

STATE REQUIREMENTS, MULTIMODAL RELEVANCY, AND A NATIONAL INVITATION

During the time I was preparing to teach this course, the Michigan Department of Education (2006c) released new requirements for high school students, including the requirement that students engage in a meaningful online experience at some point in their high school career. I was curious about the manner in which public speaking is changing through the use of technology, and now the state content and technology standards required students to create multimedia compositions such as digital stories, to research and evaluate nonprint media, and to develop other online writing (Michigan Department of Education, 2006a, 2006b). Like many other states, Michigan's standards were produced and disseminated to schools, yet rarely assessed formally. Moreover, multimedia composing remains a new and often ignored component of a school curriculum that must bow to the demands of standardized testing.

With this context, and given my interest in multimedia composition, I wanted to integrate my own interests and the state high school content expectations into this Speech class. Therefore, in addition to traditional experiences of speaking in front of the class, the students would explore communication in a digital world, specifically through podcasting. Approaching Speech class in this manner, Troy and I believed, would provide opportunities for my students to have a larger audience and extend their voices beyond the one time speech at the podium, essentially eliminating the constraints of time, place, and the walls of the classroom. Podcasting would allow them to focus on their voices in the delivery of a speech, as well as revise it to their satisfaction. Furthermore, since students often limit their comments to one another's work with simple replies such as "good speech," and others—teachers, parents, community members, and students from other classes or schools—could not be a part of our speech class, podcasting would allow for feedback from those who may offer a different perception of the ideas presented. Finally, as noted above, the digital literacies required to create and publish a podcast aligned with our vision of an online experience.

For this speech podcasting project we followed the "This I Believe" format based on National Public Radio's (NPR, 2007a) series of the same name because it offered a rich model for public speaking, including diverse options of speakers and speech topics (NPR, 2007b). We listened to NPR's "This I Believe" podcasts, and I invited students to craft their own essays about their beliefs. By doing this, my students engaged in an assignment with a national invitation so that they could connect their ideas to those of other famous people—such as Tony Hawk (2007), Bill Gates, and Colin Powell—as well as everyday citizens. Throughout the project, students knew that they would have

the option of posting their final version of their “This I Believe” essays on the class blog. (Visit <http://reedd504.edublogs.org/> to read the blog posts and listen to the podcasts.)

The personal nature of the essay—along with creating it in a manner that would eventually be spoken, not just written—influenced the composing process for several students. They began to make sure their speech sounded right based on their reading and revisions, and they began to see themselves as having a speaking personality. For instance, one student wrote her piece with fragments and slang terms because she wanted to emphasize these points in her essay, a rhetorical move that she likely would not have made if turning in a traditional paper or, we contend, giving a speech for the class. By exploring their beliefs, writing, listening, revising, offering feedback, rerecording, and posting their work online, students engaged in a multimodal composing process that influenced the entire process, from initial writing, to response, revision, and recording; to the final posting and feedback. We explore these processes in the sections below, while Figure 8.1 summarizes key moments from each part of the process.

Figure 8.1. Key Moments in the Podcast Composing Process

Initial Writing, Recording, and Revising	Peer Response and Collaboration	Posting and Feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spending more time on drafting initial speech • Hearing one’s voice through digital recording; identifying and fixing mistakes • Improving confidence because of ability to pause and rerecord • Monitoring tone of voice in speech • Working through entire speech without audience distractions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting support for revision from writing group • Taking speeches more seriously because of the nature of the task • Modeling of editing process in Audacity (creation of podcast introduction) • Overcoming recording and installation problems with Audacity • Expressing interest in working collaboratively • Understanding citation and copyright 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming interface and file saving problems with the blog • Imagining their new roles as content producers • Understanding their peers in different ways based on their statements of personal belief • Receiving feedback from their school, community, and others • Reading comments on podcast selectively and choosing whether or not to respond

INITIAL WRITING, RECORDING, AND REVISING

People don't know what you look like when you podcast, so you could be anybody. And you could be yourself, and not have to be scared to speak out.

—Sally, a student in the podcasting project

A “This I Believe” speech was different from the traditional informative speech found in speech class, because we would record the speeches and podcast them, thus requiring an extensive amount of writing. Unlike the outline plans we studied at the beginning of the course, students were expected to fully draft and revise their “This I Believe” speeches. While I participated in the composing process with my students and received feedback from my students and my peers I discovered that just as the “This I Believe” curriculum suggests, this is a hard paper to write. Coming up with a topic was the first challenge. One student, Danielle, reflected on this part of the composing processes:

When we started writing our papers, about what we believed, I had no idea what I was passionate enough, to write about. After listening to a lot of different “This I Believe” speeches on NPR, I realized that it didn’t have to be something that would change the world. It could be something simple, but something that anyone would be interested in reading.

Danielle’s reflection suggests a learning opportunity in which writing instruction engaged not only “higher-order thinking skills for *all* students but skills that provide students opportunities to use their writing in personally and politically empowering ways” (Dornan, Rosen, & Wilson, 2003, p. 14).

