

Making Radio: Using Audio for Student Assignments

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Elvis (the other one . . . Costello) was right: “Radio, it’s a sound salvation. Radio, it’s cleaning up the nation.” Radio didn’t die; it was just sleeping. Podcasting and ubiquitous audio tools have brought radio back to life and into the classroom in a new and powerful way.

For many years, I’ve been using radio (live broadcasting as well as podcasting) in undergraduate classes, not radio as an information resource, but radio (audio) creation as an assignment. Making radio instead of making essays or making presentations provides students with a unique set of challenges that foster critical thinking and creative construction.

When I am asked “Why radio?” the question usually means “Why not video?” The assumption is that video would be more powerful than the restricted nature of audio, and also more familiar to the students. Perhaps, but sometimes less is more. Kate Lacey of the University of Sussex contrasts video with writing, observing that “we are used to dealing with media forms that are not full of sensory plenitude” and suggests that the power of audio lies in its constraints. Additionally, Lacey highlights the difference between “hearing” and “listening,” where the latter is a critical activity and decoding process similar to that of close reading. In other words, making radio encompasses the rigorous methods necessary to effectively engage students in thinking.

I teach in a First Year Seminar program where students come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. These are not media studies courses. The objective is not to make my students audio experts, but to introduce them to a new way of conceptualizing and communicating the ideas they are researching. Requiring a different tool for their assignment (i.e., not an essay or class presentation), makes the students more engaged and reflective about the research and creative process.

In one course about the history and nature of the book, student groups appeared on live radio to be interviewed about the book they were investigating. The interview was unscripted, so the students had to be prepared to respond, in real time, to the probing and questioning of the host and be able to explain themselves in clear, concise, and accessible ways.

In other cases, I’ve used podcasts as a means for students to explore ideas relevant to the course. In an extreme case (and one that was highly successful), students created one-minute podcasts about an aspect of book culture. The 60-second constraint reinforced the need for careful research, clear and creative scripting, effective storytelling, and strong production values. Like an “audio haiku,” these podcasts were difficult challenges despite their apparent simplicity.

In most cases, the students create at least two podcasts during the semester. The first is typically not well done. Students write scripts that sound like academic papers and produce podcasts

that are aurally flat. Those initial experiences allow us to talk in more depth about the components of good radio and good academic work. Their second attempts are always substantially improved.

While you need look no further than your smartphone for the necessary tools to make good radio (e.g., audio capture, editing, and even distribution), there is another, more traditional resource that is well worth getting to know: your local community radio station. These nonprofit broadcasters are likely conveniently located on your campus and staffed by eager folks ready to help you and your students. They can provide access to excellent studio facilities—my iPhone’s audio capabilities may be good, but they pale in comparison to a real studio.

I was a neophyte when I first decided to use radio in my classes; I still think of myself as a beginner. As a result, the students and I are colearners in using radio. Having students see me as part of their learning experience added an important element to the courses. We learned, failed, reflected, and tried again together. We modeled a learning community where the roles of learner and teacher were fluid. Ultimately, this may have been the most profound outcome of the courses.

Making radio is a powerful learning approach that is easily adopted and adapted for diverse subjects and class environments. So as Elvis says: “You better do as you are told. You better listen to the radio.”

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open textbooks published by Rice University is provided at <https://openstax.org/adopters>. Note that these textbooks are only a small fraction of the total number of open textbooks that are currently available.

7 Bissell, Ahrash N. Permission granted: Open licensing for educational resources. *Open Learning*, 24 (1) (February 2009), 97–106.

8 Hilton III, J. Open educational resources and college textbook choices: A review of research on efficacy and perceptions. *Educational Technology Research and Development*.

(Forthcoming.)

9 See also the California Open Online Library for Education (<http://coolfored.org/>) and the repository finder hosted by BC Campus in Vancouver, British Columbia. <https://open.bccampus.ca/open-textbook-101/where-to-find-open-textbooks/>.