

# Sounds Good To Me: Using Digital Audio In The Social Studies Classroom

George B. Lipscomb, Lisa Marie Guenther, and Perry McLeod

In a recent edition of *Educational Leadership*, technology pioneer Marc Prensky issued the following warning regarding the state of education today: “Educators have slid into the twenty-first century—and into the digital age—still doing a great many things the old way. It’s time for education leaders to raise their heads above the daily grind and observe the new landscape that’s emerging.”<sup>1</sup> Prensky differentiates between today’s children (*digital natives*) who have grown up around technology, specifically video games and the Internet, and educators (*digital immigrants*) who have found themselves in a rapidly changing digital world. As immigrants, Prensky holds that it is not necessary for teachers to immerse themselves in every area of new technology, but feels that they should be aware enough to allow students the opportunity to incorporate some of these technologies in the classroom.

In social studies, in particular, this incorporation of technology presents some unique opportunities. With such innovations as blogging, interactive mapping, digital resources and others entering social studies classrooms, there is great potential for teachers, but it is hard to know where to begin.<sup>2</sup> This article will focus on one familiar, yet rapidly changing area of technology—digital audio. We will provide examples of some of the materials social studies educators can use in the classroom, discuss means of investigating such content, and explore podcasting, a new medium for students to access and create their own interpretations of the past.

## Background

Educators have long found ways to enhance their teaching by bringing in music and other sound elements to the classroom. From phonograph records to radio, cassette tapes to compact discs, a variety of audio content has been a staple in social studies classrooms.<sup>3</sup> A number of educators have encouraged the use of music as a means of helping students relate to a moment in time.<sup>4</sup> Waller and Edgington believe that music allows students to connect with the people they are studying and can “stir emotions in a way that no book or lecture ever could.”<sup>5</sup> The main challenge for teachers wanting to use audio content in the past was the cost associated with purchasing the material

and the difficulty in obtaining it. The digital revolution is rapidly changing this situation.

## Audio Streaming

Even though much of the information that is currently online is protected by copyright, teachers and students can still listen to numerous speeches, interviews, songs, eyewitness accounts, and other historical artifacts through a process known as *streaming*. No sophisticated equipment is needed—simply a computer, Internet access, and a means to play the content for students (speakers, individual headphones, etc.). The following examples illustrate how streaming audio can be used in lessons concerning World Wars I and II.

In the study of World War I, textbooks and other print sources often fail to capture the human element of life during this great conflict. The website “First World War.Com” has an entire section devoted to songs, speeches and descriptions of that era.<sup>6</sup> Among these sound files, teachers and students can hear several versions of George Cohan’s “Over There,” a popular song in the United States after the U.S. entry into the war. Students could listen to this song while studying life on

the homefront during the war and use the lyrics to examine motivations for young people to go off and fight in Europe.

Similarly, streaming supports students who wish to examine American reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Library of Congress (LOC) website contains hours of “Man on the Street” interviews in the days immediately following the attack.<sup>7</sup> By accessing the LOC site, teachers can provide short clips of individual interviews to engage students in the realities of December 1941. While the sound quality of these recordings may be distracting to students accustomed to clear digital sounds, the historical significance of these recordings makes them indispensable for the classroom. In order to help students who may have difficulties with these interviews, transcripts available on this site may be photocopied to add to their overall understanding.

### Downloading Audio

While streaming audio has a number of advantages in its implementation, the major deficiency is that without Internet access or a fairly new computer, the content cannot be accessed. For teachers wanting possession of audio files, however, there are a number of options, some legal and some not.

During the late 1990s and early part of this decade, many teachers used Napster, Kazaa, LimeWire, and other file swapping services to acquire free audio content. However, this created an ethical dilemma. While some have argued that acquiring such content is simply “fair use” in the classroom, others resisted, worrying about copyright laws. Fortunately for educators, there are a number of guidelines and resources available for helping to make sense of this critical issue.<sup>8</sup>

For legal downloading, a number of services including Napster, Rhapsody, AOL, and Walmart, offer digital content for a monthly fee; but one service, the iTunes Store (previously known as the iTunes Music Store) from Apple, has become the leader in this field offering the ability to download songs, books, television shows, and now even entire movies, to computers and iPods for a reasonable

price. The service has expanded beyond the United States with new online stores in Australia, the United Kingdom, France, and Japan. Once you have downloaded iTunes audio files to your computer, you can share them with up to five users. For the classroom, any downloaded audio content can be played straight from the computer or burned to a compact disc.

