Excerpted from

Student-Powered Podcasting

Christopher Shamburg

Through creating podcasts, students learn to connect with the world around them both by developing relevant content and by learning to responsibly use content created by others. S*tudent-Powered Podcasting: Teaching for 21st-Century Literacy* provides educators with the information and resources they need to get their students podcasting, including tutorials, 17 adaptable units, and a discussion of ethics and copyright considerations.

The first chapter introduces how podcasting helps students learn 21st-century literacy skills. Author Christopher Shamburg examines the definition of 21st-century literacy, its importance, and why schools need to reform teaching and curriculum to include these skills. In addition, Shamburg shows how podcasting can shift educational paradigms and teach students powerful ideas.

Beyond Podcasting:
A Paradigm Shift

This chapter presents the big ideas of student-powered podcasting: how it can connect to ideas of 21st-century literacy, challenge existing educational paradigms, and become a catalyst for teaching powerful ideas.

Podcasting is the creation and serial distribution of media through the Internet. Audio and video files (often thought of as "episodes") are created and disseminated on a regular basis by a podcaster; a subscriber can easily receive new episodes and episode information, and download, view, listen, and transfer the episodes to a variety of portable players. Technical information on how to do these things is clearly presented in this book, but the true subject of this book is what students can potentially *learn* using this technology.

The specific technologies of podcasting offer an accessible and powerful tool that can engage students and give them skills for success in the 21st century. But the benefits of podcasting can go beyond technological proficiency and academic content knowledge, beyond enhancing the existing curriculum, and even beyond podcasting itself. Let me explain.

Podcasting offers an inexpensive way to create and share compelling media that correlates to authentic activities outside of school. Students who podcast become active participants in culture and society. They can create original content as they ethically and effectively collect and remix the work of others. Students can create audio dramas, news shows, or audio tours. This book gives directions, assessments, insights, and examples for a variety of multidisciplinary projects.

The ideas in this book began in 2006 when I was working with the NJeSchool, the largest online public high school in New Jersey. We were thinking about courses that would work *better* online than in a classroom, as well as broader questions about the types of projects, skills, and mindsets that students needed and the types of activities that they would like to engage in. After research, reflection, and some risk taking, we came up with a language arts class based on student podcasting that has been running ever since. Ultimately, however, we also came to realize that we had struck on a paradigm shift in curriculum development and teaching that correlated to larger social and technological trends and went well beyond the specific technologies of podcasting.

One reason the ideas in this book are a shift is because, as opposed to working from antecedents in education, the content was primarily developed from authentic activities outside of schools. The units in this book do not approach podcasting as an enhancement of the existing curriculum, but rather as a catalyst for reflection and curricular reform. Furthermore, though the technology is critical to the student projects, the ideas here are not simply about technological proficiency. The technology is a seamless part of real-world activities with educational value that connect to several disciplines.

Reading, Writing, Literacy, and 21st-Century Literacy

Although in this book I do address existing content standards and conventional literacies—reading, writing, speaking—my main premise is that students need to be directed in new literacies as well as conventional literacies. These new literacies cannot be simply tagged onto existing curriculum, models, and mindsets.

A shorthand way to describe *literacy* involves "reading and writing text," but the term *literacy* connotes a far more complex process. There have been distinctions between everyday literacy and academic literacy, for example, and an association of literacy with "discourses," or ways of acting in the world (Gee, 2004). In *New Literacies*, Lankshear and Knobel (2003) make an important distinction between the terms *reading* and *literacy*. They posit that the term *reading* conveys an internal, psychological process, while the term *literacy* conveys a social process—connected to other practices, communities, economies, and empowerment.

There has been a shift in education over the past 30 years to focus on literacy as opposed to reading—the changes are reflected in approaches, practices, funding, and program names. Two of the major factors that contributed to this shift from reading to literacy were, first, an awareness of the correlation between illiteracy and unemployment in the United States during the 1970s and, second, the growing trends in psychology and other social sciences to see learning as a larger social process as opposed to an isolated cognitive process (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). This book looks at literacy both as the skills of reading and writing text and as the broader, complex social processes.

Moreover, it's the extension and clarification of these broader social processes that is the launching point of 21st-century literacy, the main focus of this book. It would be easy to dismiss the term *21st-century literacy* as just another adaptation of the word *literacy*—at best, a term capturing a specific educational agenda, and at worst more jargon in the data smog. For me, the fundamental question "Why do we teach children to read?" helps clarify the importance of emphasizing what's unique about 21st-century literacy. We teach reading to enable participation and empowerment—we want students to succeed in the world, so it's important that they be able to understand others and communicate their own ideas.

Even a skeptic would likely acknowledge that for these goals to be realized in the 21st century, new skills and mindsets are required. Although specific technologies such as Second Life, microblogging, iPods, and podcasting could be included in the catalog of 21st-century literacy tools, the term *21st-century literacy* captures a skill set and frame of mind bigger and less ephemeral than proficiency with the latest technologies.

I believe that we are at a revolutionary point in our history, a paradigm shift akin to the introduction of writing to the ancient Greeks or the effects of the printing press on Early Modern Europeans. We need to look at our teaching in this larger sweep of history. Twenty-first-century literacies involve the skills and mindsets associated with the digital technologies and global networking of the information age. These skills and mindsets are related to the immediate technologies, but they are also related to the larger and tacit shifts associated with digital technologies and global networking—shifts in social structures, culture, capital, and labor.

There are some fascinating examinations of 21st-century literacy that informed the direction of my work with student podcasting and the ideas of this book. Prominent among them were Lankshear and Knobel's *New Literacies* (2003), William Kist's *New Literacies in Action* (2004), and Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2006b), *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education in the 21st Century* (2006a), and the American Association of School Librarians' *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (2007). Below are common key ideas that informed the direction of this work.

