



# The Virtues of Podcasting and Multimodal Literacies in the Creative Writing Classroom: Diversity, Voice, and the New Digital Environment

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## ABSTRACT

*This article argues for the pedagogical value of two types of podcast production within the creative writing classroom, the craft-analysis podcast and the storytelling/narrative podcast. Analytic podcasts offer students a self-reflexive, metacognitive, multimodal learning tool that supports diversity in thought as it pertains to craft analysis; also, we discuss utilizing external podcasts to diversify instruction in the classroom. The production of narrative podcasts highlights the value of the desperate storytelling elements, and how those elements can be used in a multitude of different ways in order to create a multimodal experience that forefronts students' voices within these narratives.*

## INTRODUCTION

To this date, the pedagogy of multimodal literacy has a rich academic literature; however, there is a paucity of focus applying these principles in a collegiate setting, specifically as applied to the creative writing classroom. There is a case to be made, though, that centering the discussion on multimodality can prove valuable, especially considering how much of the framework for multimodal pedagogy lives within the realm of multi-cultural literacies. We are especially concerned by the ways that workshops and singular modality creative writing classes fail to serve a considerable portion of students, either because they do not feel welcome or they do not feel capable. That being said, it would seem that podcasts exist within an a priori cultural space, almost as if tailor-made to address these and other prevalent questions with which those in our field currently struggle.

In this article, we will strive to answer a simple question, why should we incorporate podcasts into the creative writing classroom? We will point out how the value of podcasting is apparent given

its place in our culture as arguably the most popular and fastest growing form of media (McHugh). We will also discuss how it provides a number of pedagogical benefits for creative writing students and creative writing instructors alike. For instance, we will discuss the value of creating podcasts as a multimodal and metacognitive creative exercise that puts students' voices at the forefront of their stories (McLuhan and Gholnecsar). This is to say that while it is valuable that podcast creation affords students a multimodal learning experience, it also allows them a space in their narratives where they can more directly highlight their voices. As such, we will argue that issues of intersectionality are not only another matter to be considered when adapting multimodal and metacognitive theories to learning, but that those issues are both inherent and integral to the pedagogical groundwork that supports it. This is because, as much of the field of study suggests, if multimodal and metacognitive learning is valuable because it allows students to increase the number of cognitive connections to the content of which they are studying, then one must assume that the student's identity is fundamental to that process, i.e., the ability to personally identify with both creative instruction as well as with the material creative process, ideally, should allow for increased efficiency of learning within the student (New London, Mura, Archer, Pennington).

To wit, considerations of creative writing workshops as well as creative production and craft construction must be considered. We intend to do this by pointing out glaring issues in the traditional workshop model, as well as a craft instruction model that, since its codification in the 1920s, has not yet fully reckoned with its history of negatively reinforcing power structures that are baked into its organization (Amato, hooks, McGurl, Ritter). This is because workshops and craft instruction consistently serve to deny, silence, erase, or otherwise discourage the lived experiences of a host of identity groups, and this is an issue integral to using podcasts as multimodal learning platforms because they, as previously stated, strive to make sure that students' narratives, as well as the narratives of diverse groups, are heard.

Again, if the fundamental pedagogical goal is to allow students avenues to make personal connections to both the content of their creative work as well as their instruction, then once that groundwork has been established, students can benefit from the diverse creative perspectives of their peers as well as diverse perspectives of other writers, ultimately providing them with the ability to apply that self-knowledge to their own creative output.

It is important to note, utilizing podcasting has limitations, from technological literacy to access. Students and teachers may even feel overwhelmed by the idea. It can be difficult to incorporate brand new technology and modes in our classrooms, but the simplest form of podcasting only requires a cell phone and a single intuitive app (such as Anchor). In fact, teaching our students how to make a basic podcast usually takes less than one class period of direct experiential teaching thanks to how

many of them are experienced smartphone users. According to the Pew Research Center, 1 in 5 Americans are “smartphone only” internet users, and these Americans are overwhelmingly BIPOC and/or from rural communities, most of whom have no traditional home computer or laptop. We see the effects of the technological divide in our classrooms every day, as students with more resources have more options on when and how they can complete even simple assignments that require technologies many of us take for granted, such as word processing and printing. Students with learning disabilities who also lack home computers or laptops are doubly burdened, relying heavily on accessibility apps on their phones that shared computer labs often do not offer. While research shows multimodal approaches are especially helpful for all minoritized students, they often rely on technology unavailable to a large segment of that population. However, thanks to smartphones, easier access to the internet has provided, as Barbara Monroe says, an avenue for so-called “‘have nots’ [to] speak for themselves and, in so doing, . . . teach educators at all levels much about nonwhite ways of knowing and interacting in the world.”

