Podcasting for School Media Specialists: a Case Study from Central Minnesota

Plamen Miltenoff
pmiltenoff@stcloudstate.edu

Jo Flanders
jlflanders@stcloudstate.edu

Jennifer Hill
hije0202@stcloudstate.edu

Learning Resources and Technology Services
St. Cloud State University
St. Cloud, Minnesota, USA

Abstract: The advent of technology, computers, and the Internet has changed the ways of interaction in education. In the school library profession, school library media specialists are often left isolated and report feeling disconnected to their colleagues. Four library and media specialists are exploring podcasting as a medium to rally school media professionals into a community that can benefit from each other's experiences. The experience of podcast creation is dissected as a perfect opportunity for school media specialists to enhance needed technological skills and create a venue for communication among colleagues and other professionals.

Introduction

Internet 2.0 and Web 2.0 are definitions that are recently enjoying great popularity. While Internet 2.0 entails the hardware and administration of a faster Internet connection and the ability to transmit larger amounts of data across computers (Webopedia), Web 2.0 is considered the sum and concepts of software and its ability to deliver a new level of social interaction based on the Internet (Wikipedia). The new generation of users, the *Millennials*[1], or the last generation just entering college, became accustomed most rapidly to these new features of the Internet and turned to its social possibilities (OCLC 1). By the fall of 2006, the Millennials proclaimed that email is for "old people" (Carnevale, 2006). Librarians bring further evidence about an increasing, gap between library services and Millennials' demands (Thomas & McDonald, 2006). Deep-running assumptions within academia and, some believe (Selwyn, 2007), within all of society,

[1] Definition on *Millennials* from Wikipedia at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennials. Also, Howe, Neil, Strauss, William, and Matson, R.J. (2000). *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. New York: Vintage Books.

continue to prevent education from embracing the advent of the technological achievements of Web 2.0.

Considering these developments, two faculty members and two graduate assistants from St. Cloud State University decided to go beyond traditional online communication (email) and address a professional audience using the opportunities offered by Web 2.0: podcasting.

The state of the profession in Minnesota

The term "school library media specialist" has replaced the title of school librarian. The change in the title was prompted by the rapid technological changes that occurred in the last decades and a strong influx of technology in daily life, including education. The traditional librarian's responsibilities increased with the added responsibilities of the technologist role. In addition to the school librarian, the new "media specialist" became an information broker, technology specialist, Web master, computer expert and overall information literacy authority. The American Library Association's (ALA) definition of the school library media specialist includes four main responsibilities: teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator (ALA). The ALA envisions school media specialists regaining the long disputed role of librarians as equal educators on the academic ground.

The ALA's vision and the rapid advance of technology have placed a great burden on school librarians. The transition from bookworm to computer geek, from introvert pundit to outgoing public relations personality has been slow in coming and difficult to envision for some. Amidst a communication revolution, school library media specialists have remained disconnected. The increasing requirements of the profession have left little time for communication and the communication explosion. It has hindered, rather than aided the creation of a supporting environment, which could assist school media specialists with the transition. While the need to exchange ideas, experiences, and best practices has remained, the medium of delivery has changed. In the beginning, email and listservs proved helpful, but being text-based and passive in their structure, they only contributed to the information overload, rather than alleviating it. Conferences and workshops help greatly, but are constrained in time and space. Only 14 % of library directors see the library as having a role in building social networking in the community (OCLC 2). Thus, library administration does not aid greatly the application of Web 2.0 tools.

Case Study

Two faculty members from Learning Resources and Technology Services (LRTS, http://lrts.stcloudstate.edu/) and two graduate Assistants with the Center for Information Media (CIM, http://www.stcloudstate.edu/cim/) at St. Cloud State University (SCSU, http://www.stcloudstate.edu/default.asp) in Minnesota brought together knowledge,

skills, and enthusiasm to address the condition of the school library media specialist profession in Minnesota.

One faculty member teaches technology classes and technology workshops; podcasting included. Members of the team met with him to become familiar with the technology of creating and maintaining a podcast. They discussed various types of podcasts[2], before selecting the one most suitable for their audience. Further, they learned to record audio and edit it with the free software package *Audacity*[3]. The next session was a crash course on the use of *Adobe/Macromedia Dreamweaver*[4] and constructing and altering an XML file. Last, they learned to upload the production and XML file on the server and complete the RSS process[5].

Process

Once the workshops were completed, a Web page, podcast, and blog were created for school library media specialists (http://web.stcloudstate.edu/schoolmediapodcast). The Web page was created using a standard Web editor, Macromedia Dreamweaver, and the podcasts were recorded and edited using open source software called Audacity. Audacity was chosen because it is free of cost, is user friendly, and runs on Windows, Macintosh, and Linux operating systems (Firment, 2006).