> **Participation.** Digital technologies have given us unprecedented abilities to create media and content to express ourselves to various and wide audiences. Media creation tools and distribution networks that 20 years ago were available only to a handful of media conglomerates now come preloaded on even the least expensive computers. Almost anyone can create and distribute media and actively participate in culture, politics, and communities. Students need to identify appropriate venues for diverse media and content. They need the skills to compellingly create content for real purposes and real audiences. Our students need to be active creators, not passive consumers. They need to be engaged citizens and self-directed workers.

> **Appropriation.** Remixes, embedding media, and copying and pasting are part of the constitution of our digital environment. Students need the skills and mindsets to effectively and ethically synthesize the work of

others into original and compelling work. These skills are the foundation of audio remixes *as well as* good research papers.

Mediums. Students need to know that different mediums (audio, video, text) and different technologies (podcasting, online video, blogging) have different properties, purposes, advantages, and weaknesses. They need to learn how to identify, choose, innovate, and capitalize on these mediums and technologies.

Ethical Behavior. Students need to understand that with the opportunities possible with networked and digital technologies, there are also risks and responsibilities. We cannot teach this to students by blocking out the changing world, but must instead develop techniques to guide them in developing their own ethical compasses and responsible behaviors. They need to be able to identify ethical boundaries and existing abuses of new media.

Personal Interests. In traditional schools, students are often required to repress their individual interests and learn the curriculum of the school. Schools need to take a more dialectic approach between the goals of the school and the experiences and goals of the students. This not only correlates with much of the past three decades of research on cognitive science, but also matches the skills needed for today's world. As already mentioned, today's social and economic systems require more individual volition and portable skill sets. The ability to identify, hone, and connect personal interests to communities and organizations that value those skills is the path to a fulfilling life.

These are some of the premium skills for engagement and success in the 21st century, and podcasting is a powerful and accessible activity for teaching them.

Tensions and Conflicts

The skills and mindsets associated with new literacies are challenging many traditional paradigms of our culture. I believe they're also causing a need for a conceptual shift in our approach to education. It's worth highlighting some of the subtle but powerful paradigms that have outlived their usefulness in our digital and global world.

An increasingly blurry separation in society is the one between consumers and creators of media. Most of our systems—schools, law, entertainment—have been built on a strict separation between consumers and creators of content. Some of these systems—the United States legal system, for example—have built hundreds of years of precedents on this dichotomy. The recent explosion of digital technology that enables people to copy, share, and remix is a precipitous challenge to the workings of these systems. It's now more important than ever to educate students on the ethics and legalities associated with copyright, fair use, and the ethical appropriation of others' content.

In education, we generally strongly distinguish between individual and collaborative endeavors. But this dichotomy between independence and collaboration is not as simple outside of schools as we make it within schools. Our networked digital world facilitates and often even requires interdependence in both work and social life. I find that, using technology, many of my students spend their free time collaborating with, and receiving instantaneous feedback from, their peers—and they're tremendously engaged by it. The activities in this book attempt to harness that engagement.

In literacy and humanities education I see an unnecessary split between material that students are interested in and more traditional literature and curricular content. I would argue that students' perceived lack of interest in history, Shakespeare, poetry, or Jane Austen novels has nothing to do with history, Shakespeare, poets, or Austen, but with a teaching tradition that relies on rote memorization of facts, formalist essay topics, and the mechanics of literary analysis. If teachers would instead deeply reflect on what brings people to this material, students would more easily develop a natural affection for it. I hope the projects in this book will offer you new ways of approaching the material you teach that will truly spark your students' interest.

Cultivating Powerful Ideas

The units in this book are based on the space where real-world activities connect to student interests and powerful ideas. For this book, I define "real-world activities" as activities that occur outside of school and that are done in communities by professionals. Podcasting tours, news stories, audio dramas, and media reviews are examples of real-world activities. These activities come with their own goals, communities, examples, and models. The objective

of the podcasting course was to find and refine activities that maximized student interest and choice. For example, in the audio tours lesson, not only do students choose a place of interest, but they focus on making the tours engaging and interesting to audiences of their choice.

Applying the term "powerful ideas" to educational technology was pioneered by Seymour Papert in his groundbreaking book *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas* (1980). Papert saw technology as a catalyst for powerful ideas. He writes that "one comes to appreciate how certain ideas can be used as tools to think with over a lifetime. One learns to enjoy and respect the power of powerful ideas" (p. 76). I want to convince you that podcasting can be a vehicle for teaching powerful ideas—not simply a new way to teach existing curriculum. My observations encourage me to think that student-powered podcasting can promote several powerful ideas—ideas that students can use over a lifetime. For example, the hands-on and reflective approach to copyright, fair use, and digital media that students employ in their podcasting can become a tool for them to think about the balance of individual rights and community benefits. Similarly, the powerful idea of audience, whether in creating a media review or an audio tour, can become a tool for them to empathize with and anticipate the needs of others. In student-powered podcasting, these issues are not isolated lessons, but fundamentals of students' work as podcasters.

New technologies do not necessarily lead to better teaching. I feel frustration when I see a tech-savvy and well-intentioned teacher, standing at the front of a class, cranking up a set of desktop speakers and playing a podcast that "enhances" the existing curriculum. Regardless of how compelling and polished the content is, if that's the extent of the technology integration, the teacher is most likely simply reinforcing passivity in the learners. On the other hand, I feel excitement when I see students empowered with creative technology tools that help them effectively participate in media creation, personal understanding, and communication with others.

Teach your students to podcast, and you'll take them further down the road to 21st-century literacy.

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