We, the dual authors of this article, Leigh Camacho Rourks and Saul Lemerond, are both creative writing professors who have been struggling for well over a decade with the many problems that plague what can only be described as the “traditional” creative writing classroom. Though not necessarily unique, our perspectives related to the teaching of creative writing have been molded by our own experiences as both students and teachers of minoritized groups. Rourks is a Cuban American with a learning disability in written expression, who has, throughout her career taught writing in institutions and programs serving significant and diverse populations of non-traditional students, probational students, at-risk youth, and currently at Beacon College, students who have learning disabilities, ADHD, and Autism spectrum disorders. Lemerond is dyslexic and has taught similarly diverse populations of students over the course of his teaching career, including at the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal college as well as at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Our relationship formed out of a shared interest in multimodal learning strategies as having potential to aid in broadening the voices of contemporary publishing, which, many scholars believe, has been stifled by the hegemony of traditional writing instruction.

We have found the merits of using podcasts in a creative writing classroom are manifold, and this paper will apply this theoretical scaffolding to two types of podcast incorporation, the craft-analysis podcast and the storytelling/narrative podcast. In doing so, we will offer anecdotal experiences from our own work in the classroom. We will then outline the practical scaffolding we used in introducing and implementing these modes of creation in a classroom setting.

## ESCAPING THE MASTER/STUDENT DICHOTOMY

### Rourks:

Like many creative writing professors who teach in minoritized communities, the issue of privileging traditional and dominant voices in the classroom (and in publishing) has been a concern over my entire career. However, working exclusively with students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorders at Beacon College has further crystalized my understanding of the role of the master/student dichotomy in fostering a homogenized writing and publishing community, which continues to silence marginalized voices. This structure is antiquated, as is the problematic nature of the language used to describe experts in our field as “masters.”

The desire to alter classroom power structures towards a more democratized learning environment (often described as a move from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side” teaching modes) is, of course, nothing new. Current versions of the movement (revitalized across academia in the late twentieth century) lay in a desire to better reach a diverse set of students. For example, in 1993, the article “Every Course Differently: Diversity and College Teaching, An Outline,” asks readers to envision a “metaphor of teaching more in line with theories of learning as construction . . . : coach, midwife, experienced companion (as opposed to the ‘sage on the stage’)” (Nelson 95). At the core of this prodding lies the need to reach more students, not just those who look, think, and learn like the dominant homogeneity of teachers in higher education (which despite moves to diversify, still skews to a neurotypical white male). Nelson opens with the declaration:

I believe that bias has been (and is) so deep in our society that no one is free of sexism, racism, and classism. Further, our ability to recognize bias is deepening rapidly so that having our teaching up to last year’s standards usually leaves a lot for improvement this year. (94)

This is certainly still true, even in departments where discussion and workshop models dominate. This is why in “The Many Voices of the English Classroom” Turvey et al. argue that there is a “continuing need to conceptualize the English classroom as a social space where a number of voices meet.”

Although the creative writing workshop model was an early adopter of “guide on the side” principles in higher education, fully embracing the co-operative learning philosophies of early American pedagogy philosophers such as Parker and then Dewey, it is more often than not as competitive a learning model as any in American Higher Education, which tends towards Master/Student(s) power structures (Johnson et al.). This is probably due to the necessarily performative nature of a model which can claim as its greatest proponents those who insist writing cannot be

taught (Menand). In this model, the professor is set as the class's "moderator" and "living example of an author," whom, it is assumed, the students will look to emulate (McGurl 14). As moderator, he may seem to be a "guide on the side," but as students' only example of a living author (especially in smaller programs), he is certainly their sage. The result ranges from students who parrot their professor to those who vie so hard for dominance in his eyes as to make the workshop a hazing experience and, as McGurl explains, "an occasion for violence done to the youthful writer" (95). This problem is brutally amplified for minoritized students.

### **DIVERSITY AND THE WORKSHOP MODEL**

The core issue returns us to Nelson's concerns, vis a vis bias. Despite extensive discussion of its flaws amongst teaching, writing, and publishing professionals, the workshop model is still at the heart of most creative writing classes and programs. Unfortunately, it requires a certain homogeneity that can discourage diversity of thought. It can especially leave minority and disadvantaged students at best silenced, at worst attacked. This is an issue that prevails despite our knowledge and discussion of its presence and damage. In "Unsilencing the Writing Workshop," Beth Nguyen discusses the ways the traditional workshop model silences BIPOC. She tells the story of having to stay silent in workshop as her white classmates discuss what dim sum is (instead of her story), not only wasting her time but colonizing the concept of "common knowledge":

The group's knowledge was knowledge. I was the outsider, the strange Asian who needed to adapt my work to what they understood. . . This is also the kind of unchecked, micro-aggressive yet forceful imbalance of power that is the typical workshop environment. It is undoubtedly experienced in some way by everyone but profoundly so for writers of color, especially since creative writing programs, nationally, are 74 percent white. (Nguyen)

There should be nothing surprising about Nguyen's experience. Such experiences have been documented repeatedly by BIPOC writers (as well as LGBTQX writers and writers with disabilities). Many of us have witnessed or experienced this firsthand. And yet it still happens. Our biases and privileges can blind us, and so our teaching practices must be, as Nelson suggests, not just checked and rechecked but changed and changed again.

