Chapter 15. Toward a Feminist Sonic Pedagogy: Research as Listening

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Feminist scholars have argued for the importance of listening in our research and teaching (Powell, 2002; Ratcliffe, 2005; Royster & Kirsch, 2012). Scholars of sound have likewise advocated for soundwriting as a way to push the boundaries of what students view as critical, generative, embodied, and complex compositions (Ceraso, 2014; Sterne, 2012; Stone, 2015). In this chapter, we develop a feminist sonic pedagogy that emphasizes listening, collaboration, embodiment, and positionality to rethink approaches to student research projects. In particular, we reflect on the opportunities that soundwriting offers for incorporating these feminist pedagogical principles.

Through a series of soundwriting compositions, this sequence of assignments frames research as a feminist act of listening. Sonic rhetoricians such as Mary E. Hocks and Michelle Comstock (2017) have discussed the importance of a listener-centric pedagogy, emphasizing "resonance" and sonic rhetorics as "fully embodied listening practices" (p. 137). We draw on these connections with feminist methodologies to approach teaching research as a collaborative act of listening and embodiment. Soundwriting encourages students to approach feminist listening practices from multiple angles, listening to research listening to others' work, and, ultimately, listening to their own reflections throughout the semester to develop a final episode rooted in collaboration and embodiment.

When designing an intermediate composition course, coauthor Brandee Easter knew she wanted to incorporate soundwriting. However, after the first iteration of the course, she realized that the audio essay assignments weren't quite working. She decided to rework this assignment into podcasting to better emphasize feminist pedagogical practices of listening, collaboration, and iteration. Students are taught to approach research as collaboration with texts, resources, and interviewees, upending the more traditional view of research as a colonizing act of taking and claiming. By asking them to create weekly podcasts, as students work through the different methods, they begin to subtly shift their research questions in response to how they "hear" the text—how they craft their podcasts for others to consume. Together, Easter and Marquardt have taught through four iterations of the course and have found the affordances of soundwriting for teaching research as a feminist act of listening.

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Across eight weeks, students collaboratively attempt to answer a "mystery," taking up and reflecting on a different research method each week in a short podcast episode. The methods include traditional secondary research, observation, interviews, hypothesizing, and archival research. At the end, students reflect on the information they have gathered to produce a final full-length episode. This final episode asks them to both reflect on ways they have learned to listen and also produce a sonic text that invites others to engage in such listening.

This chapter includes the full sequence of assignments and a student example across the seven weeks of production and revision. In our audio reflection of the class, you can find more details in how we go about setting up class structure and some troubleshooting ideas. In the end, we've found that foregrounding listening to research and collaboration opens up space for all sorts of listening, especially to one another in the classroom space, and that collaborative podcasting in particular affords opportunities to promote accessibility through shared skills, experiences, and resources. We discuss how these practices have generated projects that embody feminist practices, helping students see how their projects fit into larger societal conversations.

This research has been approved by UW–Madison IRB, ID: 2017-1370.

Assignments and Sequence

This project is divided into three sequences:

- Sequence 1: Narrating Mystery
  - Episode 1: Narrative
- Sequence 2: Research Methods
  - Episode 2: Secondary Research
  - Episode 3: Interview
  - Episode 4: Observation/Testing
  - Episode 5: Archives
  - Episode 6: Deduction & Hypothesizing
- Sequence 3: Revision
  - Standalone Episode Revision

Sequence 1: Narrating Mystery

Episode 1: Narrative

Inspired by *Serial, Mystery Show*, and *RadioLab*, this sequence will build toward creating a pitch and demo episode for a podcast serially investigating a real-life mystery—anything you want to know but can't figure out from a simple Google search or asking an expert. This podcast will span six episodes and explore your mystery from a different research method each time, so make sure your mystery or question is interesting and complex enough to pursue all semester.

The audience for this pitch will be a board of producers at the student radio station, making your podcast audience the university community, especially students. In a short, 3–4-minute podcast episode, introduce a mystery through narrative. Your mystery should use description, narration, and sonic strategies to engage your listeners. Think of this assignment as an exploration into mysteries and audio composing. The writing and production skills and content you explore here are a foundation for the course's major projects.

