Podcasting a Pandemic: Reporting from *Station Eleven*

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Introduction
One obstacle to building a classroom community is media content that has become extremely fragmented. There is so much new and niche content produced daily that there are fewer shared cultural texts, but it is through these shared texts (and experiences) that both students and instructors can find common topics of interest. Speaking in terms of emerging digital economies, Anderson (2004) noted that there has been a shift in media from the mass-market, hit-driven culture to one of niche entertainment. Or as he described it: the long tail. At the wider end of the tail are the mass-market hits—*Friends*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Game of Thrones*—and at the narrower end are indie content and content directed toward smaller, niche communities of consumers. In addition to television and movies, other media, such as podcasts, video games (whose narratives have become increasingly complex), YouTube, Vlogs, blogs, etc., have resulted in students having richer and more diverse and nuanced media and textual consumption than those of previous generations, but this fragmentation of content has also made it more difficult to build affinity spaces for engaged learning.

Although media fragmentation has made it more difficult to find shared cultural texts, new media has fostered deeper engagement with texts, allowing students to interact with them beyond simply watching or listening at a prescribed time or place. By interacting with texts through multimodal genres and assignments, students begin to build toward an interdisciplinary understanding of—or ability to transfer—writing (or text production) and thinking skills. Identifying *critical* thinking as interdisciplinary understanding values a student's

> capacity to integrate knowledge and modes of thinking in two or more disciplines or established areas of expertise to produce a cognitive advancement—such as explaining a phenomenon, solving a problem, or creating a product—in ways that would have been impossible or unlikely through single disciplinary means. (Boix Mansilla et al., 2000, p. 161)

The following report explores how interdisciplinary understanding is cultivated through the use of podcasting and fanfiction genres to deepen student engagement with a text.

Background on the Assignment
The Wasteland Radio project tasked students with creating a two- to three-minute news radio podcast that had them act as reporters in the post-apocalyptic setting of the novel *Station Eleven*. This project was given to students four weeks before the due date and was the first major assignment of a composition course. Knowing that most of the students were not familiar with recording and producing podcasts, I gave them a crash course in using

Audacity audio editing software and on the basics of how to record using cellphones. Students were given fifty minutes of class time each week to work on their podcasts. In addition to these workdays, students were required to produce a script for their podcast and produce an audio rough draft for review one week prior to the due date. My goal with selecting the podcast as the first major writing assignment was to provide students with a fun project that had them working with concepts relevant to the learning outcomes of the Composition II course while also building on rhetorical and genre conventions germane to both traditional modes of writing and multimodal ones, like podcasting.

Supporting these outcomes also involved the creation of an affinity space grounded in one text: *Station Eleven*. This novel, by Emily St. John Mandel, follows a travelling symphony and their experiences in a post-pandemic, apocalyptic world. *Station Eleven*, the university's book selection for composition courses, served to center the class around one shared text that—ideally—would run contrary to aspects of the fragmented media consumed by students. Another important note is that *Station Eleven* was chosen the semester prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, and it is mere coincidence that the book was used during the first year and a half of the pandemic.

In addition to podcasting, the assignment integrated elements of fanfiction. To report on an event from the novel, students were required to include at least two relevant sources (or voices) in addition to themselves as reporters—these could be characters from the novel or characters they imagined within the world of the novel. Students were also required to include environmental sounds and sound effects suitable to the setting of the news report.

The Wasteland Radio project, in using podcasting and fanfiction to foster student engagement with the text, was designed in response to two course learning outcomes:

Critical Thinking Skills
Students will identify problems/issues and develop solutions/analysis. Students will analyze a variety of texts for their rhetorical and/or literary features, as well as analyze the rhetorical situation to which the texts they produce respond.

Communication Skills (written and oral)
Students will communicate proficiently. Students will practice communication skills through discussions, presentations, and a variety of required written assignments.

These learning outcomes are necessary to developing an interdisciplinary understanding that the Wasteland Radio project encouraged by having students "integrate knowledge and modes of thinking" from podcasting and fanfiction for both "explaining a phenomenon" and "creating a product" (Boix Mansilla et al., 2000): the news radio report.