### Podcasts

Among digital audio offerings, podcasts offer some of the most promising content for today’s social studies classroom. Originally pioneered by former MTV “veejay” Adam Curry, these Internet broadcasts get their name because they can be easily stored on an Apple iPod™ or similar portable digital music player. They can run as little as several minutes to more than an hour in length, are available on many websites, and can be downloaded to a computer or portable digital media player. There are podcasts on every conceivable topic including health, religion, sports, and popular culture. Some podcasts even have a video component (*vodcasts*), and can provide some additional insight for visual learners. For teachers, perhaps the most attractive aspect of podcasts is that they are available free of charge.<sup>9</sup>

For social studies classrooms, podcasts can be incorporated into daily instruction in a number of ways:

1. *To supplement curricular goals*—There are many podcasts out there that can provide social studies teachers with additional information on classroom topics. For example, Colonial Williamsburg uses its re-enactors to share information about life in colonial America from prominent figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry to more common citizens such as weavers, bakers, and blacksmiths.

2. *To update students on current events*—News providers, such as National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, the BBC, and many others, provide reporting on news stories that are updated on a daily basis. Specifically, CNN now offers its Student News show as a daily video podcast (*vodcast*).

3. *To inform students about the politi-*

## General Sites for Streamed Audio

Rank	Speaker	Title	Audio	Duration
1	Abraham Lincoln	Gettysburg Address	0:53	0:53
2	John F. Kennedy	inaugural address	0:53	0:53
3	Franklin D. Roosevelt	100 Days Speech	0:53	0:53
4	John F. Kennedy	inaugural address	0:53	0:53
5	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
6	Abraham Lincoln	Gettysburg Address	0:53	0:53
7	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
8	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
9	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
10	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
11	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
12	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
13	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
14	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53
15	Abraham Lincoln	Emancipation Proclamation	0:53	0:53

American Rhetoric  
(Top 100 speeches of all time)  
[www.americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesall.html](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesall.html)

American Slave Narratives  
[xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpa\\_home.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpa_home.html)

Digital History: Historical Music  
[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/audio/music.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/audio/music.cfm)

History Channel-Speech Archives  
[www.historychannel.com/speeches/archive1.html](http://www.historychannel.com/speeches/archive1.html)

History Matters  
[historymatters.gmu.edu](http://historymatters.gmu.edu)

Library of Congress American Memory Collection  
[memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/ListSome.php?format=Sound+Recording](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/ListSome.php?format=Sound+Recording)

World War I  
[www.firstworldwar.com/audio/](http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/)

**First World War**  
Vintage Media

**New! The Great War**  
CD-ROM  
\$24.95

**Vintage Media**  
Vintage Media  
\$24.95

The audio of the website contains various recordings - audio and video - of speeches, letters, diaries, reports, songs and speeches from the war.

2 included with the best value package, such as the 20th Anniversary Edition and the 20th Anniversary Edition. The audio files are available for download or purchase. The audio files are available for download or purchase.

Each audio and video file is produced by us. The audio files are available for download or purchase.

## Relevant Podcasts for the Social Studies Classroom

BBC, [www.bbc.co.uk/radio/newspod](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/newspod)

CNN Student News, [www.cnn.com/EDUCATION](http://www.cnn.com/EDUCATION)

Colonial Williamsburg, [www.history.org](http://www.history.org)

C-Span, [www.c-span.org/podcast](http://www.c-span.org/podcast)

National Geographic, [www.nationalgeographic.com/podcasts](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/podcasts)

The New York Times, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

NPR Story of the Day, [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)

White House Radio Addresses, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/radio](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/radio)

## Key Terms in Understanding Digital Audio

<b>iPod™</b>	portable music player distributed by Apple; comes in various styles and sizes; newer versions contain video capabilities
<b>iTunes Store</b>	portal for digital audio and video; songs, audiobooks, podcasts, videos, and movies available here; credit card needed to establish an account and make purchases
<b>Podcast</b>	term derived from a broadcast that is compatible with Apple's iPod
<b>RSS</b>	stands for "really simple syndication" which is a file format that allows users to subscribe to a favorite website, podcast, blog, etc.
<b>Streaming</b>	a process or technique for allowing computer users to access large data files in a steady and continuous stream; useful applications in this process include Real Player, QuickTime, and Windows Media Player
<b>Vodcast</b>	podcast with video enhancement

*cal process*—The White House has made use of this medium to include weekly addresses (in English and in Spanish), press briefings, and speeches as a means of showcasing the role of the chief executive. A number of individual Congress members and potential candidates are also using podcasts to express their political viewpoints on key issues. C-Span also offers a number of podcasts related to legislative activity and politics.