Sequence 2: Ways of Knowing

In this sequence, we will collaborate to investigate our chosen mysteries through a series of podcast episodes. Each episode will ask you to take up and test a new research method and report on your findings, telling your investigation that week as a **compelling 3–7-minute audio story**. Although you may use more than one research method per week, the only requirement is that you test out that week's method. (For example, for episode 4, you must try observation; however, you may also conduct an interview or research online, etc.)

Each episode in this sequence has the following requirements:

- 3–7-minute audio narration of this week's investigation
- Tests traditional research methods to solve your mystery (though may include others)
- Discusses or uses at least one piece of evidence found through traditional research
- Reflects on the benefits, as well as limits, of that method
- Uses sonic strategies to tell a compelling account of your work
- Includes a short reflection on process/product/collaboration

Episode 2: "Traditional" Research & Asking Questions

This week, let's start where we usually start: those ways of knowing that I've bunched under the label "traditional research." By this, I mean the types of secondary research we've been taught is how we answer questions in school: libraries, books, articles, databases, and search engines. What kinds of evidence can you find? What kinds of questions does this research help you with?

Suggestions:

Consider the ways that you might take a relevant angle on your question if your mystery specifically isn't available. For example, how can you use secondary research to provide background and context for your question?

Remember that you don't have to necessarily come to answers here. Thinking critically about why you were not able to find answers using this method is as important, if not more so, than finding answers.

Episode 3: Interview

This week, we'll turn from secondary to primary research. Using interviews, what aspects of your mystery can you solve?

Suggestions:

You can interview more than one person.

Try to schedule your interview early. It can be difficult to work out schedules. If possible, an in-person interview gives you more opportunities to ask better questions.

Ask your interviewee's permission to record their answers upfront, letting them know what you'll be doing with their interview.

Plan for your interview by drafting questions but be prepared to go off script as well.

Remember that you don't have to necessarily come to answers here. Thinking critically about why you were not able to find answers using this method is as important, if not more so, than finding answers.

Episode 4: Observation/Testing

Observation as a way of knowing has been foundational to the rise of scientific thought. It is the foundation of any scientific lab. What can you see and verify with your own eyes? This week asks you to get out into the field to learn about your mystery. A good example for this assignment may be *Serial*, Episode 3, where Sarah Koenig (2014) goes out to Leakin Park herself. Testing may be another way to think of this assignment, depending on your question. What scenario can you watch that might help answer some aspect of your mystery?

For this assignment, choose a location and/or community to observe. Plan to spend at least 1 hour there. What do you notice? Hear, smell, see, sense? Who do you notice? What is it like to be an observer? What can you know from watching?

Suggestions:

Be aware of your own positionality. How are your own positions, beliefs, identities shaping what you notice? What are your biases coming in?

Take lots of notes.

How can you set the scene of your location for listeners? How can you help them feel like they are with you? How can you be descriptive with sound?

Episode 5: Archives

Archives are collections of materials, documents, oral histories, and other artifacts and objects that have been gathered and maintained by organizations, often historical or governmental.

Using the holdings of the university archives, find at least one artifact that interests you about your topic and learn as much as you can about it through any other research methods, including further archival research, secondary research, interview, etc.

We will meet at the archives for one class, and after an introduction, you will have the remainder of class to explore.

Suggestions:

How can you help your listeners see and understand your object?

Take pictures! You can't use them in your podcast, but once returned to the archive, you may have difficulty finding that exact item again.

It may be helpful to plan to record during class on Tuesday as you explore the archives, capturing your reactions and experience.

Consider also what isn't in an archive: What wasn't deemed important enough to save? What is missing?

Episode 6: Deduction & Hypothesizing

Hypothesizing and deduction are two crucial processes to finding knowledge. Hypothesizing involves generating theories based on what you have observed while deduction is ruling them out.

This week asks you to take stock of your investigation thus far. Knowing what you know now, what theories do you have for your answer? Which of these seem promising to explore (hypothesize)? Which do you think you can rule out (deduction)?

For this assignment, you do not need to venture a final answer. This is, after all, not your final episode. Additionally, the ultimate goal of this assignment is not only to get you closer to answering your mystery, but to also prepare you for the work you'll need to do for your full episode. Using any methods that seem appropriate to you, explore the range of possibilities your answer might take.

Suggestion:

It will help to keep nuancing your research question. In other words, if your research question hasn't evolved since the first episode, you are probably not making much progress. So, this is not only imagining answering your question in different ways, but you might also imagine asking your question in different ways.