### **THE MANY VOICES CLASSROOM AND THE PODCAST**

Considering that the Pew research Center has found 76% of College and University faculty are white (and 81% of full professors are), the homogeneous workshop is a reflection of the homogeneous faculty system (Davis and Fry). In this system, the workshop is a force of erasure of

marginalized identities because the workshop is a place where the author's silence is mandated, encouraged, or, in some cases, simply safer. When the author is the only BIPOC in the room (or one of the only), their experience is minoritized to the point of full erasure, especially when the classroom's "sage" is the blueprint for the class's homogeneity.

One way to avoid this sort of closed system is for the creative writing classroom to expand into a "many voices" model. The many voices pedagogy is most closely aligned with social justice teaching, and at its core is an ethos of diversity. For example, the Many Voices Reading Group studied by Julie Botticello was "set up to counter dominant narratives and white knowledge bases underpinning higher education systems" and "the readings for Many Voices were selected to offer academic mentors who have created legacies of empowerment in their writing, so that students could follow their example in their works" (22). The key to serving a diverse group of student writers is to provide a large and diverse community for them to learn from.

Many of us work hard to create classes dedicated to diversity, and we provide readings from a variety of authors. But it can be difficult to achieve a many voices course from readings alone. Balancing student reading loads (especially in a workshop class where reading loads are already quite high) is a challenge we all face. Additionally, frequently updating those reading lists in order to constantly battle the ways in which our own biases affect our decisions creates a dramatic rise in teacher workload. Moreover, studies have shown that University students read astonishingly little of what is assigned to them before class. For example, studies show reading compliance of Psychology students at all levels to be below 30% and there is evidence that this low level of compliance is fairly standard in all majors—even English majors (Hoefl). Finally, even those students who dig in and read every single assignment are not in fact "hearing" the voice behind those readings. Reading is a single modality, but research shows the necessity for incorporating multiple modalities in the classroom, engaging "multiliteracies [which set] out to stretch literacy beyond the constraints of official standard forms of written and spoken language to connect with the culturally and linguistically diverse landscapes" (Jewitt 245). This need is highlighted in writing classes with multi-lingual and neurodivergent learners, whose needs are generally overlooked in standard creative writing classes despite the fact that both groups are prevalent in all our universities. Therefore, to truly create a many voices classroom, other modalities must be considered.

Thanks to the abundance of craft-oriented podcasts by an ever growing, rich, and diverse group of writers, creative writing teachers can more easily create a many voices classroom, one that centers on intersectionality. Changing out podcasts each semester, thus inviting new voices and new discussions into the classroom, is not difficult, as prep time becomes minimal. Additionally, as they can be listened to in class, compliance can be raised drastically to all students who attend the session. In my

experience, even when assigned as homework, students appear to comply at a much greater rate. The general popularity of podcasts means many of my students are already fans of the medium, and those who are not are often excited to have a new way to engage. However, perusal of the literature, scholarly and popular, indicates a widespread unease with the idea of audio materials replacing traditional visual reading. As Have and Pederson point out, the medium of a story is important and the move between mediums is “not frictionless . . . A story changes when it is moved to another medium, and strategies of analysis must therefore be developed which are sensitive to these material and technological differences” (203). This is not a weakness but a strength. Listening to authors read and discuss work does not replace assigning readings but provides a different modality that encourages students to exercise new analytical pathways. Ultimately, when considering assigning texts, the idea of “‘reading’ should not be reduced to the visual decoding of writing but can also be an auditive decoding of an audiobook, which offers a different form of literary experience” (203). Podcasts change this dynamic further because they focus on active and immediate discourse—lively discussion. The writing community comes alive in podcasts and students have a chance to experience living voices in concert, and the opportunities to amplify minoritized voices are magnified.

