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LEADING BY EAR:
Podcasting as an Educational Leadership Tool

Abstract

This innovative practice paper explains how a student-produced podcast is used as an educational tool to showcase leadership and ethics. It illustrates how podcasting provides a unique pedagogical experience for students to engage with leadership themes in a way that is accessible, practical, and relevant. In this example, the podcast episodes become an innovative teaching resource, while the creation of it provides an experiential learning opportunity for the student hosts. In creating the work, students develop essential critical thinking skills, and the students who engage with the podcast are introduced to valuable leadership concepts.

Introduction

The term "podcast" is a combination of Apple's iPod brand and the word "broadcast" (Robinson & Ritzko, 2009). Podcasting is the "creation and serial distribution" of media via the internet (Shamburg, 2009, p. 5). The key elements to a podcast are its regular and consistent distribution of content and the ability for listeners to subscribe to the podcast to be notified of new uploads. Podcasts can include audio-only episodes as well as video episodes. This paper and review of scholarship will specifically focus on the impacts of audio-only podcasts as a teaching resource since the student podcast discussed is audio-only.

More than 700,000 podcasts were available by 2017 and more than 100 million people had listened to one. About two-thirds (67%) of the overall podcast audience are between the ages of 18 and 44 (Nielsen Podcast Insights, 2017). Podcasts cover a wide range of subjects and interests at a variety of depths. This

breadth of subject matter allows for exceptional flexibility in both consumer and producer choice (Robinson & Ritzko, 2009).

As a broad consumer medium, podcasts are forecasted to soon represent a $1 billion advertising market (He, 2019). However, the educational opportunities represented by podcasts should not be lost in this exploding market. This paper explains an exercise that leverages the growing popularity of podcasts as an educational tool, especially within the context of leadership education. Our podcast project provides a unique pedagogical experience for students to engage with a variety of leadership themes in a way that is accessible, practical, and relevant to students. Before we discuss our specific podcast exercise, however, a review of related scholarship provides an academic and pedagogical framework that supports our project.

Review of Related Scholarship

In the context of technology-based learning, podcasting is a relatively simple teaching device that is both flexible and accessible (Steventon, 2013). Podcasts are inherently mobile and simple in content structure, and Steventon noted that podcasts "[fit] within the comprehension of the majority of students, unlike many other technologies with which the familiarity of the so-called 'digital natives' of the 'net generation' is overstated" (p. 100). Shamburg (2009) found that students can authentically connect and engage with current media trends; thus, podcasts can allow students to more deeply connect with a curriculum. Producing podcasts is also relatively inexpensive, and students can use smartphones and laptops to create, distribute, or listen to them (Shamburg, 2009).

Integrated course design is a concept of teaching that incorporates varying learning activities and opportunities for reflection and feedback (Fink, 2003). Relevant learning activities that resonate with students encourage active and enriching learning (Fink, 2003). As digital tools have become more popular, they have been increasingly embraced as effective instruction components within higher education (Northcote, Marshall, Dobozy, Swan, & Mildenhall, 2007). And when integrated into learning experiences, podcasts specifically have been shown to resonate with students across subject areas (Bolden & Nahachewsky, 2015 Bryans Bongey, Cizadlo, & Kalnbach, 2006; Walls et al., 2010). Podcasts can be used to engage understanding, which makes them both a teaching resource for instructors and a learning resource for students. (Goldman, 2018). As such, podcasting has been identified in the literature as an excellent pedagogical tool for leadership education in that the act of integrating podcast production and/or consumption in the classroom incorporates "an especially 'human' and 'humane' rich interactive experience" that is especially needed and effective in leadership education (Kidd, 2012;

Salmon & Edirisingha, 2008).

Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) list podcasts among the art forms capable of being a "transformative pedagogy for leadership education" (p. 298). They recommend incorporating ways to engage with art when teaching and learning leadership concepts, such as making art, viewing art, or participating in a group setting with the art. Our student podcast model incorporates all three levels of interaction. Students create the podcast, listen to it, and participate in group discussions about the podcast in the classroom, allowing them to better grasp and digest leadership concepts. Guthrie and Jenkins also note that art forms can be used by leadership learners from both content and process perspectives. As content, the "art" that is created can be filtered through a leadership lens to "help students make sense of the art, contextualize leadership, and widen their perspectives on both" (p. 299). As a process, the creation of the art provides students opportunities to practice refining their creative and leadership skills, as well as "develop along humanistic dimensions" (p. 299). Therefore, with the podcast as the chosen art form, the impacts of this multifaceted practice have significant learning opportunities through both content and process.