Sequence 3: Revision

Standalone Episode Revision

In this sequence, we will build on the work and research completed so far to produce a full-length, standalone episode on your mystery. This is the culmination of all of your hard work this semester, and it asks you to bring together your research, listening, storytelling, and sonic strategies to tell an engaging account of your mystery and investigation.

This assignment is also, at heart, a revision, asking you to re-vision your mystery, research questions, and evidence into something new.

Requirements:

- 15–30-minute episode telling a compelling story of your mystery and investigation
- Uses multiple research methods to investigate possible answers
- Made up of no more than 50% of material recorded in your previous episodes

- Presents a substantially deepened and nuanced research question compared to your starting point
- Includes relevant in-process pieces to demonstrate your work this sequence
- Includes a reflection on the piece and process, noting anything you'd like your listener to know

Sample Student Projects

1. "Episode 1: The Pitch" by Abby. In this episode, Abby gives her first pitch for looking at the mystery of Robert Grunenwald, the man behind a UW–Madison urban legend.[4]
2. "Episode 2: Traditional Research" by Abby, Carly, and Emily. In Episode 2, Abby, Carly, and Emily tackle the first research method: traditional research. This research mostly yielded videos and current newspaper articles about Grunenwald.
3. "Episode 3: Interviews." In Episode 3, Abby, Carly, and Emily interview fellow students about their interactions with Grunenwald on campus.
4. "Episode 4: Observation/Testing." In Episode 4, Abby, Carly, and Emily try to retrace Grunenwald's steps in places where his urban legend is most commonly recurs: College Library.
5. "Episode 5: Archives." For their archival research method, Carly, Emily, and Abby discover that Grunenwald's story stretches across decades, and they begin to really wonder why the UW campus is so obsessed with the legend.
6. "Episode 6: Deduction and Hypothesizing." Students were not required to fully produce the episode this week, although we have included the script here.
7. "The Revision." In their final revision, Abby, Emily, and Carly create a podcast that is focused on members of the UW campus and why they are so concerned with retelling the legend of Grunenwald.

Reflection

Meg Marquardt: So, why did you switch to podcasts?[5]
Brandee Easter: It's weird, but there wasn't enough listening.

[Podington Bear's (2013) "Twinkletoes," quick tempo music with flutes and xylophones in minor key, plays.]

4. Seven student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book's companion website.

5. The audio version of Brandee Easter and Meg Marquardt's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

Brandee: Hi, I'm Brandee Easter.

Meg: And I am Meg Marquardt. We're both Ph.D. candidates in the composition and rhetoric program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Brandee: In this audio component of our praxis chapter, we're going to share the origins of the class and assignment structure.

Meg: We'll then walk through a student example from my fall 2017 course.

Brandee: And we'll talk about some questions we're still thinking about.

Meg: Brandee, why don't you start us off because you are the original class designer. But it looked a lot different the first time you taught it, right?

Brandee: Yeah, so English 201 felt like a bit of a daunting class to teach because the structure and content is so open. It fulfills a communications requirement, but what you do with that is pretty flexible. And so, although we've both taught courses with more standardized structures, this is the first time I've taught a class that felt truly my own.

Meg: And doing all that for the first time is hard!

Brandee: Yeah, hard but exciting. I really wanted to use this opportunity to think about anti-racist, anti-sexist pedagogy. I used a grading contract. I themed the course "Bad Writing," which focused on asking what our rules about writing are, why, and what the consequences are. And all of this was accomplished through collaborative audio essays exploring research on writing rules.

Meg: And everything you taught was brand new, right?

Brandee: This was the first time I went into my class with the goal of being actively and explicitly anti-racist and anti-sexist in my teaching. Though I loved how the content was working toward these goals, I wasn't making the best use of the structure and assignments.

Meg: Huh. What wasn't working with the assignments?

Brandee: Well, I noticed a couple of things. Revisions weren't happening. Once an audio draft was made, it was very unlikely to undergo major revisions. I also found that groups didn't have many opportunities to practice collaborating since they only made one audio essay altogether. And, ultimately, what was lost, somehow, seemed to be listening.

Meg: What do you mean?

Brandee: Well, I'm thinking of Krista Ratcliffe's (2005) rhetorical listening: deliberate listening that helps the whole class investigate and interrogate their own positionalities and the positionalities of their research.