4. *To take students where they otherwise couldn't go*—For teachers hoping to expose their students to different parts of the world, *National Geographic* has created brief clips showing a variety of unique topics including Nepalese tongue boring, Japanese puffer fish, and sewer divers in Mexico.

### Creating Podcasts

While one means for bringing podcasting into the classroom is through professionally crafted programs, another powerful aspect of this medium is that podcasts can be created by anyone, including young students. All it takes is a microphone and a script for students to become "stars" in their own right. While social studies

teachers have used similar activities in the past, never before has it been so simple for students to have their work so easily created and disseminated. The following examples come from two teachers, one elementary and one high school, who used podcasting to engage their students in historical inquiry.

### The Elementary Classroom

Fourth grade students at Ellen Woodside Elementary School in Pelzer, South Carolina, created podcasts in their study of Westward Expansion. The students worked in groups of five and based their podcast creations on the book *Dear Levi*, by Elvira Woodruff. They were asked to create informative news talk shows as though they were on a journey across the country. Each show was recorded at specific points along the trail chosen by the students. They used a map to pick out nine major points, such as forts or major cities, where a broadcast of their news show would be appropriate and most likely heard by the greatest number of people. Students were asked to include details such as weather, food, supply rations, sickness, morale, local terrain,

and interactions with Native Americans in their newscasts.

The students began their podcasting project when they were about halfway through reading *Dear Levi*. At this point, they had gathered enough information about Westward Expansion not only through reading the novel, but also through various classroom activities, discussions, Internet research, and other sources. Once the students had completed their research, they wrote scripts for each news broadcast they would make on the trip west. Although the students were granted a good deal of freedom in what they reported in their news shows, they were always encouraged to keep in mind where they were on the trail in order to keep their broadcasts relevant.

Once the students had written, revised, edited, and rehearsed their scripts, they recorded their newscasts on an iPod using a voice recorder. In the beginning, the students listened to what the newscasts sounded like and, as a group, discussed ways to make it more effective and interesting to the listener. The students quickly learned to control the volume of their voices, to dramatically empha-





Students at Richland Northeast High School use iMovie to combine digital audio and photographs to create an original podcast.

Photograph by  
Perry McLeod

size emotions, and to add music or small jingles, as well as sound effects, to catch the ear of the listener. In the end, students used their voices and other sound effects to create effective newscasts. They conveyed excitement whenever the group broadcasted from a fort with lots of supplies, and their voices expressed sorrow following the loss of family members or friends along the trail. Once the students were satisfied with their newscasts, they downloaded the voice files into iTunes. They then created an audio CD which was presented to the rest of the class and used as a review tool before a written test on Westward Expansion.

Overall, this project helped each of the students gain better insight into what it was like to cross the United States in a wagon back in the late 1800s. The podcasts were not only fun and interesting for students to create, but the end results were informative and entertaining tools that could not only be used for review, but to introduce future classes to the topic of Westward Expansion, as well.

### ***The High School Classroom***

Students at Richland Northeast High

School in Columbia, South Carolina, recently engaged in an oral history project in order to gain a deeper understanding of the war in Vietnam. Through in-depth research and the use of digital audio and video technology, students were assigned a three- to five- minute podcast relating to some aspect of the war.

Students began the project by reading their texts to gain an overall understanding of the war. From this reading, they developed ideas about certain aspects of the war that they wanted to investigate in greater detail, turned these details into visual stories through video editing using iMovie, and then shared them as vodcasts. During class, students searched the Internet for images of Vietnam and watched a number of video documentaries about the war. These visuals helped the students with their early storyboard planning and scriptwriting. The students were grouped and began their research.

All the groups produced a storyboard and wrote a script for their project. Narration was not required, but students were encouraged to include some voiceovers. Music was a requirement for this project to help set the mood or tone

and make the vodcasts more authentic to the Vietnam era. Much of the music the students used on their vodcasts was copyrighted, so, in preparation, the school media specialist came to the classroom to speak about copyrights and student use policies. The students understood that all sources used in their projects had to be cited, as in any other written or visual research project. Another way students avoided the music copyright issue was to create their own music in GarageBand, a music creation software. The students love writing their own songs for their projects. Upon completion, these projects were burned to CDs and uploaded to 30G video iPods to be used at the school by U.S. history teachers as introductory material or thought-provoking activities during their lessons on the war.

