

**NOTE: This is a pre-print of the accepted, pre-copy edited version of the manuscript. The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in the *Journal of Political Science Education* (2019), available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15512169.2019.1640121>**

## **Producing Political Knowledge: Students as Podcasters in the Political Science Classroom**

**John McMahon, SUNY Plattsburgh**

### **Introduction**

Podcasting is an increasing part of the media environment, especially for the demographic of the traditional undergraduate student. According to recent survey data (Edison Research 2019), the proportion of Americans who have ever listened to a podcast has been consistently growing since 2006. Unsurprisingly, podcast listening skews young. For example, while comprising 28% of the US population 12 years and older, the survey indicates that people ages 18-34 make up 39% of those who have listened to a podcast in the last month. Additionally, people with a four-year college degree are overrepresented in the podcast-listening public compared to their proportion of the general population. It is thus important to consider the ways in which we might integrate podcasts into the political science classroom. If our students are increasingly turning to podcasts for their own media consumption, in what ways can podcasting enhance student learning?

The existing literature on podcasts and the classroom can generally be separated into two categories. First, studies have focused on the use of podcasts made by instructors as a means of delivering or supplementing course content (Chester et al. 2011; Hill and Nelson 2011; Ng'ambi and Lombe 2012). Second, studies in disciplines other than political science have considered

podcasts produced by students as a course assignment (Guertin 2010; Heilesen 2010; Kemp et al. 2012; Kidd 2012; Killean and Summerville 2019; Powell and Robson 2014). In political science, articles on podcasting and pedagogy have mostly discussed podcasts made by the instructor to deliver course content. (Roberts 2008, Taylor 2009). My article addresses two gaps in this literature. First, research on student-produced podcasts has mostly not found its way to political science, with the exception of two recent articles, one discussing “the potential for [student] podcasting in teaching peace and war” (Bejtullahu, Kunz, and Stoicescu 2018, 1), and the other analyzing how a podcast and video assignment fosters active learning in teaching critical security studies (Obradovic-Wochnik and Hayes 2017). As I suggest in the conclusion, there might be considerations unique to political science in terms of the politics of knowledge production. Second, articles on podcasting in political science have focused on providing podcasts of lectures or other instructor-produced content. I help shift the emphasis to podcasts planned and produced by students themselves, and thus engages podcasts as a tool for students to analyze and present political information in a specific rhetorical setting.

This article is also informed by literature on civic engagement and the use of technology in the political science classroom. If there is a strong potential for “Web 2.0” technologies to foster students’ civic engagement, frequency and expression of political views, and political engagement (Chod and Muck 2015), and if political science classrooms can be distinctive spaces for cultivating democratic engagement, particularly when active learning strategies are implemented (Sloam 2008), then podcasting can play a unique role in political science classrooms. Podcast assignments are active learning opportunities using Web 2.0 technologies to promote critical thinking and analytical reasoning in student-generated communication about political issues. Indeed, developing abilities for “how to effectively and successfully discuss

politics with others” and to “communicate about politics in more captivating and interesting ways ... will equip younger audiences to engage with politics throughout their lifetime, with “cooperative communication” particularly “associated with knowledge and satisfaction” (Shulman 2015, 105, 109).

To explore these themes, I reflect upon a podcast project conducted in five courses across two institutions, in which the final project was for students to make a podcast on contemporary political issues. This paper is intended as an initial foray into analysis of student-produced podcasts in the political science classroom, focusing on assignment design, learning objectives, and my own pedagogical reflections in order to reach some tentative postulates about the pedagogical potential of podcasts and provoke further, more systematic research.

### **Assignment Design and Learning Objectives**

I designed this assignment for my introductory American politics course in the Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Fall 2018 semesters, and in my Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 Political Ideals and Ideologies course. These were taught across two different institutions,<sup>1</sup> and the class sizes ranged from twenty-three to thirty-seven students. The full assignment for the Fall 2018 American politics and Spring 2019 ideologies course are included in Appendix A.<sup>2</sup> In this section I discuss the objectives of the podcast and the central pedagogical choices I have faced in constructing the assignment.