When interviewees were at a distance and unable to travel to St. Cloud State University, a Voice-Over-the-Internet (VOIP) protocol was used to communicate. *Skype* was utilized for the same reasons as Audacity. Social scientists have found that talking over the Internet differs little from conversing on the telephone. Skype offers a conference call option with up to ten users, an instant messaging function and file transferring, making it a decent collaboration tool (Giussani, 2007).

After interviewees' permissions, the conversations conducted on Skype were recorded using free software called *MP3myMP3*[6]. Copyright free music was incorporated into the beginning and the end of the recording to give the podcast more pizzazz. The advantages of interviewing guests via Skype were obvious: it saved travel time and money for the interviews. The disadvantages included variations in the sound volume and quality. This drawback was alleviated using different features of the Audacity software package. Edited files were then saved in an MP3 format and mounted onto the World Wide Web and the XML file was updated with the recent information. The Web site was updated accordingly to reflect the site's new contents.

[2] http://web.stcloudstate.edu/pmiltenoff/podcast/podcast06.pps
[3] http://audacity.sourceforge.net
[4] http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver/
[5] Watch the video segment, which explains RSS here: http://www.commoncraft.com/rss_plain_english
[6] http://www.mp3mymp3.com/mp3_my_mp3_recorder.html

Interviewees

Interviewees mainly came from central Minnesota and included practicing school library media specialists and academic professors who instructed school library media specialists. A wide variety of topics were touched upon; including the future of school library media centers[7], using SMART Boards for instructional purposes[8], developing information literacy standards[9], book selection for the Maud Hart Lovelace Award[10], and an interview with the current president of the Minnesota Educational Media Organization (MEMO[11]).

Preparing for such interviews requires a fair amount of planning prior to the podcast. As consistently as possible, the facilitators of the podcast adhered to what communication professionals call the "two-step process: develop a rapport with the source, and then orient the person to the interview process" (Patrick, 2007, p. 43). Rapport was often established with interviewees through prior personal connection and affiliation with St. Cloud State University and MEMO. Those professionals who expressed interest in becoming a podcasting guest were contacted via e-mail and sent a list of questions, which directed the venue of the interview. On the day of the recording, guests were contacted via phone and all hardware and software was checked to confirm it was working properly. Once all technical issues were resolved, the interview commenced. A typical interview would usually last from fifteen to thirty minutes. Almost every interview was a learning process. For example, one of the interviewees, an Apple user, was having problems installing Skype and the team had to bypass the difficulty by conducting the interview vie Adobe Connect,[12] an e-conferencing tool, (which SCSU had recently acquired a license for).

Audience and Publicity

The perceived audiences for the school library media specialist podcasts were the members of MEMO. During the inception of this project, the concept was presented to MEMO's leadership board and was approved. Permission was granted to advertise the monthly podcast using MEMO's listserv. Additional publicity was gained through the *State Library Services Newsletter*, *the Center for Information Media's Newsletter*, and MEMO's newsletter, *MEMOrandum.* Two presentations were also given on this topic at a MEMO technology meeting and the annual conference.[13]

[7] http://web.stcloudstate.edu/schoolmediapodcast/podcasts/podcast_don.mp3
[8] http://web.stcloudstate.edu/schoolmediapodcast/podcasts/kathy_lewin.mp3
[9] http://web.stcloudstate.edu/schoolmediapodcast/podcasts/jane_interview_v3.mp3
[10] http://web.stcloudstate.edu/schoolmediapodcast/podcasts/SaraMartini.mp3
[11] http://web.stcloudstate.edu/schoolmediapodcast/podcasts/gary1.mp3
[12] http://www.adobe.com/products/connect/
[13] http://web.stcloudstate.edu/schoolmediapodcast/memo2007.pps

Hardware/Software/Server Space Issues

Handling the technological part of this endeavor turned out to be of great educational value for the participants in this project. Creating a podcast is based on average technological knowledge. By ALA standards, such is expected of every librarian and school library media specialist. The participants in this project used Windows machines, yet during presentations and in conversations with colleagues, it was determined that Apple machines were equally suited, if not superior, for creation of a multimedia production such as a podcast.

Microcomputers and peripherals

Knowledge and ability to calculate the size of the podcast was a consideration from the beginning. Audacity has options to save the output file in a Microsoft audio (.wav) format and the ubiquitous MP3 format. Although both are compressions that substantially reduce the raw working file format, awareness of the different levels of compressions was of paramount importance. Podcasts with a large file size meant that fewer sessions could be kept on a limited Web account. Respectively, fewer sessions would be available for the podcast listeners on the Internet. The other extreme was to compress severely the audio files and fit too many podcast sessions on the Web site, creating an inferior audio quality. A decision to stick to the standard CD quality of sound versus superior "archives" quality was made.