As both a teacher and a researcher, I am interested in understanding the links between technology, genres, and student learning/engagement. The Wasteland Radio project was designed to "help students encounter what we believe about contemporary communication practices, which is that writing looks and works differently in different places" (Cushman & Kelly, 2018). The intersection of podcasting and fanfiction is particularly interesting to me, as I had not initially conceived of the project as fan fiction. How would students engage with the assignment? Would their engagement with the course text, *Station*

Eleven, be altered? And most importantly, how would this assignment translate into student learning, chiefly their writing and thinking skills?

Podcasting in Higher Education

As a genre, podcasts are fairly new to the media and educational landscape. Although it has been possible to record and edit audio files since the 1990s, it wasn't until low-cost, high-quality consumer-grade technologies and software became more readily available that educators began to take a more serious look at the inclusion of podcasting in curricula. The initial move to include it was much the result of curricular and institutional learning outcomes that value the use of new and appropriate technologies in instruction.

There are three practical applications of podcasts that appear in higher education classrooms: 1) the podcast as an instructional text, 2) the podcast as an artifact of analysis, and 3) the podcast as a deliverable. The first of these applications relies on the traditional "banking model" of education (Freire, 2000). As an instructional text, the podcast functions as an extension of the classroom lecture, where students passively listen to and consume it for course-related information. These instructional podcasts, pardon the pun, fall on deaf ears. As Thomas and Willis (2013) observed, students are reluctant to engage with instructional podcasts, preferring instead traditional modes of instruction.

The second application, the podcast as an artifact of analysis, is grounded in literature and cultural studies, communication, and rhetoric. Podcasts are examined for their cultural and textual significance and viewed as sites of social and political contestation. At the forefront of this view is a postmodern conception of the text, which locates the podcast in dense social arrangements. Moreover, this view structures podcasts as material products resulting from human agency, technological constraint, and social activity.

The final way podcasts are used within educational contexts is as a student deliverable. Focused on narration, podcasts reflect traditional, linear prose expected within many curricula and courses and can thereby replace larger essay projects, reading responses, and even peer review (Bowie, 2012). Another way in which podcasts emerge within the classroom as a student deliverable is as "voiceless essays" (Folk, 2016), which rely less on traditional narrative structures and are abstract—soundscapes that form sonic impressions or sound collages for some dramatic or reflective effect. Lastly, the podcast is a deliverable as the podcast itself, which makes sense as there are podcasting courses included in communication, journalism, and rhetoric majors.

Fanfiction, Literacy and Education

Online fan communities are the home to many different fan works and genres—the most popular of which is fanfiction. Fanfiction—or fanfic—can be produced in a diversity of modes that includes text, audio, video, music video, video game, etc. The impetus for more active fan communities mirrors the change in digital technologies, specifically those related to Web 2.0 (the interactive web), which fostered what Jenkins et al. (2008) described as "participatory culture." A participatory culture is a "culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content" (p. 331). Participatory culture relies on the perceived value of consumers by those that "own" the content as well as on access to and availability of digital technologies and networked platforms for creation and distribution of related fan content beyond the walls of fan communities. These expanded communities, then, act as affinity spaces, which are characterized as sites where informal

learning occurs as a result of a community's shared discourse, knowledge, and expertise (Gee, 2007).

Examining how fanfiction can create meaningful educational opportunities and engagement is a conceit central to a large number of literacy scholars whose research addresses literacy practices in non-academic contexts (e.g., fan communities) and how lessons from those contexts can be incorporated into traditional classroom spaces. Several literacy scholars believe that the literacies cultivated in these non-academic settings can be instructive for creating more meaningful and engaging courses and assignments (Gee & Hayes, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Roozen, 2009).

Findings

Following completion of the Wasteland Radio project, students were asked to submit an in-class reflection on the assignment. They were given thirty minutes to discuss their thoughts on and experience with the assignment, what their preconceptions of it were, what they liked (and didn't like) about it, and what skills they believed were useful/beneficial to them after completing it. In addition to the in-class reflection, we had an open discussion about the assignment, where I took notes on what students were saying, a follow-up to notes I had taken during podcast workdays on student interaction and what students were saying while drafting their podcasts.