Meg: Got it. So what did you change?

Brandee: Well, I changed the theme, but the major change was switching from audio essays to podcasts. I wanted to focus on collaboration and listening. And so podcasts, as serial and iterative projects, made the heart of the class about practicing research as a feminist act of listening, reflecting, and collaborating.

Meg: By the time you changed the course to podcasting, I already knew I would steal it when I started teaching my own 201 course.

Brandee: *[laughing]* Not stealing, Meg—collaborating!

Meg: The course has three sequences: the idea pitch, the collaborative research phase, and a final revision. In each, students are creating podcasts to try to solve a mystery, broadly defined as any question they can't answer by a Google search or asking an expert.

Brandee: Yeah, I brought this approach to the course from Caroline Levine's (2003) work on suspense and mystery fiction to present research as a mystery and research methods as ways of knowing.

Meg: So, how does this class start?

Brandee: Well, in the first sequence, we set up podcasts as a genre and understand how research is like solving a mystery. The capstone assignment is to make a short, 3–5-minute episode that introduces a mystery they want to explore in the next sequence.

Meg: Yeah, I call that first episode as a "trailer," meaning they should tell the story in a compelling way that draws listeners into the question.

Brandee: Then, in Sequence 2, which I think is really the heart of this course, we first spend a week teaching, forming, and building collaborative practices around the most compelling mysteries. Then, students, in groups of three or four, produce a weekly 5-minute podcast episode that examines their mystery from a different research method.

Meg: We start with traditional research (like Google or library searches), move to interviews, observation and testing, archival research, and then deduction and hypothesizing.

Brandee: Finally, Sequence 3 is a 15–20-minute revision of all of this hard work into a standalone audio essay, much like an episode of *RadioLab* or *Reply All*.

Meg: Because one of the most exciting things about this course, to us, is the iterative and serial nature of podcasting, we're going to focus on only one student example so that we can walk through the process of the class.

Brandee: So the example we are going to focus on is from your class in fall 2017. So, do you want to introduce it, Meg?

Meg: Sure! This is a podcast about Robert Grunenwald, a man at the heart of a UW–Madison urban legend.

Brandee: Ok, but I've never heard of Robert Grunenwald?

Meg: I hadn't either! Maybe because we weren't undergrads here. But on campus, he is known as Tunnel Bob.

[clip from The Badger Herald *(2015) video report]*

> **Student 1**: Um, to give you a little bit of an idea about the environment down here, it's extremely hot. Blisteringly hot. We've been walking for, I don't know, probably 30 minutes in tunnels going in mostly one direction. We went out under Engineering Hall. Tunnel Bob is, seems like a really good guy. He's waiting for us and kind of letting us do our own thing, explore the tunnels as we wanted to. We should keep going though.

> **Student 2**: Can I ask why, why tunnels? What is it about tunnels that you like? Is it, is it, like, something about the underground?
>
> **Grunenwald**: Not just tunnels. Steam tunnels are what I like. If it's just an ordinary tunnel, I don't care much for it.
>
> **Student 2**: But why? Is it the steam? It's not the heat aspect, is it?
>
> **Grunenwald**: More mystery on them.

Meg: That's students from one of the student newspapers, *The Badger Herald*, interviewing Grunenwald. It's rumored that he spends much of his time alone in the steam tunnels that run under the campus.

Brandee: Okay, so what is the mystery here? Like, what did your student want to find out?

Meg: So the student who started this had heard stories about him popping up in unexpected places and lingering late into the night in libraries, scaring hapless undergrads. He's described as spooky and abnormal, so I was nervous from the beginning.

Brandee: What were you concerned about?

Meg: I didn't want the podcast to end up further characterizing Grunenwald as an outsider or an other. As the student who pitched this mystery, Abby, notes in her first episode, she is already thinking about how the strangeness of the legend has led to some problematic characterizations of Grunenwald, characterizations that she wants to challenge. Here's Abby in her first episode:

> **Abby**: Tunnel Bob is a genuine person with genuine emotions, interests, and ambitions, but his attraction to these tunnels kind of distracts everyone from his humanity. *[background music begins]* His past might have a serious impact on why he does what he does in the present, but his life story is uncharted territory. That is the mystery I'm attempting to unravel in this podcast. Who is the genuine Tunnel Bob? And why does he spend so much time in the tunnels?

