

Small-Town Perspectives, Big-Time Motivation: Composing and Producing Place-Based Podcasts

A high school and college teacher collaborate to incorporate technology into an assignment called the Rural Voices Project, for which students compose stories about their lives for a real audience.

We begin with a classroom snapshot. Chatter spreads like wildfire across the room. Students have been given the directive to list topics that mean the most to them. Angie, a sophomore girl twirling a few strands of hair, has so many questions that it is difficult to keep up with her.

The conversation begins with the absence of a topic on which to write. We discuss a number of possibilities: school, cheerleading, her favorite English teacher. Nothing sticks right away.

“Yes, you may write about anything you want. Remember, this project is called Rural Voices. So, any story that you would like to tell would be perfect for the project.”

She asks if she can write a poem about a relationship that has recently ended.

“Certainly. A poem would be perfect.”

The Power of Publishing Student Writing

Student motivation is difficult to measure, manage, initiate, and control. Teachers control many aspects of classroom environments, including student interaction and cooperation, by the rules and procedures they establish and maintain (Ryan and Patrick 437). But, there is often little classroom teachers can do to predict what will motivate students to move beyond the monotony of “playing school” and elevate their efforts to achieve authentic learning. If we are lucky, we simply have the opportunity, every once in a while, to experience real student motivation in our classrooms. When everything seems to

work, when the engine that is our classroom is firing on all cylinders, when all we can do is move a couple steps back and take notice of what authentic, motivated, and engaged learning looks like, that is when we find ourselves right in the middle of something great, something meaningful.

The Rural Voices project, an activity of the National Writing Project, created such an experience for us and our students. For the project, we asked students to write about their hometown and then record their writing for a CD to be shared with classmates.

Asking students to publish their work, which can be done in a variety of ways (including orally presenting work to the rest of a class), is one way to increase student motivation. In the sports world, student athletes are willing to run laps, climb stairs, and practice before or after school daily in preparation for the big game. They are motivated because when they step out onto the court, they want to be as prepared as possible—especially for the audience of family, peers, and community members who will be cheering them on. The same is true in writing. Writing with the teacher as the only audience rarely encourages students to give their best effort. However, most students who know in advance they will be published—that their work is going to be showcased, just as an athlete’s skills are showcased on game day—want to look as good as possible in front of that audience. When they know their work will be shared and displayed, they are more likely to take the time to revise and edit to create a more polished piece of writing.

Podcasting and Place-Based Writing

Another classroom snapshot: Microphones, connected with black cables, are set up in three different parts of the empty classroom. There is a light hum resonating from the overhead heating unit. Angie has more questions.

“So, what is all this stuff?”

“This is a program that captures the audio signal from this microphone and transfers it into my computer.” My hands move almost automatically as I connect the components with black and silver cables. The hard drive of the computer whirs with anticipation as the final pieces of the audio-logical puzzle come together.

Angie seems nervous as I prepare for our recording session.

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “You get as many takes as you need to get it right. Just be yourself in front of the microphone.” I wait as Angie reads her copy quietly to herself. She paces in a small circle in the middle of the empty classroom that has become our makeshift recording studio.

She asks me if her voice will be posted to the Internet immediately.

“No, not right away,” I tell her. “You’ll have to allow time for me to put it all together.” She seems reassured for now. “Are you ready?” I ask.

She nods.

One way to build intrigue in the classroom is to capitalize on teens’ growing interest in digital media and user-generated content for the World Wide Web. Robert Rozema suggests student-generated podcasts might be especially effective for inspiring student motivation, in part because podcasting is a genre that naturally expands a reader’s/writer’s/producer’s audience (31). While Rozema suggests that podcasting can

help motivate students to read young adult literature, we believe podcasts can also motivate students to write creatively.

Another key factor in building interest and motivation for students is relevance. Relevance is especially challenging in creating school writing assignments, for which students often feel forced to respond to writing prompts that have little if any connection to their own lives. We have found that

place-based writing—assignments that focus on or are shaped by the geographic area in which students live and learn—can further motivate young writers, as they write from their own experiences (Brooke; Jennings, Swidler, and Koliba).

Our Rural Voices project takes advantage of the motivating possibilities of podcasting and place-based writing.

The Rural Voices Writing Project

In his timeless “My Pedagogic Creed,” John Dewey shares his belief that school should represent “present life”—the life students lead outside school. Further, Dewey believes that education that does not address the lives students live beyond the school can “cramp and . . . deaden.” A place-based curriculum, such as is engaged in the Rural Voices project, can create the school-life connection Dewey finds so crucial for students.

