

# Podcasting Saved My Sanity



## Insanity Threatened

Four years ago, as a fairly new Grade Seven classroom teacher, I discovered that I was not always the supportive, understanding type of teacher I had envisioned myself to be. Having come from a student services background I was more accustomed to working with students one-on-one, or in small groups, not having to meet the myriad demands of twenty-eight plus students. One area that particularly taxed my patience was the daily help students needed after school because they had been away for reasons that were not necessarily related to illness.

While I understood the importance of sports in the full spectrum of education, and, in particular, its importance in connecting to the school, I found myself mentally (and not always so mentally), gnashing my teeth as students left early or missed entire days for this or that event. I was concerned that students were missing out on important content necessary for their comprehension of the lesson. It certainly wasn't their fault, but it meant more work for them and possibly poorer marks and extra an challenge for me as I tried to help students catch up after school in inadequate snippets of time.

If I added to that sports group my students that were away

for three days due to illness, another student a half day for an appointment, and those that left on Thursday so their parents could score that choice camping spot, I routinely ended up with students after school. One needed two days of catch up, one needed a week, and this one needed one subject from yesterday morning. I found it overwhelming and frustrating. I felt I never could give these students what they needed academically, help them balance their conflicting needs, and still keep my sanity.

## A Post-Secondary Solution

So, I decided to podcast all my original lessons and post them, password protected, on the Internet. Those students that must be away would not miss anything except their own personal participation and experience of the lesson in person. I was well aware that this service was available at the post-secondary level and did not see why it should not work at the middle school level.

With the help of our district technology helping teachers, I set up a podcasting site on Rapid Weaver. I created an explanatory welcome page, separate pages for each subject, and made a link to the page on my classroom web page. While Rapid Weaver is a simple blog program, it had the plus that I could post to each page.

For example, an English lesson could be put onto the English page.

Because I was involved with the district Technology Learning Network, I set up my podcasting as an action research project, surveying my students before and after the implementation of the process, and collecting data throughout.

Before I started, I asked the students what method they used to catch up when they were away:

- 20% said they would ask the teacher.
- 58% said they would ask their friends.
- 6% said that they would do nothing and hope to catch up on their own.
- 5% said they would do nothing.

I was hoping to see this set of statistics change.

## The Logistics

The tool that I initially used to record my voice was an iPod Nano, using the voice memo function. I use a sound field system and so I placed the iPod near my speaker. This amplified my voice and allowed me to move around the room. I then downloaded that voice memo to iTunes, converted it to an mp3 file, and uploaded it to Rapid Weaver. Students also had a "pass" microphone to use when I wished student voices to be recorded. Initially, I also put

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student photos and videos of science labs on the site.

### **Why I Keep on Podcasting**

The benefits of podcasting include:

- Returning students that are struggling readers do not have to find someone to read their text to them (they can access the lesson when I do that).
- Illustrative points that come up for discussion during a textbook reading are not missed.
- Some students come back to school after an absence all caught up and ready to go.
- Less teacher time is spent in ‘catching up’ students; you just place them at a computer with headphones on.
- Less teacher frustration is felt when handling the regular absence of students.
- Opportunities for students to review lessons and study, especially if reading comprehension skills are low.
- Ability for parents to be aware of what has been taught.
- Ability for parents to make sure their child’s notes are complete (from the Notes Review lesson).
- Ability for students who are away for extended periods of time to catch up on their work (perhaps in real time depending on the Internet connections in that area).

