

Students and teachers tune in to podcasts

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The subjects were typical for a seventh-grade classroom: a summary of a mealworm's metamorphosis, strategies on improving memory and making studying easier and a story about a classroom candy thief.

But the discussions last fall at Longfellow Middle School in La Crosse, Wis., were not taking place only for their classroom to hear. They were recorded as part of a series of podcasts the students produced and syndicated over Apple's iTunes music store.

"Their audience has moved to the entire world," said Jeanne Halderson, one of two seventh-grade teachers at Longfellow who supervise the podcasts. "The students find that exciting. It's a lot more motivating to write something that the whole world can hear, rather than just something for a teacher to put a grade on."

Podcasting — posting an audio recording on-line that can be heard through a computer or downloaded to a mobile device like an iPod — is following blogs and on-line classes as yet another interactive technology catching on as a teaching tool. Currently, iTunes lists more than 400 podcasts from kindergarten through 12th-grade classes, while Yahoo has nearly 900 education-related podcasts. Some are produced by teachers wanting to reach other educators with teaching tips, while many are created by students, like the La Crosse seventh-graders with their podcast, at lacrosseschools.com/longfellow/sc/ck/index.htm.

"A podcast is like few other devices that a teacher can use in advancing a student's development," said Daniel J. Schmit, an instructional technology specialist in the college of education at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and the author of "KidCast: Podcasting in the Classroom." "It teaches them to do research, to

communicate in print, to speak effectively and grab attention with sound."

One reason podcasting is effective in the classroom, Schmit says, is that it can be used in every subject. Indeed, "Coulee Kids" is like a weekly variety show, running 7–14 minutes, with introductory music. The Nov. 18 podcast included discussions of photosynthesis, the difference between angiosperms and gymnosperms and a segment on adding integers. The Jan. 6 episode featured student interviews about bullying, a follow-up to a report on "20/20."

Of course, students have been producing audio programs for generations, typically using tape recorders or reel-to-reel machines. What makes podcasts better, educators say, is that they are easier to edit than splicing a tape because they are recorded digitally on a computer. Perhaps the biggest difference, though, is that podcasts are available to a worldwide audience, which can subscribe to them and have them automatically downloaded to their computers when a new installment is posted.

Like other classroom technologies, podcasting requires a learning curve. As a result, teachers already using podcasts in their classes tend to be early adopters of technology. Kathleen B. Schrock, administrator for technology at Nauset Public Schools in Orleans, Mass., said one goal of her podcasts is to persuade teachers "how easy it is to produce one." Schrock's podcasts (on-line at nausetschools.org/podcasts.htm) include short interviews with teachers and administrators about things like how they use technology in their classrooms. This spring, she plans workshops to show teachers in her district how to create a podcast.

"Just the word 'podcast' scares a lot of teachers away," Schrock said. "There are a lot of misconceptions."

One of the most common is that schools need iPods or other portable audio devices, like MP3 players, to create and listen to a podcast, said David Warlick, who sifts through education-related podcasts and lists good ones for teachers on his website, the Education Podcast Network (epnweb.org). "All you need is a computer, access to the Internet and a microphone that you can buy at Toys 'R' Us," Warlick said. "I listen to podcasts on my computer."

The sound can be edited, and music and other audio elements can be added easily, Warlick said, using software like Acid Music Studio, GarageBand or open-source Audacity. "Learning the software is the most difficult part," he said.

Halderson, the teacher at Longfellow Middle School, said she practiced using the podcast software in August, and her students produced their first show the second week of school. "We laugh at that one now," she said. To improve their show, the students listened to podcasts from other schools, including "Room 208" from Wells Elementary School in Wells, Maine, and "Radio WillowWeb" from Willowdale Elementary School in Omaha, Neb.

Those shows motivated the Longfellow students to perfect their own podcasts, said Megan Wichelt, a seventh-grader there. "It's better than learning out of a textbook because you're actually doing something with what you learn," she said. Moreover, the potential audience for a podcast, she added, is so much larger than just the teachers and parents who usually read her essays. "I know other people are listening, so it's very fun to do."

This month, Halderson got 14 new video iPods for her students, bought from donations and the sale of greeting cards, butterfly houses and birdhouses that were all made by the students.

While she and other educators agree that the technology will never replace a live teacher, there are exceptions. Schrock of Nauset Public Schools says that teachers could record lessons for absent students.