

THE BIG LOOP

LANGUAGE ARTS UNIT PLAN: PODCASTING AS STORYTELLING

WHAT IS THIS?

This is a unit plan aimed at helping educators empower students through storytelling using the emergent medium of *podcasting*. This unit begins with a primer on the art and craft of podcasting, proceeds with several lessons on the making of podcasts, and ends with a collaborative student project that utilizes the skills acquired in this unit. For the introduction, we will borrow heavily from a recent New York Times article, "[Project Audio: Teaching Students How to Produce Their Own Podcasts.](#)"

WHO ARE YOU?

My name is [Paul Bae](#). I am the producer of a couple of well known podcasts *The Black Tapes* and *The Big Loop* (named by *Forbes Magazine* as [one of the three shows](#) to help get you into audio drama). Before I entered the field of audio drama, I taught secondary (i.e. high school) English in Vancouver, British Columbia for twelve years. With a background in teaching gifted and special needs programs, I recognize the need for diversified learning environments that embrace various levels of skills and knowledge acquisition; that is, kids learn at different speeds and in different ways. And the trick is to teach them all. This unit is designed with diversified learning in mind.

WHO IS THIS FOR?

This unit is designed for teachers building language arts curricula for students aged 13 to 18 years. Designed by a former educator, this unit is intended to help teachers build a collaborative storytelling environment in which young people learn to hone various skills in the attempt to strengthen their abilities to build narratives. The character/community building aspect of this unit is to use podcasting to build *empathy*.

WHAT IS PODCASTING?

Podcasting is the art of producing audio programs for the internet. That covers a lot of ground, so for the purposes of this unit, let's narrow that down: podcasting is the collaborative making of audio stories to be made available online. Listeners can access podcasts by downloading them onto their computers or smart phones.

Before we go any further, if this is your first foray into podcasting, check out [iTunes' FAQ page](#). Given that the term *podcasting* comes from Apple's *iPod*, I think it a good place to start. However, you don't have to use Apple products to access podcasting since it's now available on several platforms (like *Overcast* and *Podbean*—both free).

WHY PODCASTING?

As a teacher of young people, you already know that digital media is not the future—it is *the present*. And podcasting is the fastest growing segment of digital media. There is no other medium growing faster in terms of content, distribution, and industry.

For a more detailed analysis of the economics of podcasting and what it will mean for your students, read [here](#). When it comes to preparing young people for careers in the digital age, learning how to produce podcasts gives your students a head start in the industry.

As for student learning outcomes, the cooperative learning potential of podcasting is huge. For you veteran teachers, don't feel intimidated by the technology. Remember the classic [Cooperative Learning](#) texts from [David and Roger Johnson](#) we all learned in teachers' college? Podcasting's potential in this arena is huge. Groups will need students who love writing, editing, interviewing, talking, acting, and using software for editing. Have a student who hates reading but loves making music? Get them into the editing task of their group. Have a student who's too shy for oral presentations but loves taking notes? Give them the transcription part of the group task. You will find a part for most types of students in this unit.

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

If you already listen to podcasts, skip to the next section. If you've never listened to podcasts before or are still not sure how podcasting fits into a classroom, take the time to listen to the following podcast episodes. You don't have to listen to all of them though it is highly recommended to give you an idea of how diverse this medium can be, the various functions it serves (entertainment, education, even helping you sleep!) and what it's capable of in terms of building narratives.

Heavyweight, "[Buzz](#)" (A man's intimate journey with his father as he tries to patch things up with his estranged brother.)

The Truth, "[Can You Help Me Find My Mom?](#)" (Bonus: Ask students why this works so well as audio but could be a challenge as a movie.)

[Sleep With Me](#). This one's designed specifically to help people with anxiety fall asleep and trust me, it works. It was even praised in [The New Yorker](#). Just don't listen to it while driving.

Modern Love, "[A Heart of Gold](#)." An actor reads a letter about a woman's pet turtle. It is short and packs an emotional punch that might surprise students with how much you can do with fine writing, voicing, and music.

Okay, caught up and ready to seriously think about incorporating podcasting into your unit plans? Then let's begin.

A Beginner's Guide to Podcasting

If you have never attempted to make a podcast before, you can't do much better than this recent article in The New York Times, "[Project Audio: Teaching Students How to Produce Their Own Podcasts](#)." The article is basically a *teaching unit* that includes several links and PDFs which you will want to save into a podcasting unit folder on your computer. Depending on your students' grade levels, this unit will take from 3 to 5 classes. And when grouping your students, anticipate that some of them will already be familiar with the technology, so separate and group them accordingly. And keep an eye out for the musicians in your classes, for they will most likely be the best at mixing and editing on the software.

