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PODCASTING POSSIBILITIES *for Art Education*

BY MELANIE L. BUFFINGTON

Technological developments influence the way artists create works of art. Newer technologies associated with the Web, called Web 2.0, are changing and affecting the work of contemporary artists. One form of Web 2.0 is the development of podcasts, which are compressed files that can be shared through the Internet. Podcasts are mainstream and many art museums use them as a means to provide audio or video for visitors, virtual or real. Over the last few semesters, I worked with groups of undergraduate and graduate art education students to develop podcasts based on their interpretations of works of art. Through these experiences, the students and I learned a great deal about the creation and use of art-related podcasts. Numerous art educators encourage teachers to incorporate technology into their classrooms and many specifically call for the introduction of Web 2.0 tools (Buffington, 2008; Chung, 2007; Liao, 2008; Liu, 2008; Roland, 2006, 2007). The purpose of this article is to share practices from the contemporary art world relating to podcasts and Web 2.0, and to share observations about the strengths and weaknesses of art-related podcasts while considering their educational uses. The article concludes with suggestions for ways art teachers can use podcasts in their classrooms.

Podcasts

The term *podcast* is a combination of the words "iPod" and "broadcast," and podcasts emerged from the idea of audio blogging. Podcasts can be audio-only files, or can include images or video. The files are compressed and shared via the Internet. To listen to a podcast, you need a computer with Internet access and sound output capability. To create and distribute a podcast, you need a computer with Internet access, a microphone, and sound editing software. Common software includes GarageBand (Mac), Adobe Audition (PC), or Audacity (cross-platform). Many websites and blogs feature podcasts that are freely available for users to download and listen to on their computers, portable digital music players, or cell phones. Users can listen to the content of the podcast in a linear fashion, or navigate through it and listen to segments, return to previous segments, or skip sections altogether.

Relationship to Digital Storytelling

In recent years, authors in our field have promoted the idea of creating digital stories as a means of engaging students with newer technologies (Chung, 2007; Roland, 2007). Georgetown University's digital storytelling multimedia archive states, "Digital stories are multimedia-authoring projects combining texts, images, and audio files into a short film clip" (¶ 1). Digital stories often present first-person narratives. Both podcasts and digital stories may involve a similar planning and editing process. Though podcasts can involve first-person narratives, they can also take different formats. Some podcasts take the form of a discussion between a few people about a topic, whereas others present a lecture, radio show, or tour of a physical place. Additionally, podcasts may be serialized tutorials (see http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/) to which a user can subscribe. In this case, a program on the subscriber's computer continuously scans for new content; as new episodes of the podcast are produced, files are automatically sent to the subscriber. An example of this is the iTunes program on Apple computers that automatically scans for and downloads new episodes of podcasts. The serialization and syndication of podcasts are features that previously clearly distinguished them from digital stories. However, some digital stories are now serialized and syndicated and there are podcasts about digital stories. Thus, the line between these two forms of media is blurry and we need to develop an inclusive way to think of this collective body of media. I am positing the term *[inter]active media* as an umbrella term referring to the wide variety of media currently available in a digital format. The use of brackets indicates that the level of interactivity may vary significantly. As the forms of media that artists use and we may use in our teaching practice emerge and change, I believe that our field benefits from an attempt to create language around them.

Media to Education and Contemporary Art

In 1967, McLuhan wrote, "There is a world of difference between the modern home environment of integrated electric information and the classroom" (p. 12). More than 40 years later, this situation may be even more pronounced, in that classrooms and teaching practices have not inherently kept pace with the technologies of students' lives. Keeping teaching practices fresh is always a work in progress. In the case of new technologies related to Web 2.0, we should consider in what ways our students' world and the art world are inherently driven by and connected to Web 2.0. We, as art educators, now have an exciting opportunity to build connections between the content of contemporary art and the ways we teach our students.

Many contemporary artists utilize the Web, and aspects of Web 2.0 allow artists to create in new ways. Wolff (2008) explores the ways in which artists use *Second Life*[1] and how the group 0100101110101101.org works with discarded objects in *Second Life*. This has led to the development of the term 'SLart,' referring to art created within the online virtual world of *Second Life*. Another outgrowth of this concept is the establishment of the slartmagazine.com site that describes itself as a "critical review and journal of the virtual arts" (¶ 5). Additionally, Wolff (2008) discusses how performance artists are utilizing the technologies of Web 2.0 that allow audience interaction with the performance. One specific example relates to an audio tour program commissioned by the Whitney in 2005 that visitors could view on small media players. Created by artists Scott Paterson and Jennifer Crowe, the piece entitled *Follow Through* consisted of the audio guide and users' interactions with it. Unlike a traditional audio tour or acoustiguide, this audio guide did not explain the