The Rural Voices project was developed as a result of the research conducted by the Nebraska Writing Project (Bauman 1). The research conducted by site participants investigated the effects of place-conscious instruction on students’ performance. Place-conscious or place-based instruction also seeks to help students build an appreciation for their surroundings as they develop into active and responsible citizens (Noddings 67; Bauman 1). A place-based curriculum, including place-based writing, can address a number of issues and topics, including the social concerns of the particular community being studied (Bishop 66; Smith 587). One offshoot of the Rural Voices project was a presentation at the 2003 National Writing Project Conference in San Francisco where the presenters played cuttings of site-based writings that were written by students from Hawaii, Minnesota, and Kentucky, among others. Each section gave the audience a feel for what life is like in those students’ communities.

The process at our rural Midwestern high school began with an introduction—and some listening time devoted to CDs the NWP had created for the project. At first, students giggled at the other students’ accents and their descriptions of their lives. Slowly, though, the students began listening more intently to the stories they were being told, and they talked about why some of the stories were more vivid and “better” than others.

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front of the microphone.”**

Once we informed our students that they would be contributing stories to the Rural Voices project, we heard the traditional claims of “I don’t have anything to write about,” and we began brainstorming topics. Before long, we had a list of interesting topics: family, hunting, tornadoes, farming, learning to drive, local sports teams, ice storms, gardening, raising pigs, and many others. Students selected two or three topics and further brainstormed using idea webs and other graphic organizers.

Once the students settled on a sufficiently narrowed topic, they wrote narratives or poetry to share their community stories. After sharing at their tables and revising, the students practiced oral readings before they recorded them, as Angie does in the classroom snapshot above.

Producing the Podcasts

Technology played a major role in taking the students’ writing to a much wider audience. Students composed their pieces with the idea that each piece would be recorded in the author’s voice. During the writing process, students were encouraged to consider how music and sound effects might enhance their original composition. These considerations varied in importance among all of the writers in the Rural Voices project, but it is essential to note that as students wrote, many considered including elements that would make their original writing a portion of multimodal compositions.

The production of each student-written composition was carried out in two parts: recording and postproduction. The recordings were conducted on site at the school over two school days. Students excused themselves from class for about five or ten minutes to record their writing. During the recording sessions, students visited with the producer about ideas for sound effects and music selections. Postproduction was completed offsite, where the readings, music, and sound effects were assembled and mixed together into a complete composition. The final recordings were burned to compact disc for the classroom teacher to share with the students.

The application of technology in this project was rather advanced. One of the teachers in this project, a doctoral student who volunteered to help record the works, collected extensive experience in audio production as the office manager and produc-

tion assistant of a commercial recording studio—a job he held prior to becoming a school teacher. However, there are many reputable online resources available to help classroom teachers incorporate podcasting and other forms of audio recording into their instruction that align to all ability and skill levels (consider pointing your Web browser to <http://www.apple.com/education/podcasting>, <http://fcit.usf.edu/laptop/Podcasting101/Introduction.html>, or <http://www.speedofcreativity.org/resources/podcast-resources/>). With digital, nonlinear audio recording becoming the standard in audio production, it has never been easier to record, edit, and burn with ease.

The equipment used to record the students’ readings included (1) a Marshall MXL 2007 studio condenser microphone; (2) a Mackie Onyx Satellite audio firewire interface; and (3) an Apple MacBook computer equipped with Garage Band, a multi-track, nonlinear audio recording program that is included in the iLife software suite. The Marshall MXL 2007 condenser microphone was selected for this project because it is a relatively inexpensive, large-diaphragm microphone that can accurately capture a wide range of voices in rich detail. It is not necessary to use this style of microphone, but, microphone selection is perhaps the most important decision to make when recording the human voice. Ideally, a microphone used in an application such as this will provide the user with a sensible dynamic and frequency range for capturing most speaking voices.

A digital audio interface converts audio signals into a digital format that can be recorded, and later edited, by your computer. A range of digital audio interfaces is available and can fit most budgets; the Mackie Onyx Satellite that we used is about mid-range. Most interfaces connect to a computer through a firewire connection, which is a serial interface that can transfer information much faster than the common universal serial bus (USB) interface. The Mackie Onyx Satellite, like most audio interfaces in its price range, supports two audio inputs, which means the user can record two audio signals at once. The feature that sets the Satellite apart from the rest are the Onyx pre-amplifiers that are hardwired into the circuitry of

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the interface. These professional-grade pre-amplifiers provide rich and warm processing that is ideal for recording a range of inputs, including, most importantly, speaking and singing voices.