Trust me: I was halfway through writing my own beginner's guide to podcasting when this article was published three days prior to upload. You remember that feeling when you first stepped in to someone else's class to substitute and a few minutes into your lesson, a student says, "We already read that"? That's how I felt seeing this excellent piece. So please go through every link and video in the article to completely familiarize yourself with the technical and narrative building blocks of podcasting.

Important note: make sure you check with your administrator or in-school computer tech to see which free editing software your computers can handle. If you have Macs, you'll be using [Garageband](#). If you have PCs, you'll be using [Audacity](#).

If you're still unsure of the basics, [this article](#) by [Youth Radio](#) is another primer on how to produce a podcast from the ground up.

At this point, you have enough of the basics to begin designing your own unit for fitting podcasting into your curriculum, whether it be history, science, or drama. The teaching and learning potential is nearly limitless.

However, if you are an English teacher and would like a ready-made unit for your classroom focusing on the issue of bullying and violence, continue reading. Warning: this is where a bit of self-promotion comes in as the unit uses my podcast, [The Big Loop](#), as the study material. Given the nature of the series which touches on sensitive topics and utilizes "mature content," you may decide you'd rather use

another podcast that will be less controversial but just as edifying. I've chosen some incredible samples below (that are relatively short episodes).

Alternative Subjects and Podcasts:

- On narrative perspective and voice: The Truth, [Can You Help Me Find My Mom?](#) (8 min)
- On gay identity and rights: This Is Love, [A Private Life](#) (22 min)
- On empathy: Modern Love, [A Heart of Gold](#) (18 min)

You may retrofit the following unit to any of the podcasts above by changing the topics. Good luck!

[insert evaluation grid and self-evaluation grid]

The Big Loop Podcasting Unit

*Due to the mature subject matter, this lesson is designed and intended for senior grades. Target age: 15-18.

*This unit depends upon the teacher having firmly established the classroom expectations of mutual respect towards the views and opinions of others.

Lesson 1: Empathy

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Speakers or system that can stream a computer or your phone. Must be loud enough for the whole class to hear clearly.
- Download “[YOU](#)” and “[Goodbye Mr. Adams](#)” on your computer or phone for classroom playing.
- Print copies of this [Forbes article](#) on audio drama podcasts titled “[Let 2018 Be The Year You Discover Audio Drama.](#)”
- *NOTE:* Be familiar with the New York Times article on

WARM UP

Begin by writing the following prompt on the board: “*Have you ever judged someone you didn't know only to find out later that you were completely wrong about them?*” Allow 5 minutes of free writing in journals. (If you teach an English class and don't have students regularly journaling, we need to talk. Kidding. But seriously, if you don't have your students free write in a journal, read [this short article](#) on the importance of [journaling in education](#). It is an easy way to warm your students up and prepare them for classroom discussions.)

Break students into small groups to discuss their responses. (5 min) Then discuss as a class.

BREAKING IT DOWN

Write on the board: “*Why do we so easily judge others?*” Talk about how none of us like being judged. We have all been traumatized at some point by being judged. So why are we so ready to judge others?

INTRODUCING THE UNIT

Introduce the concept of *podcasting*. (Please be familiar with New York Times article from the beginning of this unit plan titled “[Project Audio: Teaching Students How to Produce Their Own Podcasts.](#)”)

Have students take out their smartphones and find their podcast app. You may find that some either have never opened this app or don’t even have one (especially Android phone users).

Ask students “*Who listens to podcasts?*” Have them write the titles on the board with a quick explanation of what that podcast is about and why they like it. If any of them are fictional, place an *asterisk* by the title. Don’t explain why you placed the asterisks there (if you did).

Ask students if anyone followed the final days of the Cassini Orbiter last year. (Simple [article here.](#)) Now, get ready to really sell it by asking them if anyone heard of the strange “voices from deep space” that one of our Voyager space probes picked up.

Without too much of an introduction, play “YOU” up to the 4:04 mark (after host says, “It sent the astronomical community scrambling.”). Stop playing the episode.

Ask for theories on what that sound is. Ask if anyone heard of this story? Ask why this story wasn’t widely circulated.

Now, reveal the truth: that it’s a piece of fiction. Introduce the concept of fictional podcasts and audio dramas (as opposed to nonfiction). Make sure to point out that it’s all actors performing scripted parts into the audio format we know as podcasts. (If you need to know more about me by way of introduction for your classroom, here’s an [article from The Atlantic](#) on my previous work [The Black Tapes.](#))

Talk about how the narrative “hook” was set in the beginning of “[YOU.](#)” What made it believable? What made it unbelievable?

Distribute copies of the Forbes article “[Let 2018 Be The Year You Discover Audio Drama.](#)” Read together.

Discuss whether anyone listens to audio dramas. If any students listed an audio drama on the board, ask how they initially got into them. Do they prefer fictional or nonfictional podcasts?

Let them know they will be listening to an episode of [The Big Loop](#) (one of the three mentioned in the Forbes article) called [Goodbye Mr. Adams](#). Warn of language.