Freedom and Creativity

"I liked how much freedom creatively we had," one student noted. It wasn't just this lone student who emphasized that creativity was essential to their experience with the Wasteland Radio project. Statements orbiting issues of creativity and freedom were easily the most echoed sentiment regarding the assignment. Commonly, students seemed partial to developing and imagining their own aspects of the novel. One student wrote, "I liked how we each could have our own story related to Station Eleven." Roleplaying, as such, helped frame the assignment for the student, allowing them to immerse themselves in the world of the novel, giving them a clear context for work that went beyond the "real" exigency of a graded assignment.

Creativity also played a role in the class interaction. During in-class brainstorming sessions, I observed more willingness by the students to share their story/topic concepts for their news reports than their topics for their academic essays, which were later in the semester. Unsurprisingly, the more that students became acclimated to the course, the more likely they were to open up and share. However, brainstorming for the Wasteland Radio project began in week three of the course whereas the brainstorming for the academic essay began in week nine.

Although the responses were overwhelmingly positive, there were a few students that found the freedom and creativity difficult. A student wrote, "Coming up with my topic was difficult, because there were little to no specific requirements on what we could talk about." Throughout in-class workshops and brainstorming, there were a small number of students who felt it was difficult to create a story within the world of the novel. This number would have been greater if the Wasteland Radio project had students work individually and not within groups. The groups worked to ameliorate student anxiety while also affording students another person with whom to work through story concepts.

Overall, much of the positive student feedback was a result of the genre itself: fiction. Students noted a high level of engagement because they were able to explore the world and fiction of *Station Eleven*. Their responses and discussion ranged from more general feedback regarding story and narration to more specific feedback that directly links to elements of fanfiction.

Voicing their experience with the assignment, one student noted, "I like that I was able to use my imagination and create a story myself. . . . It was a good learning experience I thought." Mirroring this sentiment, another student stated, "It was fun and engaging to think up your own story and then report it like a news reporter." Unlike other students that discussed creativity, these two students highlighted the effect that creative writing, in particular story, had on their experience with the project.

When it came to the fiction of the assignment, more students noted the positive experience of exploring the world of the book beyond its narrative, an essential element of fanfiction. "I thought [the Wasteland Radio project] was cool because we basically got to make our own history and be creative," wrote one student. This student's experience is reflective of much that makes fanfiction so successful: co-authoring and expanding the world of the fiction. Likewise, another student said, "I liked how we could make up our own scenario about the book." And as another student suggested, "it was different, [the Wasteland Radio project] gave us a chance to develop our own little story line."

Another aspect of fanfiction that seemed to affect student engagement with the project was the notion of character. Particularly in fanfiction, it is common for authors to expand the story of an existing character or birth a new character into the original text or even add themselves into the fiction's narrative. One student said, "I like how we got to act like a reporter because I got to pick out my favorite part in the story and talk about it." This student's response exhibits what is known in fanfiction circles as an OC (original character), where the author/fan community inserts into the narrative world a new original character that did not exist in the source text or media (Fanlore, 2019). This character may be the fictional representation of the author of the fanfiction or a new character without a real-world equivalent.

Creativity and Technology
The podcasts were for many of the students a point of pride that came from the act of putting together separate individual parts to make one, individual piece. One student noted, "I loved putting [the podcast] all together at the end. It was really fun to decide what volume or music to have and where." Another student similarly wrote, "I liked the project; it was cool to see the outcome of just some simple statements and audio together."

When I discussed with students their grades on the podcast, a number of them asked for my reaction to their piece—not just what their grade was. They were more concerned with my entertainment than the grade. One student, whose podcast is best described as a postmodern, post-apocalyptic mash-up of *Station Eleven* and the *Blair Witch Project*, knew that his piece lacked the narrative structure necessary for a good grade but inquired about specific references he put into the podcast. Moreover, the student wanted to know if the feeling of danger and urgency came out in what is probably best understood as sound-collage. Although this student's podcast failed to meet the specifications of the assignment, the podcast reflected the student's ability to make connections to narrative forms and genre conventions germane to other disciplines.