The first learning objective of the podcast, to connect course material and ideas to a contemporary political issue, is the only learning objective for this assignment not specific to the podcast form, but rather realizable in many different kinds of assignments. The second objective, to “explore multiple modes of analytically and creatively engaging” the fields of American

politics and political ideologies specifically addresses the podcast form, linking the expectations for political analysis and critical thinking to the more creative form the podcast will take. This objective signals my interest in students learning how to mobilize the intellectual capabilities they (hopefully) develop into non-traditional sites and formats. The third learning objective was to “learn audio recording and editing skills that may be useful beyond the classroom and your time” at the college. Here, I wanted to provide students the opportunity to develop competencies relevant for a wide range of internships, off-campus experiences, and careers. Students in these courses can now plausibly present themselves as having experience in podcasting, audio recording, and audio production, with a podcast to present as concrete evidence of these skills. The fourth and final learning objective of the assignments connects this assignment to the institution’s college-wide learning outcomes.

Considered broadly, the objectives of the podcast assignment express my attempt to integrate elements of the institutional mission with my concern for students to take on the role of producing political knowledge. The assignment constituted an intentional effort on my part for students to rearticulate the knowledge from my classroom beyond its walls and transfer it to a new setting, thus engaging in outward-oriented active learning.<sup>3</sup> This requires that students consider the ways that the knowledge gained in their formal education can have impacts beyond the space of any particular classroom or educational institution. Formulating this objective also picks up on the counsel given by John C. Bean to encourage students to think rhetorically—“present[ing] the problem within a rhetorical context that gives students a role or purpose, a target audience, and a genre”—so that assignments become “effective meaning-constructing task[s]” (2011, 98). This assignment provides a role (analyzing a contemporary political issue), audience (people who listen to politics podcasts), and a genre (politics podcast). In doing this, I

hoped to ensure that students would successfully participate in meaning-construction in political science.

How, though, did the mechanics of the assignment work to attempt to achieve this set of learning objectives? In discussing the decisions I faced in the process of assignment design, I contextualize the multiple considerations at play in the assignment in order to inform consideration of how the assignment might be altered and improved by those who adapt it.

*Should the podcast be mandatory?:* The initial dilemma was whether to require that all students complete the podcast, or to provide an alternate option to write a more traditional paper. Ultimately, two considerations led me to frame the podcast as the main assignment, with the choice of researching and writing a policy brief (American politics courses) or research paper (Political Ideologies course) also available to them. First, these being the initial attempts at a podcast assignment, I was unsure of its ultimate success. Second, I suspected that the success of the assignment would in part depend on student interest and enthusiasm for the podcasts. In the end, thirty-four out of one hundred and forty-one students across five classes chose the paper option.

*Individual or group?:* Furthermore, it was necessary to decide whether to have students make individual projects or work in groups. Recognizing that students vary in their interest in and commitment to group projects, I opted to let students decide to work individually, in a pair, or in a group of three, with the required length increasing as the groups became larger. I also wanted the projects of my class to reflect the variety of podcast formats that are commonly found in the public sphere. Combining all classes, there were thirty-five individual podcasts, eighteen pairs, and eleven groups of three. For students that worked in groups, I required each student to

confidentially submit an overview of their individual contributions to the group and of how work was divided, in order to provide accountability for all group members.

*Topic choice:* In order to enable students to exert agency over the podcasts they were to make, I left the directions purposefully vague. For example, in the American politics courses, they were instructed to “analyze a topic of national, state, or local political relevance,” while exhibiting connection to the rest of the course. Hillary C. Shulman’s research on political communication norms indicates that students choosing political topics they discuss in classes enables a “sense of ownership” that can foster more active engagement (2015, 95). However, there are risks to this approach of providing little direction on topic selection (Bean 2011, 91). To address these real concerns that students can flounder when asked to construct their own topic with little restriction, I required students to submit several short intermediate assignments throughout the second half of the semester through which they would iteratively develop their topic in consultation with me.

