Podcasts and the Promotion of Pedagogical Perambulations in Religious Studies

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As educational opportunities become increasingly available beyond the context of traditional campus classrooms, there are still few efforts to challenge the stationary learning mode that higher education almost exclusively depends. Students are sitting for their degrees, whether that be at a desk on campus, or at home online. How can we employ digital technology to remove the physically confining walls our current educational models depend, and expand the range of learning environments we provide for our students? This paper explores how the implementation of podcasts for educational purposes can provide entirely new possibilities for student engagement by way of a more active, embodied, learning mode. Over the course of this paper, I will discuss what roles digital media is playing in the lives of college students; how popular and accessible podcasts have become in American life; and the educational values of podcasts for enhancing students' engagement with the oral dynamics of the texts and cultures we too often neglect in the academic study of religion.

Ubiquitous Technology in the Digital Lives of Students

To begin I would like to address what role digital media is already playing in the lives of college students, in general, and the popularity and accessibility of podcasts, in

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particular. One does not have to search far nor wide on any given college campus to find students wearing headphones attached to some form of mobile technology used to listen to audio material. Given that virtually all of our students now have access to mobile devices, and students are already conversant with such technologies before they even arrive on campus, we should be concerned with how the so-called "ubiquitous technology" of our age afford new opportunities to develop more dynamic, interactive, and immersive learning environments by employing the very technology our students already use on a daily basis. Mobile technologies have a wide range of use in students' everyday lives, podcasts present an opportunity to bring together the social and entertainment uses of students' mobile devices while supporting learning in providing an entirely new learning space for students to engage with course content.[1]

Podcasts have seen a steady rise in popularity over the last decade or so. According to a recent 2016 report issued by the Pew Research Center, over 1/3 of all Americans over the age of 12 have listened to a podcast, which is roughly twice as many as 2008, so the popularity of podcasts is clearly on the rise with no signs yet of waning. According to the same Pew report, 21% of Americans over the age of 12 listened to a podcast in the past month, which is nearly twice as may as 2013, so the frequency by which Americans are listening to podcasts is also on the rise. In a different study, the for-profit company Libsyn, reported that in 2015 an estimated total of 3.3 billion podcasts were downloaded, which is

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[1] Dick Ng'ambi and Annette Lombe "Using Podcasting to Facilitate Student Learning: A Constructive Perspective," *Educational Technology and Society, 15* (4), 181.

more than twice as many since 2012, and mobile devices appear to be the preferred way of accessing podcasts. Due to the rising popularity and accessibility of podcasts, one would rightfully expect them to become increasingly visible in educational contexts, which increasingly appears to be the case.[2]

Portable Learning Environments

As the Internet is changing the very landscape of information creation, distribution, and consumption, there are ample reasons to consider changing the way we teach and design our courses. Given that podcasts represent a form of portable audio that is already a major part of our culture, and students' everyday lives, there are great advantages of using podcasts to deliver course content. For instance, podcasts can contribute to new forms of learning that takes seriously the positive impact of walking on our thought processes, and in the maintenance and development of a healthier mind-body relationship. As such, podcasts can be employed in a way that provides a more natural learning mode. Furthermore, there is real promise that the portability of podcasts may even enhance students' memory as course material is introduced against an evolving background of sights, smells, and sounds. How does this help create mental associations and mnemonic links in students' brains, enhancing the learning process, and allowing material to register

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[2] Laura A. Guertin, "Creating and Using Podcasts Across the Disciplines," Currents in Teaching and Learning Vol. 2 No 2, Spring 2010.

in a more lasting way than the isolated, muted, two-dimensional reading environment our assignments typically depend?

Though the advantages of using podcasts are myriad, I wish to highlight what I identify as the three primary benefits of integrating podcasts into the college classroom. First, podcasts contribute little to the growing college costs, given that the software to produce and consume podcasts can be completely free and depends on the technology faculty and students already have access to. Second, podcasts can appeal to students with diverse learning styles, who could depend on podcasts as an alternative portal to course content that allows them to repeat and review pertinent material. Teaching with podcasts provides students with self-paced, flexible, and independent learning opportunities. Podcasts are generally more accessible than other educational audio material, since they can be received, stored and consumed at the user's convenience. Subscription feeds provide the means to automatically distribute podcasts to students; as well as track downloads and monitor students' use of the podcasts. Third, podcasts provide opportunities for students to engage with course material outside of class, which can support learning, as well as enhance the time and quality of student discussions in class. For these three reasons and more, the relevance of podcasting in higher education is very real, especially when it is integrated into the curriculum according to sound pedagogical principles.

