. Most often however, podcasts are presented in some sort of narrative form. In this regard, storyboarding and organizing materials are often essential to creating an effective podcast. Many professional podcasts may leave listeners the impression that they are freeform and ad-libbed. This may be true for a podcaster with many years of experience, but for students with no experience producing podcasts, a well developed script is almost essential. In developing a podcast, attention should be paid to the listener’s experience. Being a very linear format, audio gives content producers the opportunity to lead the listener through an unfolding experience.
Grading

Keep in mind that listening to student podcasts can take more time that reading an equivalent written assignment.

As with other forms of self-expression, emulation can be a powerful tool for learning a new skill. There is no shortage of professionally recorded podcasts available on the Web. Discovering existing podcasts that effectively convey the types of information covered in class and critically discussing those podcasts can be a very useful exercise. It is important for students to gain exposure to examples of the types of podcasts you are expecting. Providing students with examples of existing podcasts that highlight certain elements can be beneficial. In selecting examples, consider what you are hoping students will gain from listening to these examples. Some podcasts might highlight narrative form while other might exemplify effective use of non-verbal sound effects.

Consider grading with a rubric and share that rubric with your students. Student podcasts as likely to be produced by groups of students, with each student perhaps contributing in different roles, and will likely convey a variety of subject matter. A rubric will help to keep your grading criteria consistent. Make an effort to separate production quality from content. This can be difficult because poor recordings, varying volume levels, and background noise can really distract from any message students are trying to convey. Recording oneself is a form of public performance. Unless you are teaching a course on audio production or public speaking, be tolerant of some mistakes.

Tools

The Digital Learning Lab (DLL) is the Lewis Library Building offers a wealth of resources to help in executing a podcasting assignment. In collaboration with Princeton faculty, the DLL can loan equipment, such as digital audio recorders, quality microphones, and adapters, for use in course assignments, and make a variety of software for editing their podcast available to students. The DLL also offers in-class workshops covering the process and tools involved in producing a successful podcast. The Digital Learning Lab website can be found at https://mcgrawdll.princeton.edu

Publishing

While not strictly necessary, having an online place to share and archive the podcasts developed in your course can facilitate reflection upon the project and further enhance the learning experience. Audio files can of course be uploaded and shared within the class through the Canvas Learning Management System, but many courses opt to establish a course blog for the purpose. The McGraw Center’s Educational & Classroom Technologies group through the McGraw Commons (https://commons.princeton.edu) offers free Wordpress websites for Princeton courses and will work with you and your students to develop the site. Blogs hosted on McGraw Commons can be public or be restricted to the participants of your course.
Contact the McGraw Center

For more information, contact the Digital Learning Lab at mcgrawdll@princeton.edu or the Educational & Classroom Technologies group in the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning at mcgrawect@princeton.edu.