It is certainly true that podcasts are not a magic bullet. Used without care, they can act as a barrier for students with auditory disabilities, auditory processing disorders, attention deficit disorders, and other disabilities. It is important to note that no matter what visual or auditory media a professor utilizes in class, it must be accompanied with standard accommodations such as pausing regularly for processing delay and attention loss, providing transcripts when available and outlines when they are not (though programs such as otter.ai make creating transcripts fairly easy when none are available), and offering options for re-watching/listening outside of the classroom as sustained watching or listening can be difficult for many students. Among the many forms of diversity we must all consider is the diversity of disability. Not all students self-identify for accommodations for a variety of complex reasons; therefore, providing blanket accommodations such as these for all students is necessary and can improve the quality of education for everyone.

Professors who curate podcasts that provide a broad range of viewpoints on the life and craft of writing, even those they disagree with, have a unique opportunity rarely found outside of team-teaching—modeling vibrant academic discourse. In the team-teaching model, students “see that it [is] possible to disagree about fundamental issues and still respect the integrity of your opponent without being hostile” (Anderson and Speck). I recently had the opportunity to team teach a class with a professor from a different field. We both attended and participated in every class during the semester. We often viewed materials through quite different (and at times opposing) lenses, and we did not hide that from our students. We modeled learning from each other, through disagreement and dialogue. Student engagement was very high, with students delighted by our differences, often

laughing with *and* at us, and intellectually challenging us more than I have experienced in traditional class environments. What we modeled, they embraced. Unfortunately, team teaching is a rare opportunity most teachers and students will never experience.

It is no wonder then that workshop can result in hostile discussion, as most students' main model of discourse is non-academic (and the current violence of popular discourse highlights exactly how problematic this is). However, professors can put a writing podcast on for the class, pause it regularly to engage, to talk back, to agree and disagree, and even open up the dialogue to students in real time. This achieves much the same sort of modeling as team teaching. In this way, the students become part of the larger discourse in a very literal and practical way, and ultimately entrenches the idea that diversity of approach and thought positively enhances our world and work.

### **THE RISE OF THE STUDENT VOICE**

In order to truly be a part of a many voices classroom, students themselves must find their voices. Again, podcasting is a wonderful route to achieve this. In a class where the professor has modeled and shared in craft discussions by repeatedly bringing in podcasts to help guide fledgling writers, the next step is to ask them to engage with craft in much the same way. In my classroom, students make podcasts as a metacognitive exercise in exploration of their own ideas about craft. The reflexive nature of both craft discussions and revision make them particularly suited for the incorporation of metacognitive learning strategies. According to Mitsea and Drigas's article, "A Journey into the Metacognitive Learning Strategies," "[i]t has been proved that the implementation of metacognitive strategies empowers higher-order cognitive abilities, attentional and memory control, self-confidence and leads to independent and meaningful learning" (4). Podcasting is an excellent way to foster metacognitive learning, especially when paired with portfolios, as students' pointed and planned discussions of their own work and process pushes them to explore their declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge about writing.

One way I achieve this is by having students interview each other after having completed portfolios (or in some cases, interview themselves), consciously forming craft discussions for an audience. In classes where students have already been exposed to similar podcasts by established writers, they are encouraged to see their own work, and their own thinking about their work (metacognition), as a part of a larger conversation within the literary community.

This level of introspection allows "students to learn to take control of their own learning by defining goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them" (Rathnayake 57), and because

it is done in service of a larger discussion, they begin to orient their goals and progress within a more diverse literary community than they may find in our classroom. This is especially helpful for first generation college students and students whose backgrounds are underrepresented in the workshop. Additionally, the podcast interview is an emerging writing form that hinges on prepared questions based on the interviewee's work, requiring students to engage deeply both as readers and writers, testing and growing their own understanding of craft through partnership, then refining it as they find ways to articulate their ideas for a larger audience (either of their fellow students, when played to the class as a whole, or in the greater world, if the podcasts are published).

At midterm and finals, I have my students create the usual portfolios, but I add a podcast component. This past year I allowed students to either work cooperatively interviewing each other, or speak on their own. I suggested a time of ten minutes or so per person, but gave no hard and fast rule on it. I gave them a list of topics to explore, told them they had to include a one page reading of their work, and showed them how to use an easy, free podcasting app (Anchor). Then, as an experiment, I let them go with no further parameters. Because my class was small (six students) and is a non-majors introductory course, I felt comfortable providing them with more freedom than usual. Two of my students turned in a delightful hour and a half discussion on writing. A listener would probably not realize that these were anthrozoology and psychology majors that had no real desire to be writers in the long term. They could not stop talking about their writing, their ideas on writing, other people's writing, what they didn't understand about writing, and what they believed about the craft. It was glorious, if long.