Play the first 4 minutes of [Goodbye Mr. Adams](#) in class. (Until we hear the host's introduction.) Pause the episode. Ask if the episode is more or less believable or authentic than [YOU](#). Discuss these differences. (The main difference they may notice is the prominence of the narrator/host in [YOU](#).)

Continue playing the episode. Stop at 5:07. Ask: "Why is he grateful that he went to school before the days of social media?" This will inevitably lead to ways in which social media is used to bully peers.

Now, ask: "What do you think is going to happen in this story?" Have all their predictions on the board. Have them keep in mind the way the story opened.

HOMEWORK

Have students SUBSCRIBE to The Big Loop (thank you!), DOWNLOAD [Goodbye Mr. Adams](#), and LISTEN to all of that episode. You might have to show them HOW to actually do all of this if they've never used a podcast app.

Lesson 2: Narrative Conflict

WARM UP

Begin by writing the following prompt on the board: "*Have you ever pretended you were okay with something that happened to you but knew you were lying to everyone? Why did you lie? What stops you from opening up to others?*" Allow 5 minutes of free writing in journals.

Break students into small groups to discuss their responses. (5 min) Then discuss as a class.

Now ask: "Is it possible to lie to yourself?" Is it possible to trick yourself into thinking you're fine with something but actually be deeply disturbed by it? Open class discussion. This should be lively.

Now talk about the concept of the first person narrator. Ask, "Is it possible for the narrator of a story to lie or mislead the reader?"

Break class into small discussion groups, preferably groups of five. Let everyone know that each group member is responsible for remembering or taking notes on their group responses to one of the following questions. Write the following questions on the board:

1. How do you feel about Brady's "journey" in the story? Did he end up in a better place at the end compared to the beginning? How and/or how not?
2. What was your initial reaction to the violence in the story? Did you root for Brady and cheer on his revenge? Or were you repulsed by it? Or a mix of the two?

3. Imagine the rest of Brady's life as if the story were to continue. How do you think his life would develop and turn out?
4. Do you consider the ending a "happy" conclusion? Why or why not?
5. What do you think the writer was trying to communicate with this story? What do you think was his *intended* lesson or theme?

Group share the results of the small group discussions. Have one member from each group share their group responses.

Now share the author's reasons (i.e. my reasons) below for writing this episode. You may read it or give the gist of it.

"I wrote this episode after bingeing The Punisher on Netflix last year. I found myself rooting for the violence. In fact, it went beyond that with me sometimes wishing more harm and violence on The Punisher's enemies. After I was done watching the series, I felt this incredible discomfort at my reaction to the violence. It had brought out an ugly aspect of my character. I was disgusted at my need for violence and revenge. I wrote "Goodbye Mr. Adams" in response to that—to have listeners cheer on Brady's revenge and then when the episode's done, have the listeners examine their own reactions to the violence. A part of me feels Brady was justified at times though he definitely goes overboard. I don't have answers here. I just lay forth the questions."

Ask, "Did the writer succeed in making you question your reaction to the violence in the episode?" Discuss their responses to this. Ask, "How could he have better achieved his aim of making you question your response to the violence?"

ASSIGNMENT

Students are to write a paragraph or two explaining "Is violence ever justified?" Due at the end of class.

HOMEWORK

Think of a fictional podcast/audio drama they would like to produce. It has to be 5-10 minutes long. What would it be about?

Lesson 3: Let's Make A Podcast

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Copies of the New York Times article, "[Project Audio: Teaching Students How to Produce Their Own Podcasts.](#)"
- Large index cards (one for each student)

For this, use your discretion when breaking your class into groups. Numbering students and grouping them accordingly into teams of four. Let students choose their own roles (help them if they can't decide).

On the board, write this list of roles:

- writer
- editor
- transcriber
- host

Give each student an index card. Students are to write their roles on an index card. Then under the titles, they are to list their responsibilities. But let everyone know that there are no definite lines between each. Every member may do a bit of everything if they so choose.

Now read through the New York Times article together.

The next 3 classes will be devoted to following the New York Times unit plan. However, you should add the option of allowing them to produce an audio drama. One rule: all roles must be acted only by the four members of the group. They cannot seek out the services of anyone outside of their group.

Be prepared to roll up your sleeves and dive in to help them. If possible (and I highly recommend this), reach out to any podcasters in your city to see if they'd like to guest speak in your classroom to give a hands-on lesson on how to produce a podcast.

[*If you teach in Vancouver or the Lower Mainland, and you would like me to personally visit your class at this point of your podcasting unit, please email me at bigloopproductions@gmail.com. If I have the time, I will gladly come in to help out.]

Use whatever assessment guide/rubric you're comfortable using. I suggest a mix of peer, self, and group assessment rubrics, making sure to provide the assessment criteria *before* the project begins so the students fully understand the expectations and learning outcomes.