Mac and PC users will find a wide range of audio programs to record, edit, and download audio files to compact disc or save as an MP3. We used GarageBand, a nonlinear audio recording program for Macintosh computers; however, many other programs, such as Audacity, Cakewalk, Ableton, and Digidesign ProTools, serve both operating systems. And, depending on which digital audio interface chosen, most manufacturers include a trial version of a comparable editing program for use with their product.

Successes Stories

While many students fussed that they didn't have anything substantial to write about and then fussed even more at the possibility of recording their writing, the source for their complaints changed once the recordings were complete. We scheduled a day late in the school year to listen to the finished product, and for many of the students, the day couldn't come soon enough. They pestered us about listening to the CD nearly every class period until then.

When the day came, our typically rowdy class settled down extremely quickly. The students listened as attentively as they'd ever listened in our classroom before.

Students clapped for their classmates when each student's recording had been played. Once

we'd listened to that class's CD, they started making requests to listen to specific works of students from the other classes, which told us they'd been discussing the project outside the classroom. One student nervously asked to go to the restroom to avoid hearing her own recording.

We decided to pause and wait for her return. She actually seemed pleased that we'd waited, and she was relieved when they all gave her a hearty round of applause for her recording.

Several individual successes come to mind regarding this project. Two girls teamed up to do a

paired reading about life in their small town, an idea they had developed on their own. Another student—who had been fairly disconnected from the language arts curriculum—became intensely focused on the Rural Voices project. A student who repeatedly missed work in our class volunteered to play guitar as background music not only for his own writing but also for the other students at his table. To make sure that happened, he brought his guitar to every class, *for two solid weeks*, just in case the graduate student was there that day to record. We'd never seen this student so focused and so determined to participate in a language arts activity; previously, it was a rarity for him to turn in any writing assignment on time, but for this project, he wasn't taking any chances on missing it. This was an intriguing assignment for him because it allowed him to incorporate his guitar abilities into an authentic literacy project. Because his music became part of legitimate compositions intended for real audiences, he was legitimately composing for real purposes.

Another student was a born storyteller, but he rarely took the time to put his stories on paper. Instead, he arrived before class or stayed a little after the bell to share his tale of the day. It was always a good story, especially when it came to fishing tales, so we rarely discouraged him; if only he could put such enthusiasm and storytelling skills into his writing. Because the Rural Voices project provided him an opportunity to share his tale orally, he was willing to write out his story as part of the process. He chose to tell the best of his stories, about fishing with a favorite uncle, and he received an enthusiastic response from his audience as a reward for his efforts.

Concluding Observations


The successes of the Rural Voices project in this classroom is an example of a compounded effort to motivate students to write, to tell their stories. On the surface, the technology and the use of music and sound effects to tell their stories was the initial hook to excite students to expand their creativity in their writing; there was also an internal motivation for each writer to identify how he or she is situated in our rural setting.

Take, for instance, the student who brought his guitar to school every day for two weeks. In this

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particular case, the technology was a major motivating factor because he, and those involved in his group, found value in his talent to play the electric guitar, a skill that is often unrecognized in the “official” music classes held in a public high school—and rarely recognized in an English classroom. Not only did his music provide an original enhancement of his writing, it also served as an opportunity for the student to hear his music in a recording as part of an authentic communication. Experiencing his music from this perspective provided new insight for him as a musician and as a writer, insight that up until this project he had never considered.

The born storyteller also found relevance in the project, but for perhaps different reasons. Some of the projects completed for this creative writing activity embraced aspects of the rural community of which each student was a part. But, many students told stories of vacations and traditions that occurred beyond their small town. As one can imagine, these stories illustrated the awe and wonder of far-off lands. Each student who spoke from this perspective described the islands of Hawaii or the towering buildings of large cities with intriguing and rich detail. Others embraced their hometown in their writing, telling the tales of the rural setting in which their homes, families, and schools are located. The Rural Voices project provided a platform for those who originally thought they had nothing to write about, but students found that they had a great deal to share once they considered their unique experi-

ences connected to the rural landscape. The students’ Londonian tales of hunting, survival, and adventure took hold of the listener’s imagination, while Rockwellian images of small-town flavor captivated the audience’s sense of small-town nostalgia. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In “Connecting Past and Present: A Local Research Project,” students connect to their school’s history by researching one decade of the school’s past. Through their research, students become archivists, gathering photos, artifacts, and stories. As a culminating activity, students create museum exhibits displaying the found items for their decade. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/connecting-past-present-local-1027.html>