Imagine how challenging it would be to teach about photography and specific contemporary photographers without involving students in photographic techniques. Thus, if we are to engage students with contemporary art, as an entire recent double-issue of this journal encourages us to do (Taylor, 2008), then we need to address the contemporary technology tools that artists use.

art on the walls. Instead, it instructed visitors to perform certain behaviors that disrupted the traditional idea of a museum visit, and involved the museum visitors in the actual work of art. Wolff describes this piece as a "technologically updated Happening" (¶ 10). Instead of passively walking through the museum and looking at the art, the audio disrupted the traditional audience-artist relationship and encouraged museum visitors to perform their bodies and the museum visit in non-traditional ways. Through the newer technologies of Web 2.0, Web art is continuing to expand its potential and is being curated by, displayed at, and commissioned by more art museums (Wolff, 2008).

If we are to teach our students about contemporary art, it is beneficial to acknowledge and use the tools of 21st-century artists. Imagine how challenging it would be to teach about photography and specific contemporary photographers without involving students in photographic techniques. Thus, if we are to engage students with contemporary art, as an entire recent double-issue of this journal encourages us to do (Taylor, 2008), then we need to address the contemporary technology tools that artists use.

Though still emerging as a pedagogical tool, podcasts are affecting teaching and learning. Lopez, Daneau, Rosoff, and Congdon (2008) published an article that described the ways users interact with video iPods in a museum setting. As podcasts are still relatively new, we have the opportunity to develop a wide variety of ideas about how podcasts can be used within art education.

Podcasts and Education

Within other educational disciplines, there are studies of podcasts and ideas for how students can use them as a learning tool in K-12 and university settings. Williams (2007) notes that with podcasts, K-12 students can control the speed of the content and have the option to listen to it whenever and wherever they choose. Additionally, Williams believes that the use of podcasts, especially video podcasts, can help students with different learning styles. He writes that students can develop many important skills relating to planning a project, reading, writing, listening, and speaking by learning to make podcasts.

Pasnik (2007) seems to be in agreement with Williams, specifically about the multimedia aspects of podcasts being beneficial to students. She cites studies that deal with giving college students access to primary source materials related to historical events, through digital recordings available as podcasts. These studies show that students who have access to primary source materials may exhibit skills that researchers associate with the ability to "pose questions, observe details, and speculate about context" (p. 3) with regard to their understanding of historical documents and events. I believe that these skills may also be developed in relation to understanding artworks if students have access to primary source materials related to works of art, artists, and critics. Using podcasts may be one way to allow more students such opportunities.

Podcasting with Students

In 2005, a NPR story reported on the "Art Mobs" project. Working for a class, students at Marymount Manhattan College made unauthorized podcasts of works in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. According to the blog that details their experience, the purpose of Art Mobs is to investigate the relationship between communication, art, and mobile technology (Art Mobs, 2004). The podcasts they created offer critique and interpretation of well-known works of art while using a conversational tone. These podcasts capture the spontaneity of a dialogue, but reflect an understanding of art and culture (Gilbert, 2005). The results of the Art Mobs project inspired me to have a group of graduate students who were preservice and in-service art teachers create podcasts related to a museum exhibit.

Though the Art Mobs project involved students making podcasts about works of art in the MoMA's collection without the knowledge or consent of museum personnel, I thought that working with a museum might provide another way for students to think about a work of art, learn about museum education, and provide an authentic learning experience. In the spring of 2007, a class of graduate students and I worked with several staff members at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) to create podcasts related to their exhibit, *Rule Britannia!* All of the student-created podcasts were available through the VMFA's website during the run of the show. The podcasts created by the graduate students were varied in form, content, and structure, and included serious and lighthearted discussions among the graduate students about the works of art and children interpreting the paintings. Unlike traditional audio guides with highly scripted content that is sanctioned by the traditional art history canon, the podcasts the graduate students created were conversational approaches to understanding works of art that included some of their personal interpretations.

Suggestions for Creating Podcasts

This positive experience led me to find additional ways to create podcasts with students and to consider how podcasts can enhance art and museum education. The following year, I taught another graduate class in which students created podcasts that interpreted works of art and also taught undergraduates about creating podcasts. Through reading about the experiences and research of others, discussions with students and colleagues, and listening to many art podcasts, I developed the following suggestions[2] for creating podcasts to be used in a museum or classroom setting to help understand works of art.