And then there is X, a student who is a graphic artist with a passion for writing, and who has the potential for a career as a writer if she so chooses. She is a bit of a quiet loner. She is African American. She has a learning disability. She has a vision that is not part of the traditional homogeneity found in most workshops. In this exercise she blossomed. She spoke with authority and conviction, returning to many of our class discussions, often in order to upend them with questions and critique. She also explored her own relationship with writing and her process. She was particularly pensive about her own reluctance to revise her portfolio work, despite her belief in revision's importance, ultimately providing a clear path to additional revisions she believed her work needed and a discussion of how it had changed thus far.

Not only did X and the others successfully explore craft in their podcast, they each had engaged in productive metacognitive explorations and a level of introspection that can "enhance learners' academic achievement, self-confidence and raise self-awareness" (Mitsea and Drigas 17). Maybe of more profound importance to a writing classroom is the metacognitive exercise's illuminative properties:

Imagine metacognition like a tunnel (such as a tunnel of time) and metacognitive strategies like the vehicle which could unveil countless and possible paths with the same destination: the stream of consciousness. This stream of luminosity becomes gradually visible as people make a journey in new, alternative or more trodden paths and climb the ladder of knowledge, bridging information gaps in a meaningful whole. (Mitsea and Drigas 17)

This illumination is an excellent path to voice, and creating their own metacognitive podcasts exploring craft allows students to travel it.

To cultivate students' voices, confidence, connection, we need to allow them to hear and interact with as diverse a set of voices as we can. We need to model the diverse world in our classrooms, and then we need to let them raise their voices and truly join that world. Podcasts are an excellent path for that.

## **CREATING PODCASTS AND HIGHLIGHTING VOICE: AN EXERCISE IN MULTIMODAL LEARNING**

### **Lemerond:**

Another way to incorporate podcasts and move away from viewing writing as a one-way, one-goal homogeneous field (to avoid the "McPoem" McGurl warned about, as it were), is to use them as the creative product itself. I teach a course that covers a good number of mediums, and the storytelling podcast is one of them (Lemerond). I would like to discuss this in the section, and in doing so, provide a pedagogical and practical framework that speaks to the value in challenging students to not only study storytelling podcasts, but to create them. That said, I will begin by giving a brief summary of multimodality as a pedagogical model. When I say multimodal, I use the definition of modes, and the list of those modalities, as outlined by the New London School: written language, oral language, visual representation, gestural representation, spatial representation, tactile representation, and most importantly, the representation of the self. The idea is these representations are not discrete, that they are interrelated, and that studying their relationships leads to greater conceptual understandings than we would otherwise have. Furthermore, because students are challenged to write, cast, direct, and create their stories, this results in a creative project where students see their personal voices highlighted, which is to say their actual voices become a necessary part of the stories they've created (Archer, McLuhan, hooks, Gholneसार, Pennington). To put it another way, my students are asked to become active participants within their own stories, which ideally leads them to their own personal narrative discoveries, discoveries that they then share with their peers. Moreover, creative podcasts allow professors to privilege the oral storytelling and

performance creative writing modes (such as slam poetry) that have often been unwelcome in much of Academia, and are often valued in minoritized communities (Gholnecsar and Gonzalez). This expands the meaning of what it is to be a literary writer beyond traditional spaces generally preserved for dominant cultures.

Additionally, there is the metacognitive claim that human beings conceptualize information by classifying, or creating schema for, that information and creating an understanding of that classification by analyzing its relation to their other schema (Lakaf). In the area of storytelling podcasts: students are exposed to a multitude of differing issues within the storytelling medium. They learn that there are tradeoffs between written and audio compositions, and understanding one leads to a greater understanding of the other. They are, ideally, forced to make connections regarding their multiliteracies that they may never have otherwise. The base reasoning for this:

1. Learning across modalities provides students with a greater understanding of how narratives function, how the different modalities are both discrete and connected, and what successful storytelling can look like.
2. It's practical, which is to say that students also are able to learn a practical set of skills: sound mixing, sound editing, directing, etc.
3. It's related to the concerns of narrative craft and style that we all value so highly. Students learn the creative limits and tradeoffs inherent in each of these modes. And again, that specific compositions afford certain advantages and disadvantages over others.
4. Their personal voices are highlighted, which is to say their actual voices become a necessary part of the stories they've created. To put it another way, they're asked to become active participants within their own stories, which ideally leads them to their own personal discovery of multi-literate/multi-perspectival modes of communication. These are modes that they engage in on a day-to-day basis as audio-based communication continues to be the dominant form of discourse in most of our daily lives.

Again, if the assertion that multimodal and metacognitive learning is valuable because it allows students to increase the number of cognitive connections they make, then one must assume that the student's identity is fundamental to that process. There can be no existing or potential cognitive frame which is not directly related to student identity (New London, Lakoff, Mura, Archer, Pennington).