*Podcast length:* One consistent question has been the appropriate length for the podcasts, which requires balancing of several factors. On the one hand, the time should be long enough to require substantive work and to provide enough room for students to analyze their topics in a meaningful way while also fitting in the assignment requirements. On the other hand, the length needs to be short enough such that students are required to be concise in their presentation and effective at editing, that they are not too overwhelmed with the workload during finals weeks, and that instructors have time to meaningfully listen to and grade all podcasts. In different classes, I have implemented a policy of both granting requests for extending the time limit and of holding it as a nonnegotiable maximum. These mixed concerns may point to there being no perfect length for such an assignment.

*Required audio elements:* In order to fully capitalize on the promise of podcasting as a medium of producing political knowledge I put in place requirements for audio elements that all podcasts would need to include: sounds effects or music clips; audio clips from politicians or political analysts, references to readings from class, and interview clips with members of the campus community but not affiliated with the course. This compelled students to learn several different aspects of podcast production, such as asking for an interview, writing interview questions, and recording an interview. I also wanted them to gain experience sourcing sound clips, music, and sound effects and editing audio with multiple kinds of input. Finally, I expected that this variety of audio elements would lead to more interesting and listenable podcasts.

## **Technology**

Instructor and student familiarity with the relevant technology poses one of the greatest obstacles to the assignment's successful realization. However, I was well positioned to handle the technological dimensions of the assignment: I worked closely with colleagues in Instructional Technology at both Beloit College and SUNY Plattsburgh; recording equipment and software for student use was available in both libraries; and I have many years of experience recording, editing, and producing podcasts, allowing me to serve as a resource for students. I would recommend that instructors unfamiliar with audio recording and editing seek out individuals with experience to teach them the basics, and to engage in practice recording and editing before introducing such an assignment in their courses.

Support and collaboration with institutional staff was essential to the success of the project. I consulted with Instructional Technology staff on assignment design and resources available to students. Upon handing out the assignment, I invited a staff member to conduct a

workshop with students that included discussions of: using microphones; recording tips; overview of available technologies and resources on campus; and podcasting best practices. I provided supplemental presentations later in the semester. Students learned recording and editing audio using Audacity, a free, open-source audio production program, which works on both Apple- and Windows-based systems. Students at Beloit College had access to USB microphones that could be checked out and to a soundproof vocal booth, while students at SUNY Plattsburgh had use of an audio and video recording studio in the library. Finally, I kept open extra office hours in the days before the project was due, ensuring I would be available to help with last-minute technological challenges.

I purposely did not require students to have professional-level audio quality, in order to lessen the pressure and stress of the experience. I asked them to use a microphone, the sound booth, and/or the recording studio for longer narrative portions of the podcast, to use professional-quality sound and music clips, and to perform basic production on the final audio. However, I told them to feel free to use their phones or laptops for interviews, even knowing that this would result in audio of a lower quality. I also told them that some unevenness in volume, or audio that wasn't perfectly clear would not be a problem. Ultimately, I was content with the audio quality of the podcasts the students created. While they would not be mistaken for an National Public Radio podcast, they were all listenable and comprehensible, with a few brief exceptions in a couple podcasts. If audio quality were to be more heavily emphasized, further instruction on best practices for recording, editing, and producing would be necessary.

## **Assignment Grading**

A further dilemma I was faced with involved deciding on the means of grading the assignment. That I had not previously assigned nor graded a podcast before the Fall 2016 course complicated the matter. I opted to collaboratively make a grading rubric with my classes to address this concern, deciding that this would constitute a fairer approach than my deciding on criteria in a unilateral way. This method also seeks to encourage students to engage in meta-cognition about the assignment. I sought to have students think about the assignment in a general way to gain a better sense of the important elements of the assignment, as well as the most effective modes of realizing them. Thus, my approach to grading the podcasts was shaped by both the project-specific situation and a broader pedagogical objective.