Format

Museum podcasts take a variety of formats including recordings of lectures, formal gallery tours, in-depth investigations of a few works of art, artist interviews, professional actors simulating artists, non-museum personnel interpreting art, and children interpreting art. Of all the formats my students and I analyzed, the more engaging ones were the informal interpretations of a few works of art. We found that the spontaneity of these podcasts was refreshing and held our attention. In contrast, the podcasts that repurposed existing audio or presented content in a traditional lecture format were far less compelling. Museum personnel noted this same trend with regard to creating their own podcasts (Samis & Pau, 2006). The most engaging audio podcasts we found included multiple voices, engaged listeners in understanding the work of art through the podcast dialogue, and utilized everyday language. The most engaging video podcasts included different scenes, multiple voices, and investigated various aspects of different works

of art. Video podcasts that included short bits of interviews with artists were quite engaging. Unlike a traditional audio guide, art historical lecture, or museum tour, a podcast puts the user in charge and allows the user to navigate and to skip sections. The freedom of the user to navigate through a podcast is a design challenge that must be considered during its development. When developing a longer podcast, I recommend thinking of it as a series of shorter stand-alone segments that do not require listening to all segments in a linear fashion to understand the content.

Tone

In the words of Marshall McLuhan's famous book title (1967), *The Medium is the Message*,[3] and this is abundantly true of podcasts. As a medium, podcasts are irreverent and invite remixing, hacking, and non-linear interaction with content. However, many of the museum podcasts we analyzed were highly scripted, written from a scholarly art historical voice, and a surprisingly large number featured people with European accents speaking in formal English. We noticed a disconnect within many of the museum podcasts with regard to the casual medium of the podcast and the formal tone of the audio. After making podcasts with groups of students, the term I use to address the overall tone of interesting podcasts is "casually rehearsed." As noted by Springer and White (2007), the participants in their podcasting project also mentioned the need to avoid an overly authoritarian voice in the audio.

Creating podcasts with graduate students was an excellent learning experience. As a class, we identified that podcasts with casual tones are more interesting than podcasts that seemed to be a recitation of facts. However, when students made their first draft of their podcasts, many of them took the route of conducting significant research about the artworks and created podcasts that delivered information. Through a process of evaluating the 'rough draft' of each podcast, we identified the more interesting and engaging podcasts as the ones that focused less on delivering facts, but more on inviting the listener to participate in a dialogue.

Some of the more successful podcasts were the ones in which students recorded a longer dialogue of their interpretations of the artworks, and then edited the podcasts down to include only the more insightful and interesting comments. Through the use of multiple voices and having the creators of the podcast think about and interpret the work of art, the listener is invited into the dialogue. When podcasts focus on content delivery, they are far less engaging than those that allow for multiple possibilities. In addition, the use of open-ended questions with a variety of responses also engaged us as listeners.

One group of graduate students created a podcast that involved 4th-graders in interpreting works of art. Their understandings were refreshing and caused us to re-think our pre-conceived notions. Another podcast included video and used puppets to interpret the works of art. Though humorous, this podcast was thought-provoking, and the use of a nontraditional art critic, in the form of a puppet, was educational and entertaining. These are examples of how, as a contemporary medium, podcasts can challenge the traditional authoritarian model of an art historian telling the listener about a work of art.

In reflecting upon his experience creating a podcast, graduate student Gerry Perez noted:

> Creating the podcast project made me realize how dull talking about art can be. Through hearing the recordings of myself talk about art, I was able to critique my own presentation. It made me realize that just talking about art is not enough to make it interesting to students. You have to give students an avenue through which they can directly relate to it. Making podcasts forces you to carefully select relevant ideas and themes expressed in artworks and present them in a way that grabs your audience's attention." (personal communication, June 3, 2009)

Length

Though podcasts vary significantly in length, we found that audio-only podcasts held our attention for about 2-2½ minutes. If the podcast included images or compelling video, it held our attention significantly longer. However, many of us lost interest after about 5 minutes, regardless of the incorporation of video. In the more interesting video podcasts, no scene lasted more than 2 minutes, the scenes worked well together to make a cohesive whole,