In his book *Digital Storytelling*, Joe Lambert outlines seven major features for effective digital storytelling: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, economy, pacing, the gift of voice,

and soundtrack. POV, dramatic question, emotional content, economy, and pacing are all features that most creative writing instructors are more than just passingly familiar with. They are, with few exceptions, the basis for most stories, and we spend our lives as storytellers and as creative writing instructors asking our students to consider the ways in which these can be manipulated within their own stories. One only needs to shift their understanding of these features to an audio-digital storytelling format to discover the concepts of “gift of voice” and “soundtrack,” which then become highlighted as additional or “new.” Together these features allow the storytellers more tools and/or opportunities to guide the listener’s understanding of their story in new, varied, and unique ways.

### **WRITING, RECORDING, AND SOUND MIXING**

I break down the narrative podcast medium for my students with the following framework: writing, speaking, and acoustic non-verbal elements.

The writing portion is the base of the narrative. Once we get to podcasts, we’ve been discussing issues of narrative all semester. I do teach a course that chiefly focuses on the podcast, but my intro course is a prerequisite and therefore students are already familiar with these issues when they enroll (though we will continue to discuss them, often in much more in-depth ways). The speaking and acoustic non-verbal elements would fall under what Lambert describes as “gift of voice” and soundtrack.

I use the formal characteristics of voice as outlined by Andrew Bottomley because his articles provide a practical guide to acoustic storytelling as they’ve already been established in the field of radio drama. I also prefer Bottomley’s terminology to outline voice and soundtrack for two separate reasons. The first is that “gift of voice” suggests that one must have some innate talent to engage in audio storytelling (and one does not), so dropping “gift of” in lieu of asking students to develop their own voice technique seems preferable. My interest in referring to “acoustic non-verbal elements” as opposed to soundtrack is again a practical one. The term non-verbal provides a clear separation between voice from music and foley (foley meaning sound effects). These basic elements are something people in our profession are less familiar with, but we all know them, if not explicitly, then intuitively. I ask my students to consider these when they are analyzing existing podcasts as well as for when they create their own.

### **SPOKEN CHARACTERISTICS**

Fundamental characteristics of voice include: tone, timbre, intonation, pitch, volume, modulation, accent, rhythm, and breath (a good contemporary resource to familiarize oneself with them is in James Alburger’s *The Art of Voice Acting*) (Alburger). I discuss with my students what all of these terms mean and how they contribute to meaning and composition. Breath is perhaps the most

important one as what we do with our breath often tells people more about what we mean than our words do. Moreover, often what we do with our breath means more than the words we say. A short and by no means exhaustive list of things we do with our breath: we sigh, laugh, cry, yawn, grunt, stretch, and inhale sharply. In class, I use an example of this from a past student's podcast. The podcast is about a small liberal art's college student who makes friends with a "townie" at a nearby coffee shop. Toward the end of the story, it becomes clear that the "townie" would like to be more than friends, regardless of the fact that the student they are enamored with is already in a serious monogamous relationship. There's a line where the main character's roommate says, "I finally confronted him and asked him if he was in love with Jane, and he said... . . . *nothing*." The two major voice characteristics to notice in this example are the perhaps two second silence before the word "nothing," and the way in which the word "nothing" is delivered, which in this case is enunciated slowly, several octaves lower, and with a certain tension that informs the listener that the friend is saying "nothing" because they cannot answer the question honestly and at the same time do not want to lie. This is an example where the silence before "nothing" further emphasizes the word "nothing" which has already been emphasized by the tone, timbre, and modulation. It also reveals something about the attitude of the character who is speaking, and this is one of the many ways I tell my students they can add their "own voices" to their characters as well as their narratives.

### NON-VERBAL ACOUSTIC COMPONENTS

The last major type that we discuss is the inclusion of various non-verbal acoustic components, which they have to mix with the verbal characteristics. Non-verbal acoustic components present themselves in two sub-categories. This is musical accompaniment (which also abides by the rules of tone, timbre, modulation, and rhythm) and foley. Musical accompaniment can either add to or undercut the mood and/or tension of the overall composition. I provide my students with an example, the podcast "The Good Doctor," in which the addition of ominous pipe-organ music acts as a cue to the listener that they might expect that they are listening to a gothic-horror story. For comedic compositions, one can use bright, bouncy music to undercut tension. I often do this when I create a short composition with my students at the beginning of the unit. Foley can add a similar grounding in mood or tension, such as the inclusion of thunder in the "Good Doctor" example. But, it can also emphasize certain events or actions, such as the inclusion of a tone that signals the arrival of an email, text, or direct message (or, as my students so often like to do, one can add the sound of violent events in order to emphasize certain major tensions of a story, like a gunshot, or a raging fire, or the sound of a car-crash). This part is usually the most challenging for students as they have to learn how to use the technology. However, there are sound mixing programs that currently exist that can easily be demoed at their most basic levels, and students today are savvy enough to pick them up quickly, especially when the technology is introduced along with short troubleshooting exercises.