Introducing the Oral Cultures and Dynamics of Religious Texts

Since what has been said up to this point about the role of digital media in students' lives and the particular advantages of implementing podcasts in the college classes applies across the Humanities, I would like to turn now to focus specifically on those ways podcasts represent a superior medium for introducing students to certain topics in Religious Studies.[3] I would like to focus on one topic in particular, that is the oral and performative dimensions of the texts we study. Performance criticism has emerged as a new and promising methodology in Religious Studies, which makes certain demands regarding how we understand the role of texts composed in the oral cultures of antiquity. From the perspective of performance criticism, texts are regarded as the written transcription of prior oral compositions or as written compositions designed for the purpose of oral performance.[4] That is to say the texts we study are properly understood as texts composed *in or for oral performance*. In antiquity writing materials were expensive and literacy rates were extremely low, perhaps as low 5-8% of people in the Roman world, which means that we relate to the primary sources in a radically different manner than the purpose for which they were originally composed. Once we acknowledge this, how then does this affect the way we introduce primary sources to our students? Well, first of all, we need to translate biblical texts back into sound and engage students in this process. Many have gone so far as to claim that discussions of performative elements need to take center stage in our discussion of the sources with our students, which could depend on podcasts as a prime

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[3] See Michael J. Altman, "Podcasting Religious Studies," Published online: 22 Jun 2015, pages 573-584.
[4] David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Biblical Studies," 1.

medium in introducing the oral dynamics of primary sources to students. In introducing students to oral performances of texts we can employ podcasts that demonstrate tone, emphasis, and pace to draw students into what matters in each text and point out things that they may have missed in their own first-time reading of a text.[5] In addition, what if our class time were designed to emulate the same dynamics of an oral culture that placed an entirely new premium on verbal communication in our courses? Classes would be more relational and interactive, where exchanges are more empathetic and participatory.[6] This may in fact be more intuitive for our students than some may initially project. As Mark Goodacre questions regarding moving beyond the literary paradigm in teaching the Gospel of Mark, "It is worth asking whether our students are now better equipped to be able to understand the rhetorical culture of the first century. For them, the printed word is not necessarily primary. Their experience of text and tradition is more dynamic, more interactive, and more varied than it was in the experience of their teachers."[7] In sum, podcasts provide a superior medium that can give students access to the oral dynamics of the texts, traditions, and liturgies of our subject matter, which may lend itself to a whole range of added educational benefits.

Conclusion

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[5] Philip Ruge-Jones, "The Word Heard: How Hearing a Text Differs from Reading One," 108.
[6] David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Biblical Studies," 6.
[7] "Mark in a Digital Age: The Internet and the Teaching of Mark's Gospel," in *Communication, Pedagogy, and the Gospel of Mark* (Ed. Elizabeth E. Shively and Geert Van Oyen; Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 190.

Podcasts extend the classroom to portable devices creating an entirely new learning space students engage with course content. Mobile technology allows educators to transform social and entertainment spaces provided by students' smartphones into new, more adaptable learning spaces. Though assigning podcasts for students to listen to outside of the classroom will not necessarily guarantee learning takes place, there is ample research that substantiates the claim that they can "scaffold" students' learning when integrated appropriately into the curriculum.[8] If education is ever going to evolve to the learning styles of our students, we need to actively work to diversify the educational forms we employ so as to not simply perpetuate the same stationary learning-style that has historically defined university education. Perhaps, it is within such a context that education will cease to be so pacified, and become more of an immersive experience; enabling both students and faculty alike to realize entirely new potentials of engagement in the academic study and teaching of religion.

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[8] Dick Ng'ambi and Annette Lombe, "Using Podcasting to Facilitate Student Learning: A Constructive Perspective," 18.

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