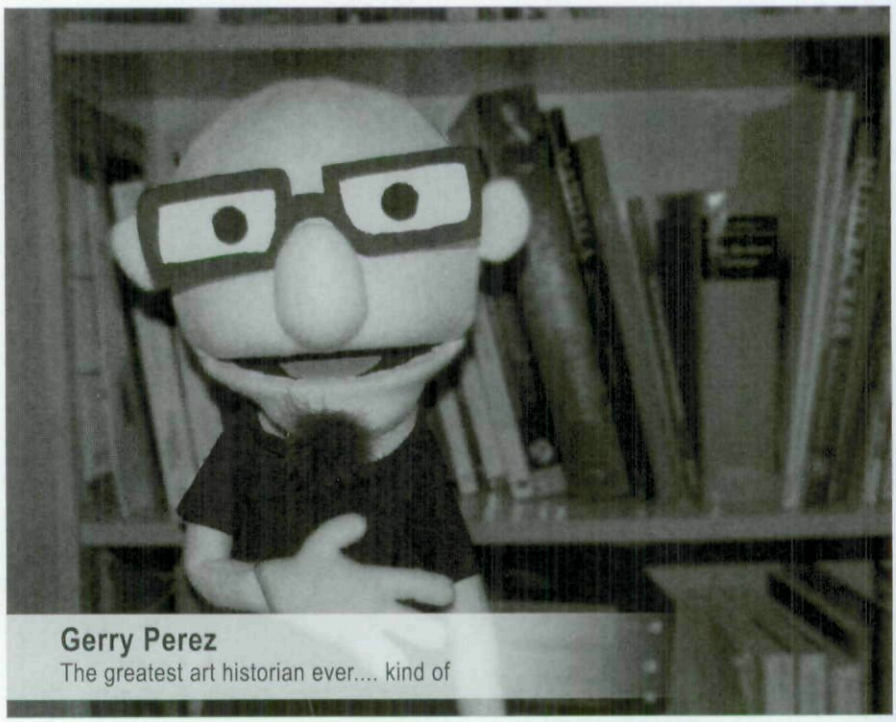

Figure 1. Still shot from a video podcast created by Gerry Perez and Kelly Cook. They created puppets, including this art historian, to help make the interpretation of a Courbet painting relevant to children. Photo courtesy of Gerry Perez.

and there were multiple voices and viewpoints represented within the podcasts. We found time-lapse videos showing artists creating works of art to be one compelling way of incorporating video into podcasts. Through these podcasts, we were able to see the artistic process and learn about how the artists created the work.

Sound Quality

Low sound quality, poor recording, or music that is too loud are factors that detract from podcasts. As in the early days of any new technological advancement, there is value in experimenting with the possibilities of podcasts and all the possible sound effects. However, when creating something to distribute via the Internet, it is important to create high quality material. Many of the podcasts my students and I analyzed had significant problems with the sound that seemed to be the result of either poor quality recording equipment, not using a microphone, or poor editing. When we evaluated podcasts that were recordings of lectures, the sound was so uneven and muffled that we quickly lost attention.

Creating content specifically for podcasts and keeping microphones close to the speakers seem to be crucial for high quality sound in a podcast. Additionally, though the use of introductory music is interesting and can add quite a bit to a podcast, we found that 5 seconds of it was sufficient. When the music continued into the vocal portion of the podcast, we could clearly hear the voice only when the music dropped to a very low volume. Some students found it difficult to concentrate on the content of the podcast vocal track when the music was too loud.

Process

Though podcasts are often described as being simple to make, it is important to approach making a podcast as a process. My students and I benefited from having time to experiment with the content, revise our notes many times, utilize the editing features in GarageBand, record multiple tracks, and adjust sound volumes. In addition to learning about the technical tools as a process, we also evaluated the content and delivery as a multi-part process.

Sohhyoun Yoon, a graduate student, expressed her ideas about the process of creating a podcast by stating,

> Making a podcast helped me to understand artwork better than reading books or listening to lectures. The process of making the podcast from research to recording gave me an opportunity to learn not only the information about artwork from books and online but also ways to approach and appreciate the artwork through my own interpretation. (personal communication, June 4, 2009)

Playing an interview with an artist via podcast can be a meaningful way to introduce a unit and focus students' attention.