More concretely, this process involved my taking thirty minutes of class time two weeks before the assignment was due to work on the rubric. I first had small groups of students come up with general categories (organization, audio quality, etc.) upon which they thought it relevant for this assignment to be graded. From there, I asked them to write sample evaluation language at varying levels of proficiency within each category; during this part of the assignment, I made sure to talk with each group in order to give feedback on the language they were developing. Finally, before submitting what they had constructed, I asked each group to indicate whether they thought that any of their categories should count more or less than the others. I collected each group's effort, and we had a discussion about the process. I synthesized the various draft rubrics and my own points of emphasis for the project. In the next class session, I presented that version of a rubric, offered them the chance to discuss and possibly vote on revisions to it. A sample rubric is available in Appendix B.

## **Podcasts and Learning Objectives**

I was impressed with the overall quality of the podcasts. Frequent topics across the four courses include immigration, mass incarceration, voting laws, economic inequality, and drug policy. There has been variation in the purpose of the interviews conducted by students, ranging from an interview with a State Assemblyperson and interviews with faculty on campus to different varieties of “person on the street” interviews with fellow students. The audio quality varied somewhat from podcast to podcast and often within the same podcast, but there have been no instances of podcasts being unlistenable. Experientially, the podcasts were pleasant to listen to and to grade from my perspective. The variety of topics, approaches to the podcast format, and general enthusiasm of most of the episodes contributed to make this a more engaging grading experience than wading through a stack of papers. On a personal level, one of the benefits of the project was that students who were not especially active in class or enthusiastic throughout the semester frequently conveyed their personalities and eagerness in the podcasts. Anecdotal feedback from students also indicates positive feedback on the project. Several students mentioned the creativity of the project as one of its merits, especially compared to a more traditional research paper assignment, while others noted being challenged in new ways. This potentially signifies that the alternative format may create opportunities for more enthusiastic student engagement. Several students told me of the new skills they learned in this medium as a benefit of the project. Students anecdotally disagreed on whether the podcast was more or less work than a paper assignment, as I received comments to the effect that this took less time to make than a final paper and provided relief during finals, while others thought the podcasts involved more effort to design, produce, and edit than an equivalent paper would require—although these students usually also said they nonetheless preferred the podcast assignment.

That these reflections are anecdotal indicates the highly preliminary nature of this essay and the assignment. Further research on student-produced podcasts, deploying rigorous Scholarship of Teaching Learning methodologies, is necessary to fully explore and evaluate the promise of student podcasting. As a proof of concept more than a comprehensive analysis, here I briefly discuss the relationship of the podcasts students created to the learning objectives for the assignment. Most students demonstrated satisfactory achievement of the first objective, to connect course material to a contemporary political issue, but this has been the objective least consistently fulfilled. Students are generally able to include occasional reference to course materials and/or to unevenly apply theories and frameworks from the course to their chosen topic, but more intentionality, consistency, and depth is necessary. I believe that this objective demands further refinement and specification, for it remains too vague for instructor and student alike. This should be paired with more precise guidance from the instructor about how students are to integrate course material into the podcast assignments, and about the purpose served by doing so.