## SOUND MIXING

The major portions of sound mixing begin first with recording. Along with the recording of voice, they must find music and foley. Depending on the student's desired effect for a specific element of their story, they then must mix these components together, though I should say that the mixing process is often an active process where students are writing, recording, adding, subtracting, and mixing different components/characteristics throughout the act of composition. The main mixing techniques I ask them to incorporate are: fading, foregrounding, and layering. In their initial assignment, I ask them to use introductory music that they must fade out. I also ask them to consider what sorts of components and elements they might include to make this composition "their own." Layering and foregrounding are important in that their music and sound effects must be loud enough for the listener to register them, but quiet enough that they do not interrupt or drown out the verbal narrative. As I previously mentioned, the example I first ask my students to listen to is a one-hundred-word story, a drabble, by Jake Webb titled, "The Good Doctor." Norm Sherman reads this story on his podcast, *The Drabblecast*. First, I ask my students to read it, and ask them to think about the sorts of images this text creates in their mind. Then, I read it to them, emphasizing major story elements as best I can. I then ask them to think about how my reading, my voice, alters their understanding. Then, I play Norm Sherman's version. The text of this version is below:

\*The audio version of this story is available for free on *The Drabblecast Website* and can be found here: <https://www.drabblecast.org/2015/11/09/drabbleclassics-25-charlie-the-purple-giraffe-was-acting-strangely-113/>

The doctor paced, laughing manically, as thunder boomed in the sky above. Torrential rain pelted into his inner sanctum. He didn't care. Disgruntled villagers with torches were storming up the hillside. He didn't care. Cackling, he flipped a massive switch. His machine roared to life harnessing the lightening from the sky above and pumping it onto the cold steel table in front of him. As electricity flowed into the cobbled together mass of organs and limbs, the doctor couldn't help but smirk at the irony of it all. Mother had always said that he'd never learn how to make friends.

I like to use this example because there is no action described within the story that does not have some sort of foley (sound effect) backgrounded within the audio. This is to say that when one listens to the story, they can hear pacing, laughing, thunder, rain, an angry crowd, electricity, and the sounds of something monstrous groaning as it comes to life. Then I can ask my students questions about how the narration is altered or enhanced by its audio features.

1. What does the narrator create with just his voice in terms of tone, timbre, modulation, accent, and rhythm? I ask them about Norm's voice. Is it flat, or is there a sinister immediacy to it? What about Norm's voice changes when he repeats, "He didn't care"?
2. I ask them about the music.
3. I ask them about the other foley: thunder, evil laugh, electricity, angry mob, bells, rain, monster groan, and flipping switch.
4. I ask them if they can notice any fading, foregrounding, or layering.
5. I ask them to think about the possibilities of what they might do with their own stories, and how they might personalize these stories, making them their own.

We then talk about how all these things come together to add to the richness of the narrative as a composition, often going back to relevant parts of the story so that they can relisten to all of the different elements in order to critically evaluate them. I then give them a short demo of Audacity, which is a free audio-mixing software program, outlining the basics of recording, uploading, and downloading. It has a learning curve, but it's not a steep one. This is where students must mix sound features and components, combine them, foreground and background them. External sound files need to be uploaded, and this is nothing new to anyone who has had to upload a file before. A somewhat tricky part is lining up the sound files in order to get them to properly play over, and into, one another. For instance, if you accidentally overlap two sound files on the same track (you can play two files over one another, they just have to be on different tracks), the program will stop playing at that point in the file. This is a very common mistake for students to make, and it can be very frustrating for them (i.e., they often think that the program is malfunctioning). It is issues like this that can grind the whole process to a halt, and this is why the troubleshooting I incorporate at the beginning of the lesson (and continue to do throughout our projects) is so important.

I provide them with a host of websites where they can find a whole slew of duty-free music and sound effects, though I also encourage them to make their own. These websites can be found with a simple Google search. After this, I give them their first assignment. They do this assignment in-class on the same day as the demo. I find this goes a long way towards dealing with those issues of troubleshooting. The directions are simple:

1. Write a short narrative (a couple of sentences to a paragraph) where a character does something, anything that makes a noise.
2. They should then record themselves. Then find music and a sound effect and add them to the recording.
3. Then they should mix all three of these things together to create a 10-30 second audio-story that they present by the end of class.