The beauty of podcasts and vodcasts is that students can see and think about concepts as many times as needed without disturbing their classmates. The “cool” factor is also very motivational. Students love watching an iPod and are oblivious that they are learning. In a few years, Richland Northeast will have a library of student-produced podcasts that will

enhance teaching and help students learn for years to come.

## Conclusion

Many of the young people entering today's social studies classrooms are auditory learners, and the typical textbook does little to engage this type of student. While by no means the sole provider for relevant information, digital audio can do much to supplement and enhance historical understanding. Audio streaming provides numerous

resources for teachers today and will only improve as digital capacity grows. Downloading remains a reliable and affordable medium for adding audio to any lesson. Podcasting and vodcasting not only enrich the classroom experience, but can also provide students with a hands-on opportunity to make history relevant and enjoyable. While it is impossible to predict future uses of digital audio in the social studies classroom, it is exciting to witness the impact that this technology is having today, an impact

it is likely to continue having for years to come. 🎧

## Notes

1. Marc Prensky, "Listen to the Natives," *Educational Leadership* 63, no. 4 (December 2005/January 2006): 9.
2. For more information on these and other applications of technology, see *Social Education* 70, no. 3 (April 2006) entitled "Connecting Technology with Social Studies."
3. For example, Gail Gerlich, "Tape It! Using Audio Tapes as an Integral Part of a Multi-Media, Multi-Material Approach to Social Studies in the Intermediate Grades," *Social Studies Journal* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 18-22; Anton Ninno, "Radios in the Classroom: Curriculum Integration and Communication Skills," ERIC Digest: [www.ericdigests.org/1999-3/radios.htm](http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-3/radios.htm).
4. B. Lee Cooper, "Popular Records as Oral Evidence: Creating an Audio Time Line to Examine American History, 1955-1987," *Social Education* 53, no. 1 (January/February 1989): 34-40; Jennifer T. Nelson, "The Sound of Music: Linking Music and Geography Skills," *Southern Social Studies Journal* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 11-19.
5. Lynn Waller and William D. Edgington, "Using Songs to Help Teach the Civil War," *The Social Studies* 92, no. 4 (July/August 2001): 149.
6. First World War.Com, "Vintage Audio: Over There," [www.firstworldwar.com/audio/overthere.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/overthere.htm).
7. Library of Congress American Memory Collection, "After the Day of Infamy," [memory.loc.gov/ammem/afcphtml/afcpseries.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afcphtml/afcpseries.html).
8. Relevant articles on copyright include: Doug Johnson and Carol Simpson, "Are You the Copy Cop?," *Learning and Leading with Technology* 32, no. 7 (April 2005): 14-20; Carol Mann Simpson, *Copyright for Schools: A Practical Guide* (Columbus, Ohio: Linworth Publishing, 2005); Kate A. Thompson, "Copyright 101," *Learning and Leading with Technology* 32, no. 7 (April 2005): 11-13.
9. For more information on the specifics of how to access and create podcasts, see Brian Flanagan and Brendan Calandra, "Podcasting in the Classroom," *Learning and Leading with Technology* 33, no. 3 (November 2005): 20-23; Will Richardson, *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 2006); Robin Williams and John Tollett, *Podcasting and Blogging with GarageBand and iWeb*, (Berkeley, Calif.: Peachpit Press, 2007).

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**GEORGE B. LIPSCOMB** is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. He is a former middle and high school social studies teacher and currently serves on the board of the South Carolina Council for the Social Studies. He may be contacted at [george.lipscomb@furman.edu](mailto:george.lipscomb@furman.edu).

**LISA MARIE GUENTHER** is a fourth grade teacher at Ellen Woodside Elementary School in Pelzer, South Carolina. She is a graduate of Furman University with a degree in Elementary Education. She may be contacted at [lguenthe@greenville.k12.sc.us](mailto:lguenthe@greenville.k12.sc.us).

**PERRY MCLEOD** is a National Board Certified Teacher at Richland Northeast High School in Columbia, South Carolina. He teaches U.S. history, oral history, and digital technology with a special emphasis in digital video editing and podcasting. He may be contacted at [Pmcleod@rnh.richland2.org](mailto:Pmcleod@rnh.richland2.org).