The importance of a high-quality microphone was established by the end of the first editing session in Audacity. Sufficient RAM to be able to run several programs simultaneously, adequate hard disk space to be able to hold the raw (uncompressed) working file in Audacity, and a quality audio card were some of the most important computer peripherals and parts that need to be taken into account before the podcast recording started**.**

Networks and bandwidth

The creation and maintenance of the podcast series helped educate the project participants in the importance of understanding the institution's Local Area Network (LAN), handling Web space (the folder on the Web where the podcasts were kept), considering bandwidth congestions (why the use of Skype is frowned upon on an increasing number of campuses), and archiving of electronic media (burning podcast sessions on DVDs for archiving purposes and to free space on the Web account). The size of the Web account for the podcast was carefully calculated to accommodate at least an annual presence of monthly podcasts available through the Internet.

Ethical Considerations

For convenience, the podcast team chose to include music in the public domain. Podcast producers must be aware of copyright rules. The use of any medium must be preceded by some education in copyright and fair use issues and how they may affect production and posting. As noted in a podcaster blog of November 5th, 2006,

> "The good news is that you can sue the pants off anyone who uses your podcast and claims it as his or her own. The bad news is that the production company that made the sound effects found for your introduction can do the same to you. "

Fearing piracy and lack of payment for their music, the recording industry has been slow to release its rights to music and sound bites to podcasters (Haskins, 2007). According to Haskins, record labels and music publishers representing the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), control the rights to 75% of most music released commercially in the U.S.

For those seeking licensure for using music in podcasts, it may be helpful to know that nearly 95% of the music created in the U.S. is owned by Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) and the American Society of Composers, Authors & Publishers (ASCAP). These two organizations grant licenses specifically for podcasts (Haskins, 2007).

Fortunately, due to Fair Use there are solutions to using music without having to get expressed permission of the copyright holder (Fair use and copyright). Since there are no clear cut rules on copyright, it is important to use common sense when creating a podcast. There are a multitude of Web sites with sound files available for free that can be used for podcasts. For convenience and ethical reasons, the school library media podcasters chose to include music in the public domain.

Future Trends

Some researchers predict the podcast market to grow to $400 million by 2011, an increase of 400 %. This is attributed to the number of new podcasters, and the rise in market advertising trends among 18 to 34 year olds (Mello, 2007). Podcasts have an audio and video aspect that brand marketers may target in the future.

It is predicted that podcasting will be used as a global communication tool and will help media specialists and educators share ideas and best practices around the world. The ease of generating podcasts for the creator and the ease of accessing podcasting content for the user makes this medium a viable tool for local, national, and global communication.

Podcasting may be able to alleviate the lack of internal communication that takes place between managers and employees in their prospective fields (Profile, 2006). Podcasting

provides a new way of narrowing communication gaps in these places, and can instigate new ideas, conversations, and workplace discussions. School library media specialists often experience this same feeling of isolation. New school library media specialists report the need for developing professional relationships and receiving job-specific training. To further complicate this problem, school administrators often cannot justify closing the media center for a short period of time to send their media professional to a conference (Thelan, 2004). Podcasting provides a venue to solve this problem.

Podcasting for school library media specialists could become an instrumental vehicle for facilitating new methods of communication in the K-12 environment. It serves as an example for providing a new way of communication among school practitioners and their peers around the world. In the fast-paced world of Web 2.0 and its social groups, educators (and especially media specialists) are increasingly asked to collaborate on projects. Podcasting is a medium of communication that is becoming increasingly popular for this purpose.

Conclusion

Podcasts can be relatively low-cost while reaching a wide audience. School library media specialists can collaborate with colleagues and share ideas using this medium. A successful, long-lasting podcast can be used as FAQ database by the profession. Downloading professional podcasts can be less expensive and less time-consuming than attending conferences (without diminishing the value of face-to-face conference collaboration). To date, the school library media podcast Web site has been accessed at least 800 times, and that number is expected to increase in the future.

The four-person team who organized this project understands that podcasting is only one approach to the latest wave of trendy "social" software entering the educational world. Team members believe that podcasting will carve a niche for itself in education. It is the teams' hope that the topics discussed in each of the podcast sessions can be shared with other media specialists and K-12 educators, and initiate further discussions, which in turn may lead to new podcasts, or podcast groups. This social way of sharing information and ideas provides yet another venue to reach others, enhance school programs, and resolve issues.

Regardless how its popularity plays out, podcasting can be contributed to further growth and development of Web 2.0 technologies in the future and the advancement of social networking in the education field.

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