

Podcasting a variety of voices...

The versatility of podcasts as a teaching and learning tool is being spotlighted in Matteson District 162, which created its Podcasting Integration Project last year.

As the district switched from PCs to Macs, six of its seven schools—a mix of primary, intermediate and middle grades—were provided with an iMac and video camera to create podcasts, says Roger Prietz, director of technology for the district. (The seventh school is a preschool-K building.) Teachers were trained, and students could register for summer enrichment programs in podcasting, to get the project started.

As teachers and students became more familiar with podcasting and with the equipment, they started producing a variety of projects. One group of students listened to a presentation by the city clerk of Richton Park, who has lived in the area for 60 years. Student focused on different facets of the city—history, entertainment, sports—and researched, wrote and recorded a segment, using GarageBand. When author Linda Sue Park visited the district, another teacher created a video podcast that was shown at a reception for the author.

This year, Prietz reports, each teacher in two elementary schools in the district were given Mac laptops and were encouraged to create weekly podcasts for parents. Teachers can post links to the podcasts on a Web portal; parents can log in and see not only the podcasts for their children's class, but also other resources that are on the site. Teachers can communicate about classroom activities as well as upcoming events.

The project has encouraged collaboration between teachers and classrooms, Prietz adds; using iChat, some teachers have experimented with two-way exchanges between classrooms, and in one case, a group of elementary students got a "virtual field trip" of the middle school.

...and one very spooky one

It's a good time of year to read a little of the writings of Edgar Allen Poe. Or perhaps take in some of his work on a podcast.

Eighth-grade students at Hauser Junior High in Riverside brought the writer's works to life, in all their creepy glory, through a podcasting project developed by instructional technology specialist Liz Whaley.

The class started off by familiarizing themselves with Poe's "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" by reading the stories and using PoeStories.com, a Web site that helped them define unfamiliar words in both works. They also watched a short adaptation of "The Cask of Amontillado," with Vincent Price, and broke into groups to write and edit summaries of each story.

Then came the technical elements of the project. Students created animations in PhotoShop Elements, and learned to use video cameras under low light conditions. They chose a selection from one of the stories and recorded it in GarageBand, editing their voices to make it sound like the story's narrator; they incorporated sound effects as well. ("One sounded like dripping catacombs," Whaley notes.)

Once the audio podcasts were completed, students imported them into iMovie. They acted out the story, and by using felt for a green screen, were able to create eerie backgrounds using photos projected with an LCD projector. They also used the PhotoShop animations they'd created.

For the final part of the project, the students created a Web site in iWeb that incorporated the movie, a story summary and links to Poe resources.

The students were extremely engaged by the project, says Whaley; they had to understand the character's emotions and create a setting for the story—and even researched Poe himself, to better understand the dark nature of his writings.