### **The Transparent Classroom**

I believe strongly in a transparent classroom. Combining podcasting with other digital measures allows parents the ability to monitor their child’s learning at their own comfort level. These measures included on-line grades, on-line homework, a class website that is updated daily, with current curriculum and upcoming tests and project due dates, and timely e-

mail communication when needed. Of course, all this information is available in class for those without computer access. Parents with knowledge are able to parent effectively. They appreciate the power that the transparent classroom gives them. Is it risky for us? Yes, but it is amazing how much more one thinks about how to teach, assess, and mark if their process is open to the world. When podcasting, one seems to automatically monitor what comes out of one’s mouth when a recorder is going. (and, as a side benefit—so do some students) You can always just not use a podcast if you decide not to. I also have an agreement with the students that I will never identify them in a negative way on a podcast. This helps them feel comfortable with the process and they usually participate fully.

### **The Convincers**

After a full term of podcasting, I again asked my students how they now caught up on missed lessons. Their responses were as follows:

- Listen to a podcast - 43%
- Ask the teacher only - 9%
- Ask their friends -36%
- Do nothing and hope to catch up on my own - 8%
- Do nothing - 4%

Parents were asked what they thought about the podcasting:

- “I just wanted to drop a quick note and say how useful we have been finding your class pod casts. As a working parent I find it hard to keep up on everything my son is doing

in school. With the pod cast I can go in and listen to what the class is doing with the current curriculum. I also found them great if my son misses a school day. We can go in and easily access anything he has missed.”

- “It’s wonderful.”
- “My son missed a week of school and he found it very helpful to be able to use the podcasting site to catch up his missed work. He has also used it for studying.”

- “I also use it to see what my kid is studying in school. I have learned stuff I didn’t know. ha ha!”

- “I think it is a great idea and very helpful if a student is away or needs a little extra help.”

- “I think they are very helpful for my daughter. I am thankful that my child can use podcasts and not fall behind in class.”

Students said that they used the podcasts when:

- “I was away for two months”
- “I went camping”
- “I was sick”

This was a gratifying result, and so I continued with my podcasting, and have now done so for the past four years.

### **Technology Barrels Forward**

For this coming fall, however, I have moved all my sites, (except for on-line grades), including my podcasting, onto a password protected class blog, which I will share with my teaching partners. Now I can also add handouts, or notes to the site and my teaching partners can add what they need as

well. I will have students add homework to the site, as well add the class photos and videos, and all the information that was on the website. I cannot post to a particular page but I can sort by category or tag and so can students and their parents. We will use the blog pages for static information. The blog is an improvement in the following ways:

- It can accommodate text, audio, video, photos, and comments.
- It functions from a Mac or PC platform.
- It is more modern in appearance
- Multiple authors can add to the site.

To create a podcast you do not need a sound field system. A simple voice recorder or mp3 player with a recording function will suffice. You can also use computer programs such as Audacity or Garage Band.

Additionally, I no longer record on my Nano, using instead a line in microphone directly into Garage Band. The benefit of this

is that I can edit out situations like the students that come to the door to make an announcement to the class. You can also record directly into Garage Band or Audacity using your built in microphone or a USB plug in microphone. I also expect this year to try some video math lessons recorded on a document camera or video recorded by those students who are always done early. Video works better for math than audio. I will likely use an iPod Nano with video to record this, as this is all I currently have available.

### **Extensions of Classroom Podcasting**

For a year, I also developed free classroom lessons for the world on another blog, using my podcasting methods, and involving colleagues in the project. It was called Classroom Lessons for the World, but for a number of reasons did not continue. I still harbour secret hopes that one day I can resurrect it to become a useful tool for developing nations.

### **Take it Slow, but Save Your Sanity**

Try not to be afraid of podcasting. Start slow and in a non-threatening way by recording a notes review, after school with no students around. Soon you will find that you will want to add more and more. At first, just have kids listen to a recording in iTunes on your computer. If that works well, get your local tech expert to help you set up a site. Not all lessons work on a podcast and not all students will access them. But...you as a professional are extending the learning beyond the classroom and doing a great deal to save your own sanity. You will turn into that gracious teacher who, wholeheartedly, excuses your students for tournaments, with well wishes and a calm demeanour, knowing that your workload has not doubled and that their learning is not being compromised. 🌱