The other objectives were more successfully realized. The second objective, to develop multiple analytical and creative modes of engaging political issues, was met through the successful formation by students of varied podcast formats, interview styles, host personae, and so on, all in the service of evaluating important issues in American politics and political ideologies. Crucially, the variations among podcasts demonstrated an ability of students to adopt the general podcast form toward specific creative and analytical ends, ranging from informative podcasts pairing expert perspectives, relevant data, and historical background along with interviews of fellow students to ascertain some common assumptions, to informed yet lively debates among the hosts in the service of elucidating different perspectives on a particular issue. A number of students explicitly recognized the fulfillment of the third objective—the cultivation

of transferable skills—by commenting to me and/or on course evaluations that they expect to use the skills developed through the assignment in future educational, professional, and personal scenarios. More generally, all students completing the podcast gain basic experience and knowledge of audio recording and production. Finally, I would evaluate a large majority of students to have demonstrated accomplishment—and a majority to have demonstrated mastery—of the college Student Learning Outcomes built in to the assignment. The most significant area of further improvement here is a need to provide further information on sourcing and citing external and sound clips in order to more fully realize the third listed college-wide Outcome. Overall, that the most content-specific objective was the one least successfully realized suggests a need for a re-evaluation of how the assignment is best suited to relate to the course material, with a consequent redesign of the assignment itself.

### **Conclusion: Producing Political Knowledge**

As discussed in my exploration of the learning objectives, the commitment to students taking the knowledge and analytical skills gained from the class and mobilizing them beyond the walls of the classroom constituted one of the most important motivations of the project. That is, I wanted students to experience the production of political knowledge, and to reflect on what it means for them to participate in that mode of knowledge production. One of the themes of the class was that the way that “politics” itself is narrated is itself a political act, for instance that we should think about the way that the frameworks, documents, and approaches that I did and did not choose to include in the class were political decisions. I hoped that the course encouraged them to contemplate—and hopefully bring to their own podcasts—the always-political nature of knowledge production.

Ultimately, I suggest that this shift from being consumers of political knowledge to public producers of it threads together what I view as the pedagogical benefits of this podcast. All of the potential benefits of the assignment—the potential for creativity, the situatedness in a particular rhetorical context, the learning of new technological skills, the application of analytical frameworks learned in class to real-world problems, and the effort to create something that is both informative and interesting—take on added weight and meaning when oriented to active political engagement. I suspect that something like this podcast assignment is generalizable to courses beyond the introductory level, to courses in all subfields in our discipline, to different class sizes (for instance, I could envision this being a project in the discussion section of a class formatted as a large lecture and several discussion sections), and other modes of differentiation of political science courses. Across all of these variations, an intentionally designed podcast assignments can draw out our students as active participants in the production of new political knowledge.

## **Bibliography**

- Archer, Candace C., and Melissa K. Miller. 2011. "Prioritizing Active Learning: An Exploration of Gateway Courses in Political Science." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44(2): 429–34.
- Bean, John C. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bejtullahu, Kujtese, Rahel Kunz, and Ruxandra Stoicescu. 2018. "Podcasting Pedagogy for Teaching Peace and War." *Peace Review* 30(1): 1–8.
- Chester, Andrea, Andrew Buntine, Kathryn Hammond, and Lyn Atkinson. 2011. "Podcasting in Education: Student Attitudes, Behaviour and Self-Efficacy." *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 14(2): 236–47.
- Chod, Suzanne M., and William J. Muck. 2015. "Conclusion." In *Technology and Civic Engagement in the College Classroom: Engaging the Unengaged*, eds. Suzanne M. Chod, William J. Muck, and Stephen M. Caliendo. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 173–78.