The value of this initial assignment goes far beyond just being a troubleshooting exercise, though it is very effective as one. This is because most students are afraid of podcasting by the simple virtue of the fact that the experience of listening to one's own voice can be jarring and uncomfortable if one is not used to it. I would like to pause to note that I do not force my students to record themselves if they do not want to, as we make a distinction between narrative voice/creative vision and mechanical vocalization. I make this clear and give them the option of finding and directing their own voice talent. I'll expound on this point later in the essay. Additionally, the activity serves as a low stakes creative exercise in which learning to use the software is prioritized over any sort of pressure to perform one's personal and unique creative voice. Also, the motivation is simple, everyone has to do it, which in the space of the classroom helps foster a sense of unity and collaboration. After we've listened to everyone's thirty second stories, I present them with their major assignment.

The major storytelling podcast assignment I give to my intro students can take whatever form they please. It can be narrative fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, or a hybrid of these things. Collaboration is not required but is highly encouraged. The requirements for the assignment are simple. Their major assignment, when completed, should be about eight minutes in length, should contain a verbal narrative element, should contain non-verbal elements (foley or sound effects), music, and an introduction (note: it's also fun to ask them to include a fake commercial).

I've had students create podcasts that have come in the form of gameshows, news-programs, journals of supernatural exploration, spoken word podcasts, creative non-fiction stories involving campus and off-campus experiences, and episodic adventure series to name just a few. Many students embrace collaboration, many do not. One of the benefits of collaboration is that students do not have to record their own vocalization if they cannot or do not want to. And, I allow my students to get voice actors wherever they can, which means they can enroll voice talent from outside of class (usually friends), all throughout campus and beyond.

The recording process itself offers a multitude of varying challenges. For instance, since my students do not have immediate access to a studio, students must find a dedicated space to record,

whether that's with their own laptop (or computer) or with one of the school's computers. I once had a student who recorded the first part of their narrative and then played it back for me to ask what I thought. I told them I liked the slight reverb effect they'd placed over it as it seemed to add an air of authority, and they responded that they didn't place any reverb over their narration, that they'd recorded it in the building's stairwell, and didn't even notice the reverb until I pointed it out. I then informed them that, for the purposes of continuity, they'd probably want to consider doing one of two things. Either they would need to record the rest of their narrative in the stairwell, or they would have to find a different space to record and restart recording their narrative from the beginning. Interestingly enough, they ended up doing the rest of their recording in the stairwell, and it turned out quite well.

Throughout this unit, students learn that, just like there are specific narrative characteristics that control an "imaginative" image when reading, the same is true for listening, and that there is a good deal of commonality between them. More importantly, by the end of the unit, students understand the value of their own voice from yet another mode, and therefore another perspective. Again, we spend our careers teaching our students how to guide the imagination of their readers. How do we get our characters to sound on the page like they sound in our heads? Or, in what ways can we use our voices to shape the imaginations of people not ourselves? This is just as true for audio storytelling, which is to say, how do we inspire our listeners to see in their minds what we see in our minds? When is this important and when is it not important? What do we need to incorporate to tell the story that we're trying to tell? What *audio* storytelling elements can we use to do this? And, which ones are the best ones for the story they feel best represents "their" creative vision and voice? Also, this helps students understand the ways in which stories delivered in an audio format are different from stories delivered in other formats. This is particularly valuable as a majority of the stories we hear on any given day are relayed to us verbally. And chiefly, it is a format that usually highlights the student's actual voice, which in most cases literally places the focus on them as a storyteller, which in turn puts the focus on their language, their literacies, and their perspective in several ways written textual production simply does not. Moreover, it provides students with practical skills and knowledge that will inarguably be useful long after they leave the classroom and with implications that expand far beyond the realm of storytelling, i.e., having experience mixing sound speaks to a possible skill that they would not have developed otherwise, one that has broad and far-reaching practical applications.

## CONCLUSION

While there is no one way to reconsider the standard creative writing pedagogical models (namely the workshop), podcasting is one alternative with multiple, useful paths. Podcasting can help change classroom dynamics to be more inclusive, more student centered, more cooperative, and more representative of the multitude of ways to approach writing, beyond traditional modes. Whether a professor chooses to use the podcast to expand the voices they bring into the course or to expand the ways the students themselves find and use their own creative voice, podcasting offers rich, multimodal solutions to the many problems created by institutionalized hegemony in the writing and publishing landscape. We have found that opening our classrooms to the podcast has enriched not only our students' learning and experiences, but it has enriched our own. It has energized and reinforced our commitment to diversity and has inspired us to challenge our own conceptions of what creative writing can be. The podcast has proven to be a revitalizing and fun pedagogical tool, which has, by decentralizing our own professorial voices, increased a sense of community in our courses. And while this article attempts to offer up a multitude of assignments and uses for the podcast; the possible applications are manifold, making this a powerful learning medium.

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