Using podcasts in the classroom as a substitute for traditional instruction methods appeals to learning styles less served by lectures and assigned readings (Robinson & Ritzko, 2009). Podcasts also enable listeners to take their learning on-the-go, engaging with the content while they walk to class, for example. When podcast production is included the curriculum, researchers have also found that students develop both hard technical skills, like editing, and soft interpersonal skills, like collaboration, task management, and critical problem solving (Goldman, 2018). Not only that, but in one study in which podcasts were integrated into instruction, researchers found that students scored significantly higher on knowledge and application assessments and felt more motivated compared to

those who received text-only instruction (Kennedy et al., 2016). When offered as a supplement to existing instruction, podcasts can provide a way "to receive high quality instruction beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom" (Kennedy et al., 2016, p. 304).

In considering the societal context of contemporary leadership education, Green and McBride (2015) observed that "today's problems require a different kind of leadership" (p. 13). They asserted that leadership must be taught at all levels of organizations, as traditional job title hierarchies increasingly represent outdated models. According to Green and McBride, "We need leadership development that promotes deep learning and sustained growth for all" (p. 13). Therefore, when teaching key concepts of leadership in higher education, it is important to align teaching curricula in the 21st century with larger social and technological trends (Shamburg, 2009). We believe that our podcast project represents a micro exercise perfectly aligned with these macro issues. In the following section, we describe our podcast project and how it has been deployed.

Description of the Practice

This podcast began in 2016 with the idea of creating an interview-based podcast featuring media industry leaders. The podcast's focus on leadership within a specific industry context built on the momentum of a leadership development program sponsored by an innovation institute within our college. The original student host had to learn how to build and distribute the podcast from the ground up, and each subsequent host has had to develop this same set of skills. Since the podcast's launch, hosts have produced seven seasons of the podcast for a total of more than 40 episodes. Each season of the podcast represents one academic semester. Typically, a total of six episodes are posted in the fall and spring semesters; one about every two weeks. Each episode ranges in length from 15 to 20 minutes.

The episodes feature a wide range of current and emerging leaders with different industry and academic perspectives. Some come from our faculty and others from established companies and entrepreneurial start-ups. Guests are engaged in everything from traditional media to social media and represent careers spanning as few as five years to more than 35 years. For example, one episode featured a conversation with the first female publisher of a regional daily newspaper, focusing on this media pioneer's transition into leadership (Norsworthy, 2019). Another episode featured a law professor discussing the standards and practices in the media industry and how they relate to ethics (Norsworthy, 2018).

The diversity in interview subjects is intentional to expose students to the variety of career paths within the media industry. When interviewing practitioners and educators, the hosts of our podcast use specific questions about career paths, leadership styles, and ethical decision-making to illustrate the relevancy of leadership concepts. By distributing these interviews in podcast form, the concepts are accessible as students can subscribe to and download the podcast from their smartphones. Collectively, the podcast episodes create a content archive over time from which professors can cull interviews that are relevant to specific course material.

In describing the practice, it is important to explain the technical processes behind the creation and distribution of podcast episodes as well as further applications in classroom curricula. Typically, each academic year, senior undergraduate or master's students are selected to host the podcast. Student hosts typically have prior training in audio storytelling, but there is an assumed technical learning curve for new hosts. Hosts must manage the recording equipment during the interviews, which consist of a soundboard connected to a laptop and two microphones. The podcasts are recorded through a free desktop application called Audacity, which allows users to record, store, and edit audio files. Once an interview is complete, the host is responsible for recording introductions and closing thoughts, sound mixing, and exporting and uploading the podcast to its distribution platform. For the first four seasons,

the podcast was distributed via SoundCloud, a free platform for audio files. Beginning with season five, the podcast migrated to a podcast hosting platform, Podbean, which automatically enabled efficient distribution to more accessible platforms such as Apple Podcasts, Google Play, and Spotify.

Hosts are also responsible for promoting the podcast via social media. Currently, the podcast is primarily promoted on its Twitter page, where hosts create graphics and discuss the main themes of each interview. Though there are many technical elements involved in creating and distributing the podcast, the process of learning by doing enables students to hone their technical skills over time in a way that is meaningful as they are able to directly track the outcome and impact of their work.

Discussion of Outcomes and Results

The ongoing creation of the podcast fuels a continual learning opportunity for students, with new students rotating into the host role as previous hosts graduate and move into their careers. Moreover, the podcasts created from the students' work lives on as a rich body of archival material that professors can tap for out-of-classroom assignments. Thus, the podcast has two primary outcomes: experiential learning for those who produce the work and rich leadership content for those who listen to the episodes. The attention the project received as a teaching resource also led to two ancillary projects, underscoring its impact.

A Digital eBook

The podcast's success led to the development of a second educational tool leveraging its content, an interactive e-book that features a collection of edited excerpts from the more than 40 archived conversations held with media leaders. The book, released by Kendal Hunt Publishing (Norsworthy & Herndon, 2020), is organized by the four major themes that emerged during the podcasts: leadership, ethics, innovation, and career advice. The e-book features embedded audio excerpts from the podcast episodes, allowing students and instructors to easily access the relevant precise moment in the featured episode. The book provides another medium through which to access leadership concepts prominent in the podcast, and it was recognized with two gold medals in the 2020 eLit Book Awards competition. It won in categories for current events and best use of multimedia (Herndon, 2020).