- Clark, Nicholas et al. 2017. "EU Simulations and Engagement: Motivating Greater Interest in European Union Politics." *Journal of Political Science Education* 13(2): 152–70.
- Edison Research. 2019. "The Podcast Consumer 2019." *Edison Research*.  
<https://www.edisonresearch.com/the-podcast-consumer-2019/> (June 18, 2019).
- Glazier, Rebecca A. 2011. "Running Simulations without Ruining Your Life: Simple Ways to Incorporate Active Learning into Your Teaching." *Journal of Political Science Education* 7(4): 375–93.
- Guertin, Laura A. 2010. "Creating and Using Podcasts Across the Disciplines." *Currents in Teaching & Learning* 2(2): 4–12.
- Heilesen, Simon B. 2010. "What Is the Academic Efficacy of Podcasting?" *Computers & Education* 55(3): 1063–68.
- Hill, Jennifer L., and Amanda Nelson. 2011. "New Technology, New Pedagogy? Employing Video Podcasts in Learning and Teaching about Exotic Ecosystems." *Environmental Education Research* 17(3): 393–408.
- Kemp, Justine, Antony Mellor, Richard Kotter, and Jan W. Oosthoek. 2012. "Student-Produced Podcasts as an Assessment Tool: An Example from Geomorphology." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 36(1): 117–30.
- Kidd, Warren. 2012. "Utilising Podcasts for Learning and Teaching: A Review and Ways Forward for e-Learning Cultures." *Management in Education* 26(2): 52–57.
- Killean, Rachel, and Richard Summerville. 2019. "Creative Podcasting as a Tool for Legal Knowledge and Skills Development." *The Law Teacher*: 1–12.
- Murphy, Michael P. A. 7. "Using Active-Learning Pedagogy to Develop Essay-Writing Skills in Introductory Political Theory Tutorials." *Journal of Political Science Education* 13(3): 346–54.
- Ng'ambi, Dick, and Annette Lombe. 2012. "Using Podcasting to Facilitate Student Learning: A Constructivist Perspective." *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 15(4): 181–92.
- Obradovic-Wochnik, Jelena, and Sarah Hayes. 2017. "Re-Visualising International Relations: Audio-Visual Projects and Direct Encounters with the Political in Security Studies." *European Political Science* 16(3): 415–29.
- Omelicheva, Mariya Y., and Olga Avdeyeva. 2008. "Teaching with Lecture or Debate? Testing the Effectiveness of Traditional versus Active Learning Methods of Instruction." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41(3): 603–7.
- Perry, Tomer J., and Christopher Robichaud. 2019. "Teaching Ethics Using Simulations: Active Learning Exercises in Political Theory." *Journal of Political Science Education*: 1–18.

Powell, Lynne, and Fiona Robson. 2014. "Learner-Generated Podcasts: A Useful Approach to Assessment?" *Innovations in Education & Teaching International* 51(3): 326–37.

Raines, Susan Summers. 2003. "The Potential Perils of Slack (Not Pack) Pedagogy: A Response to J. Martin Rochester's Remarks about Active Learning Strategies." *International Studies Perspectives* 4(4): 432–33.

Rutherford, Paula. 2012. *Active Learning and Engagement Strategies*. Alexandria, VA: Just ASK Publications.

Shulman, Hillary C. 2015. "Rethinking the Way We Communicate about Politics with Millennials." In *Technology and Civic Engagement in the College Classroom: Engaging the Unengaged*, eds. Suzanne M. Chod, William J. Muck, and Stephen M. Caliendo. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 89–122.

Sloam, James. 2008. "Teaching Democracy: The Role of Political Science Education." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10(3): 509–24.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 semesters, I was teaching at Beloit College, a small liberal arts college in Southern Wisconsin. The later semesters involve courses at SUNY Plattsburgh, a comprehensive public college in upstate New York. That the assignment was mostly successful at two different kinds of institutions is an indicator of its pedagogical potential.

<sup>2</sup> The assignment and learning objectives for earlier versions of the project are similar.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Summers Raines (2003, 432) describes active learning as strategies that shift the instructor "from the role of 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side,'" with the objective of "creat[ing] a lesson plan that maximizes student learning, encourages critical thinking, aids information retention, and allows students to apply key concepts and knowledge gained through readings and lecture to real (or realistic) problems." For a sampling of analyses of implementing active learning strategies in the political science classroom, see Archer and Miller 2011; Clark et al. 2017; Glazier 2011; Murphy 7; Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008; Perry and Robichaud 2019. For an overview of active learning strategies, see Rutherford 2012.