

Podcasts are a versatile tool that your students may well be familiar with. David Ashworth explores how to utilise them in your classroom



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The word podcast is a combination of broadcast and iPod. A podcast is like a radio show, but instead of being broadcast live, it is recorded and then distributed over the internet. It is simply an audio recording that listeners can play whenever they choose, on an mp3 player (but not necessarily an iPod), a mobile phone or a computer. As such, most teachers should have very few problems with the technical aspects.

Why?

Young people live in a digital world where blogging, podcasting and texting are the norm. Connecting with their culture provides a good opportunity for engaging with students who can otherwise be difficult to motivate. It is also a useful tool for students who are articulate speakers but less confident writers.

How?

The basic equipment required is a computer, an internal or external microphone and some recording software. Music teachers may wish to use sequencing software but many podcasters use Audacity – free software that allows you to record your programme then export it as an mp3 file. You can then upload this straight to your school website. Putting soundfiles on school websites/intranets is usually straightforward and the school ICT support service should be able to help with this. If there is resistance, put ‘podcasting’ as a whole school issue agenda item for the next staff meeting and watch them jump!

Many podcasters may wish to take things one stage further (especially if they want to use podcasting as some form of marketing or promotional tool) by inviting interested parties to ‘subscribe’ to their podcasts. This involves attaching an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed to your podcast. Although this is a relatively straightforward process, I would suggest consulting the website provider as it may have implications for school networks.

What?

You may wish to use podcasting with particular units from your schemes of work, especially where an ICT component is involved. For example, Unit 3 from the KS3 QCA scheme on soundscapes features the following activity:

- *Show how instruments, e.g. guitars and voices, can be modified with the use of delay, reverb, vocoders, etc.*

One of the guitarists in your class could bring in their effects pedals and demonstrate the different sounds available while another student provides a commentary. This activity could be recorded as a podcast, allowing your students to actually hear the effect of sound processing rather than just follow a description of it. More generically, podcasting can be used to:

- Record lessons for students (and parents) to access in their own time
- Enable students to do a music presentation in a medium other than PowerPoint
- Create a short introduction to your school or the courses you run for potential students to access, and to let parents know what they can expect their children to be doing – get your students to make their own contributions
- Create a class or even a whole-school radio station
- Submit work
- Create audio resources for use by sight-impaired students.

And another thing...

Students can develop the presentation of their podcast by trying out some of the following suggestions:

- Add some jingles: use software such as eJay (PC) or GarageBand (Mac) to create jingles which can be used to introduce particular features to the radio show
- Try an outside broadcast: use an mp3 player with recording facilities to record a feature ‘on location’ around the school, or on a school field trip. You can then download this to your computer and add it to the sound recording
- Use more sophisticated software – Mixcast Live (PC) and iTunes (Mac) are specifically designed for podcasters, allowing them to set up playlists and record their podcasts directly to MP3.

Ensure that students are aware that they will not be allowed to use commercial music in podcasts for copyright reasons. However, some artists allow their music to be played in podcasts. You can find this ‘podsafes’ music in special directories (for example www.music.podshow.com).

Conclusion

One disadvantage of podcasts is that you cannot really skim them as you might a document. It will take 20 minutes to listen to a 20-minute podcast, and there’s no getting around that. It therefore makes sense to attach a short summary to the beginning of the podcast so that the listener has an overview of the content.

Nevertheless, the human voice can be incredibly powerful and effective, and this can offset the inconvenience of the medium’s inflexibility. Podcasting, done well, can be a compelling medium that will allow those of our students who are less confident with reading and writing to engage more positively with the music curriculum, while bringing the classroom into the 21st century.

Links

Audacity software can be downloaded, free of charge at: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

Podcasting software for Mac and PC can be found at: www.mixcastlive.com

<http://www.apple.com/itunes>

Examples of podcasts on school websites can be found at:

<http://www.downsfm.com>

http://www.radiowaves.co.uk/podcast_secondary.asp

<http://mgsonline.blogs.com/mgspodcast>.

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