The e-book was inspired by the work of Shelby Coffey in the early 2000s, who produced a book titled Best Practices: The Art of Leadership in News Organizations. The book featured excerpts from 20 conversations Coffey had with news executives. He wrote, "At their best, strong leaders can command a newsroom with their presence, their eyes filled with merriment, anger, mischief, sympathy, delight, intensity for accomplishment" (2004, p. 2). While these attributes can be gleaned from reading the quotes Coffey collected from his leadership interviews, an audio-based podcast allows students to hear the subject's tone of voice when discussing leadership concepts, taking the level of understanding to new heights. Therefore, a major goal in producing the e-book was to systematically capture the best the podcast had to offer, providing even simpler access to compelling content.

Podcast Annotations

The podcast has been routinely featured in an undergraduate experiential learning course where the process we use to produce each episode has been explained and annotated. The podcast host writes a summary of the main themes that emerge within each episode and discusses specific challenges faced when producing the episode. These annotations are posted alongside the respective podcast episodes every two weeks during the season. The purpose of this supplemental material is to allow the hosts to reflect on leadership concepts presented in the interviews and share their thoughts on the material and how the interview came about. By explaining the challenges they had to overcome when producing the episode, the host also provides a model for other students to show how they can effectively overcome their own production challenges in similar media

assignments.

The current host also wrote a step-by-step article titled "How to Create a Podcast" for this course that will be used as an educational tool by instructors for aspiring podcast creators (Norsworthy, 2019). This article explained five elements to consider when building a conversation-style podcast: interviewing skills, equipment selection, editing, distribution, and promotion. Within each category, specific references are provided for free and accessible tools that can assist in increasing technical quality and promotional elements of the podcast such as its social media presence.

Overall, the annotations provide insights into both the technical methods of creating the podcast and the leadership skills needed to produce the podcast effectively. They detail both the technical and creative processes behind each episode so that students studying the podcast can better understand how such processes must effectively come together for an episode to work. Professors in our college have used the annotations in their classroom instruction to demonstrate leadership concepts in action.

Reflections of the Practitioner

As this project has developed over time, it reflects the findings of Marcketti and Kadolph (2010), who wrote that "leadership is a process of self-reflection, dialogue, critical reflection, and individual development" (p. 137). As part of the podcast creation, the process of writing annotations for each episode requires this critical reflection of the concepts and process. The idea of student hosts engaging in conversations is an essential part of dialogue. Thus, the entire process becomes one of self-reflection and individual development. This overall podcast exercise reinforces for us what many researchers have concluded: genuine engagement with leadership concepts is an important first step in encouraging students to view themselves as leaders at home, at work, and within school communities (Astin & Astin, 2000; Marcketti & Kadolph, 2010; Shertzer & Schuh,

2004).

Several students and professors across departments and colleges have approached us in hopes of creating personal or institutional podcasts. They have recognized the positive and multifaceted impact this simple technological tool can have in an educational setting and seek to incorporate it within the subject matter already being produced and discussed within their social and professional circles. This demonstrated interest within our college reconfirms Guthrie and Jenkins' (2018) conclusion that podcasting is both an accessible and accomplishable project for professors and students.

Recommendations

Marcketti and Kadolph (2010) wrote that undergraduate students will experience the unpredictable global market of today's work-environments and thus will need certain aspects of leadership in order to succeed: "the ability to find and synthesize diverse sources of information, to manage self, and to empower others" (p. 131). Thus, to meet student needs, leadership education must integrate theory, training, and experience (Hartman, Conklin, & Smith, 2007; Molt, 1995). In this regard, our podcast's educational structure enables professors to train, educate, and build leaders through a unique practical medium. We recommend that educators incorporate original podcasts into their curricula by building the production or use of podcasts into classroom or extracurricular learning opportunities. In the case of our podcast exercise, the production process takes place outside of the classroom, but the multiple types of content created can be used within the classroom.

Educators seeking to create their own experiential learning activity can incorporate podcasting in a variety of ways. Establishing an extracurricular or classroom opportunity for a student or small group of students to develop and publish a podcast on a given leadership concept or subject matter will produce content that can then be used as course material for students to engage with concepts. Leadership

concepts can be assigned to small groups of students to produce an individual episode as a part of a class assignment. In our experience, smaller groups on the production side of podcasting work most effectively, as meaningful tasks can be controlled and monitored. Salmon and Nie (2008), described podcasting as offering teachers and students "the widening of 'locations' in which learning is situated – an expansion of the temporal and the spatial; opportunities for engagement with and collaboration around dialogue; and opportunities for learners to get involved in the construction of learning for others" (p. 8).

Based on the success of our podcast, we recommend incorporating podcasting as a pedagogical tool into other leadership education programs. Our experience in developing and deploying our podcast aligns with Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) who asserted that podcasting can be a transformative tool in leadership education.

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