

Lodi Podcast Production Project: What We Did and Why

Lodi Public Library 2019-2020

In 2019 we won a WiLS Ideas-to-Action grant for an “Intro to Podcast Production” collaboration with the Lodi High School. After winning the grant, I purchased the equipment and connected with the school librarian to find a teacher willing/interested in participating. I also created ads to hire an intern. We paid \$12.50 an hour. This was an anxious time, because although I had an idea of what to do, we were also making up a lot of it on the fly and discovering things along the way.

Hire Intern(s)

Initially, I wanted to hire one intern, but after interviewing candidates, I liked two people for the different skills they offered, so I decided to hire them both. This was a fortuitous decision. One intern, Andrea Gambarro-Gunn, was a former teacher about to start grad school in journalism with an interest in podcasting. The other was a librarian in our system, Dusty Karls, who had a lot of technical experience. Andrea helped to develop the lesson plans and lead many of the modules. Dusty helped to guide us through the new equipment and at the final hour discovered the software Soundtrap, which we switched to the day before our first class with the school! We were going to use the free software Audacity, but Soundtrap is a cloud-based software that was *much* easier to use with *far* nicer features than Audacity. It added cost and was an unknown at that late hour, but we went with his recommendation.

Having an extra person also helped when we did the editing exercises in class. It also meant there was more flexibility with scheduling, because both of the interns had their own work/school schedules, and we were working with the high school and teacher and librarian, wondering if there'd be a snow day, etc. And I had my own job to do in addition to this project.

Purchase Equipment

It wasn't clear what I should buy, but I knew I wanted to buy the RODEcaster Pro Studio. There was also the added wrinkle that a lot of the podcast equipment was being developed as we were starting the project. Initially, I bought a case for the RODEcaster that was smaller, because that was all that was available. Then while we were starting the project, a new case that fit the RODEcaster and four Pod Mics, and the boom arms beneath the Pod Mics came out. That was a “Hallelujah” moment for me. Not only did most of the equipment I'd purchased fit inside it, but it also has an extendable handle and wheels like a suitcase, which made lugging everything to the school and back far less of a chore than it otherwise would have been.

I also bought a collection of plastic bins and used one to hold the headphones. While transporting everything, I'd just set that bin on top of the equipment case as I wheeled it into and out of the school.

Other equipment you might not think about at first...We needed a way for the students to save their projects, so we bought USBs that accepted SD and micro SD cards for each of them, and each also received a micro SD card.

Working with equipment like this was new to me, but it is really accessible. After someone takes five minutes to show you the basics, you'll feel much better, and after you make something you'll be able to easily teach someone else how to do it.

What microphones should you get? I like the Pod Mics because they fit nicely in the case that I mentioned. I also think they sound good. Obviously, you can improve your sound by purchasing nicer mics, but I'd advise these purchases as a starter kit, because they are accessible and professional.

I like the boom arms, because they are sturdy and add to the radio studio feel of everything. They also fit in the case. But you could always choose desktop stands if you think that works better.

Find a Teacher/Class

The Chemistry 2 teacher expressed interest in the project, since he'd done a podcast project the year before using a free app. This project could build upon that idea and give everything a more professional feel. I think he was second-guessing his decision while we were developing everything and making changes last minute, but in the end he was happy with how everything turned out and proud of what the students produced.

The Chemistry 2 class is not what I thought of when I conceived the project, but that also turned out to be a fortuitous choice. The class had only 11 seniors in it and all were high achieving who'd chosen to take Chemistry 2 over, say, study hall. The students were *definitely* resistant to us the first day, but as they developed their projects, they also liked the challenge and creativity. One student even took a radio class her freshman year in college the next year because she'd shown so much promise with audio editing and enjoyed it so much.

We were scheduled to listen to the final projects on the week that schools shut down because of the pandemic.

Find Software

Soundtrap was a terrific discovery. It makes audio editing easy and music making easy. Even if you've never made music before, you'll be able to create theme music for a show in 30-60 minutes. It's also a ton of fun.

The music making portion of Soundtrap is worth it alone, but the audio editing is really intuitive, which is crucial for anyone new to making a podcast, like all the students were. They each wrote

their own scripts, recorded their own shows, created their own music, edited their own shows, and exported everything.

The students each had chrome books given to them by the school. Using a mouse to edit is way easier than using your finger on a laptop or phone. But I would play around with the soundtrap app on my phone. The nice thing about Soundtrap being cloud-based is that you can connect with your project so long as you have an internet connection and know your username and password. The one drawback of Soundtrap is that as we've created longer shows, there have been times when the mixdown would stall, which was frustrating. I've found the support team to be helpful and would choose Soundtrap again for this project 10 times out of 10.

We chose the Educators model for Soundtrap, which allowed us to have up to 50 students at a \$250 subscription price for one year. If you are going to be using the software on your own or with a small selection of staff members, then one of the other subscription models will be cheaper. The Podcaster model has an Interactive Transcripts feature that can be nice for oral histories. The Music Maker model has more loops to choose from. The Educator model has the features of each of the smaller subscription models, as far as I know.

Timeline

The project start-to-finish *with the students* was probably two to three months, and only about six classes, since we were trying to fit it into the already-planned curriculum. The classes in Lodi are about 90 minutes each, which helped us if we wanted to teach the students something and then give them time to research, write, and create afterwards. Starting with talented, self-motivating students was also helpful, though some students definitely dove into it deeper than others.

Final Products and Beyond

We gave feedback to student projects over Zoom, since the pandemic had begun by that point. One student even did her project on the Coronavirus, which she was doing before it spread in the US. We created a library podcast that we called Duck Town. The student projects who gave us their approval to publish can be found in the Duck Town podcast feed. Look for the subheading "Bleacher Stories," if you'd like to listen to any of them.

Find a Podcast Hosting Service

We looked at several options, but chose Buzzsprout at 6 hours of uploads a month. That's \$18 a month right now. The upload process is easy to figure out and Buzzsprout offers a way to request other services incorporate your podcast in their service, so you should be able to find "Duck Town" under Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, etc, though I'd recommend having artwork developed before you request to be added to their *stores*. There's also an easy way to embed a player in your website, so people can also listen to the shows that way. Buzzsprout sends us a weekly update of our downloads, though that doesn't count

streams. We had podcast art designed on Fiverr for about \$50, but if you have an in-house designer, obviously that would be cheaper. We look forward to developing our podcast well into the future. It has been an enormous success and the staff have loved the experience of making the shows and the community has enjoyed listening.

Contact

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