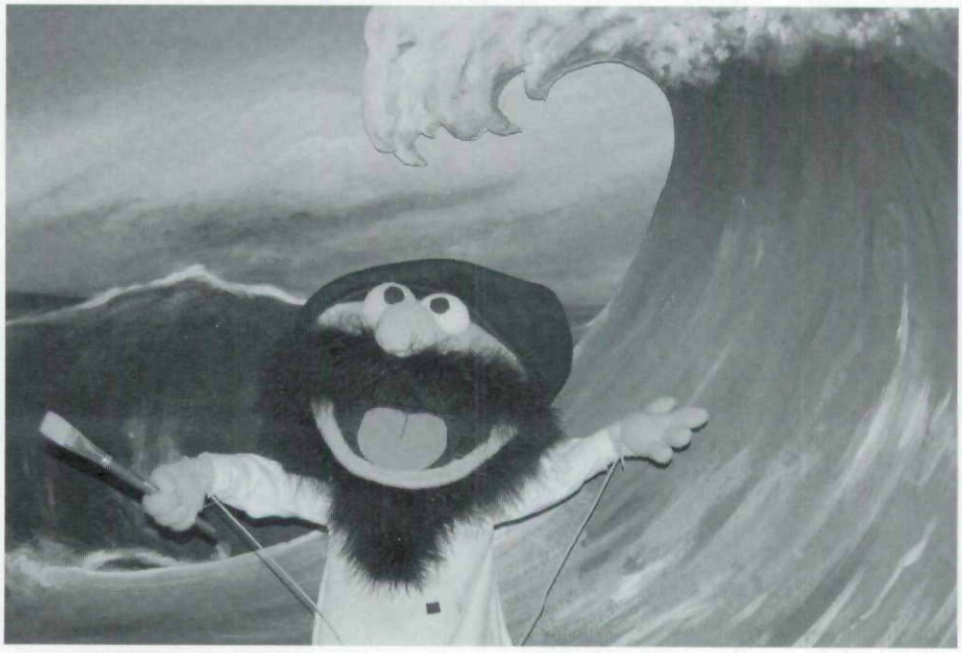

Figure 2. Still shot from a video podcast created by Gerry Perez and Kelly Cook. In this image, Gustav Courbet, in puppet form, is explaining his painting *The Wave*. Photo courtesy of Gerry Perez.

Potential Classroom Ideas

Exploring the literature and experiences of others may yield even more potential uses of podcasts for art education. Here are ideas for using podcasts that were generated through discussions in my classes with preservice and in-service teachers.

Podcasts can be useful to teachers and students at a variety of levels. In terms of using existing podcasts in classrooms, teachers can look to the podcasts available on museum websites. Numerous museums now feature interviews with artists in podcast form. Additionally, some museum websites include podcasts created by children discussing works of art. For some good examples, refer to museumpods.org. Also, entering the term "art podcasts" in a search engine yields millions of hits.

Teachers at various grade levels can use podcasts to prepare themselves for their own teaching. Thus, finding and listening to podcasts about artists can be a form of portable research for teachers. Teachers who have MP3 players can download podcasts and prepare for teaching while doing other things. Also, teachers can use podcasts with their students as a means of introducing an artist to the students. Instead of having a teacher tell students about the artist, playing an interview with an artist via podcast can be a meaningful way to introduce a unit and focus students' attention. Showing students a video podcast that includes images of the artistic process or an artist engaged in artmaking could also help students learn about how artists create artworks.

Conclusions

Teachers and students can engage in multiple ways of making podcasts. Because images can be embedded within a podcast, students can create podcasts in which they discuss their artwork, or the work of others. This may be a particularly effective way to use Web 2.0 technology to engage students in discussions of contemporary art. In addition, using this technological medium as a means to understand a contemporary artwork may well be a way to let the medium be the message. Working within the medium of students' lives and engaging them with accessible language increases the likelihood of helping them make connections between their own experiences and works of art.

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ENDNOTES

[1] *Second Life* is an online virtual community that allows users to create avatars that move through the virtual environments. Users can interact with other avatars, create art, build structures, fly, purchase items, etc. all through this 3-D virtual world.

[2] Some of the ideas presented here were influenced by class discussions primarily involving graduate students. The students included: Kelly Cook, Julie Crowder, Alexandra Duckworth, Sasha Gonchoroff, Kathryn Helms, Jan Johnston, Shastan Kuschke, Eduardo Leonardi, Laura Nichols, Gerry Perez, Shannon Reibel, Maggie Smith, and Sohhyoun Yoon. Quotes by the students are used with their permission.

[3] The title of the book was intended to be *The Medium is the Message*, but the book came back from the typesetter's with an error and the title read, *The Medium is the Massage*. McLuhan liked this error and the title was kept (The Estate of Marshall McLuhan, 2009).

RESOURCES TO HELP TEACHERS GET STARTED MAKING PODCASTS

Art Education 2.0 group started by Dr. Craig Roland

http://arted20.ning.com/

Education Podcast Network

http://podcast-software-review.toptenreviews.com/podcast-vidcast-voicecast-podcast-jargon-for-beginners.html

Incredible Art Blogs and Podcasts

http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/links/blogs.html

Museum Pods

http://museumpods.com/

Podcast, Vidcast, Voicecast? Podcast Jargon for Beginners

http://podcast-software-review.toptenreviews.com/podcast-vidcast-voicecast-podcast-jargon-for-beginners.html

Smart History

http://smarthistory.org/

The Real Beginner's Guide to Podcasting

http://www.podcastfreeamerica.com/index.php?/features/entry/the-real-beginners-guide-to-podcasting/