Brandee: So where did this project go next?

Meg: Carly and Emily joined Abby's group, and they first interviewed their peers about their experiences with Grunenwald, which were, to their surprise, overwhelmingly positive. They next tried observing, which was a research method they struggled with. Not only could they probably not observe Grunenwald, they also didn't *want* to observe him, knowing that he's not a participating research subject. Instead, they tried hanging out in the spaces Grunenwald is usually spotted to see how people act.

Brandee: Okay, I want to talk about the archive episode because in listening to them, this is where I felt a lot of interesting things happened.

Meg: That's where everything happened. We took a trip to the University

Archives, where the archivist David Null pulled several yearbooks and newspapers that referenced Grunenwald. Watching them flip through the pages was a great moment because I could see in real-time as their research question pivoted.

[Music plays in the background of excerpt from podcast episode.]

> **Abby**: For generations, Tunnel Bob has been a name we like to associate with a creepy, underground system. We never stopped to think to ask how or why this came about.
>
> **Emily**: Overall, the archives really showed us that over time, Robert Grunenwald has morphed into a semi-fictitious character named Tunnel Bob. Students and community members like to have something to talk about. They don't care or know much about the steam tunnel system and its importance. But when they learn that a guy likes to spend time down there, it suddenly became so much more interesting.

Brandee: So in response to their findings, their question shifts.

Meg: Right. They stop asking questions about Grunenwald and started asking questions about themselves and the UW campus as a whole.

Brandee: This is also where your students stop using the name "Tunnel Bob," right?

Meg: Yeah, or if they do, it's in quotes because they're referencing other people calling him Tunnel Bob. They just start calling him "Robert."

Brandee: So where does this group end up?

Meg: By the final revision, they are fully focused on presenting a story that puts the wider UW campus under the microscope.

[Music plays in the background of excerpt from podcast episode.]

> **Abby**: After weeks of research that began with a desire to know more about an urban legend on our campus, our focus turned and made us wonder why we are so obsessed with him. We're now left asking ourselves what it says about us that we've spent decades continuing to talk about and be fascinated by him.

Meg: The Tunnel Bob project is an instructor's dream. It does everything I hoped for in terms of listening to research. They really let the research guide their questions week to week, allowing them to create a thoughtful and thought-provoking audio essay.

Brandee: Not all of your students picked mysteries that took on a question so explicitly about identity, right?

Meg: Right, but I was surprised at how the process of listening through research often brought students to these kinds of questions. For example, one project about a stolen flag from a house party ended up also reflecting on race and national identity.

Brandee: I'm also really interested in how the iterative nature of podcasting emphasized collaboration and listening *to each other*.

Meg: Me, too! I was actually surprised by how much of that sort of listening was going on I wasn't aware of. I think that was my biggest takeaway from teaching this semester.

Brandee: What do you mean, Meg?

Meg: For example, another group noted in their final reflections how they had two really dominant voices in the group. They all noted how the emphasis on listening helped them learn to navigate what could have been potentially a really tough semester of working together.

Brandee: And you had no idea they had that issue?

Meg: None at all! They worked through it on their own by being careful to allow everyone's ideas to be heard. And not knowing what was going on makes me think about how I can keep changing this course in the future to better emphasize listening and collaboration. What was your takeaway from teaching this course, Brandee?

Brandee: I think for me, this course helped me see how soundwriting can afford thinking about listening as an embodied, feminist practice.

Meg: And the iterative nature of podcasting emphasizes reflection and collaboration.

Brandee: Yeah, I love getting to see groups learn not only how to work with sound but how to better listen to each other. So, you're teaching this class again now, Meg. What are you thinking through?

Meg: So, I'm changing the order of research methods. They could go in any order, but I wanted to move archives earlier because of shifts like the one in this example about Grunenwald. I'm also doing a lot more grounding in the beginning, helping students think through storytelling and critical listening skills. There are always more pieces of the course to figure out, but I think we're getting closer!

[Quick tempo music with flutes and xylophones in minor key fades in.]

Brandee: We hope these resources are helpful to your next soundwriting project, and we'd love to hear about your experiences with it.

Meg: We'd also love to hear your student's stories, if they are willing to share. The projects produced in this assignment are always fascinating.

Brandee: Good luck with your soundwriting!

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