Along with the fact that the “This I Believe” format inspired them to write about statements of personal conviction (and that may have led to some increase in the amount of time they were willing to spend drafting their speech), we contend that students knew that a podcast was a fundamentally different speech act than standing in front of the class. As Jackie explained:

At first, I didn’t really understand speech and technology together because Ms. Reed kept trying to explain it to me and I still wasn’t really getting it. But, after doing the “This I Believe” speeches, um, I really did like it because it helped me dig deep and actually look at what I actually believed in and helped me get it down and let myself share it with everyone else.

Thus as students engaged in initial writing and recording, they found a number of elements in the composing process that helped them refine their work

along the way, based on the ability to record their voice, play it back, and re-record if necessary.

For instance, having discussed the concept of *voice* while analyzing sample speeches from the “This I Believe” Web site, students were constantly monitoring their own tone and word choice; the role of emotion and intonation became central to the conversation about composition and delivery. Although students were disappointed that they would only hear the speaker of these essays and not see them, students began to respond with deeper appreciation about the role of voice in speaking. One student, Justin, put it this way:

I learned how to portray a speech personality. What I mean by a speech or speaking personality is what a person can judge about you based on how you sound, my personality has to be best portrayed through sound because podcasting doesn't include video. It's hard to display yourself in your voice because you're not used to it. It's also important, because like I said earlier, you can't have any visual gestures.

When Justin began the course, his voice was fair in speechmaking, yet just like the majority of students in the class by their own admission, he had not fully embraced the role of voice in public speaking. Throughout the class and in all their non-podcast speeches, several students spoke in a monotone and paid little attention to word choice. Here Justin's response shows how he, like others, learned about inflection and tone by listening again and again to his own recording.

Students also reported that they could see the amplitude of their voice reflected in the Audacity sound editor, so they could know when they were modulating their voice and tone, or not. In an interview, one student described how Audacity literally helped her *see* the way her voice popped with Ps and Bs, based on the peaks and valleys in the audio track. By hearing their own voices through digital recording, they were able to identify and fix mistakes in pronunciation or inflection.

This strikes us as significant for another reason. Because they were able to rerecord and work without the distraction of a physically present audience, many students reported that they felt more confident. Danielle, described her new confidence in this manner:

I think for me, too, it was a confidence booster, 'cause when I listen to myself speak I'm like, “Oh, I'm really not that bad at speaking in front of people or, like, making a speech.” And, when I just go up in front of the class and make one right away, then I'm like “Oh, that probably sounded really bad.”

She went on to say:

It was kind of easier to podcast because I knew if I messed up my recording, like something that I said, I could go back and fix it rather than stand up in front of the class and look dumb because I just messed up everything I was trying to say.

The ability to hear one's self in private was certainly part of students' feeling of comfort. Furthermore, through our observations and students' reports in their writing and interviews, the time and effort spent writing their speech for the "This I Believe" podcast was substantially more than what they did for any other speech. For all students, the time they reported spending on drafting their initial speeches was at least as much as other speeches; for most, they spent much more time. One student described the hours and days that she spent preparing, recording, and rerecording. The writing process guided their work from initial drafting through final revisions and contributed to the success of the project. In addition, the students probably sensed my excitement about the project, and that could have influenced their motivation. Yet, we also believe that students were willing to invest more personally in this work due to the nature of the topic and the fact that it would be posted online as a podcast.

In another example, Jonathan, a student who seemed less engaged or interested in the project, clearly tackled major issues of revision, as he noted in his reflection on the project:

The most important thing I learned was how to put my true thoughts and point of views into writing and process complete thoughts. This I believe essays helped with shaping and creating my speech in there speeches I noticed the emotion and realism in there [sic] voice which showed that they had a genuine belief in what they were saying. After listening to there speech I decided to go out on a limb and try to match there creativeness. Once I had all my thought down on paper It took so long before I had changed everything to the way I seen fit. Hearing my voice in Audacity was a wake up call I found myself rewording many parts of my essay because I didn't feel it sounded right coming out of my mouth.

Jonathan taps into major aspects of this experience. When listening to other "This I Believe" podcasts, he could hear the speaker offering emotion and realism, which is important to a speaking voice. He also notes that the topic had to be something he felt strongly about and believes in. Moreover, Jonathan was following speech models or mentor texts and challenged himself to be

creative. Revision seems to have found a new meaning for Jonathan in this process. He changed the material and then found, when he thought the work was ready, that more revision was needed.

While Jonathan shows ideal understanding of the goals of the assignment, particularly through his awareness of the revision experience, we also found the role of audience influencing students' work. This first came to our attention when considering citations. Unlike research papers from other courses, students were able to find real purpose in using citations. Students were clearly concerned about getting citations right; because they were publishing for an audience beyond the classroom, they knew the importance of correct citations. Moreover, discussions around copyright, fair use, and Creative Commons influenced their perceptions about what is, and what is not, appropriate to share on the Internet. For instance, students created end credits for all the podcasts. While they cited National Public Radio and the Podsafe Music Network, they also added citations of other sources as applicable to their "This I Believe" essays, even though they were not required to include additional sources.