The overall positive response, I believe, was a result not just of the creative genre or technology being used: it was a result of agency and ownership. Underlying the student responses and enthusiasm observed in the course was a pride they took in their podcasts and, unlike with other assignments, both an interest in sharing their work with the other students and a concern with others' responses to it.

Collaboration
It was clear from my observations that students were more energized and eager to work on the Wasteland Radio Project—whether it was brainstorming ideas for the narrative or sound effects, writing the script, or even editing the project—than they were on other text-based group activities in the course. It was common to see students share headphones when listening to and editing their reports. Moreover, while working in class on this project, students were more likely, I noted, to laugh or joke about their music, sound, and even audio editing choices. In one instance, two female students started laughing really hard because they changed the pitch and speed of their dialog to make it sound more like a man—a very odd, uncanny-sounding man whose speech resembled trying to speak while chewing gum and eating peanut butter simultaneously. This outburst resulted in them sharing the audio with the class, in turn resulting in more laughs; however, more importantly, it resulted in other students wanting to know what they did with the software to achieve that outcome, ultimately resulting in other students experimenting with the effect on their own voices in varied ways.

Student engagement and motivation linked to the collaborative nature of the assignment was also noted in the student reflections and discussions. As one student wrote, "I liked [the Wasteland Radio Project] because of the fact we go to work with others on it and it was really fun."

Though the class was broken into separate groups, use of the technology resulted in students taking on the role of teacher at various points by sharing with other groups tricks and processes they had learned.

Skills with (Perceived or Actual) Future Relevance
In the resulting discussions and reflections about the Wasteland Radio Project, students observed several skills or habits that they thought were particularly useful to them. The skills noted seemed to be grounded in a student's perceived future relevance of them to their major or post-undergraduate career. However, there were some skills that students thought were important in a more general context.

Students' responses noted differing skills and reasons for their engagement with the podcast assignment:

It tested skills that I like to play around with but don't get a chance to.

Writing and going over the script I made.

I'm going into computer technology so the wasteland radio project [was the most relevant to their personal goals].

Radio interview skills are essential for researchers.

> I liked how it was a different type of assignment and not just another essay. It was a simple fun assignment that I learned how to use audacity with which was cool.

Each of these responses indicates a particular skill or work that the Wasteland Radio project provided. Some of these responses acknowledge the future relevance of a skill, particularly the one from the student going into an information technology field and the one from the student connecting interviewing elements to research, while other responses express accomplishment in learning a new tool/software (e.g., Audacity). The student response I find most interesting, as a writing instructor, is the one about writing and editing their script. I am sure that if the word *script* were replaced by the word *essay*, the student would not have enjoyed writing or editing the essay.

The importance of this last piece is that while working on the podcast, students were doing work germane to a writing class. Indeed, they were writing, but they were also getting experience practicing conventions and skills essential to academic writing and other disciplines across campus. They were tasked with writing an engaging introduction. They needed a clear focus. And they had to included and integrate sources into their podcast—granted these were fictional sources.

Discussion

As I see it, there are two parallel pedagogical threads that have implications from this report: 1) using student-produced and -created podcasts in an artifact to assess student learning and 2) incorporating texts to foster affinity spaces that resemble fan communities.

Based on student responses, the podcast genre has potential to be an "agent of integration," which means that podcasts can function to build genre awareness and "prepare students for transitioning between new genres and disciplinary expectation" (Nowacek, 2011, p. 68). Rodrigue et al. (2017) agreed, "students can learn how sonic rhetorical strategies function differently in different situations, and how rhetorical situations and genres act on, shape, and inform the creation of an audio project. Subsequently, these projects have the potential to teach rhetoric broadly and to also introduce, enhance, or develop students' rhetorical and genre knowledge" (Genre and Rhetorical Knowledge section, para. 1). It is through these moments of "transfer" across genre and discipline that students develop interdisciplinary understanding, and The Wasteland Radio project demonstrated that students could identify moments where knowledge of the podcasting genre had application beyond the assignment.

The Wasteland Radio project also fostered moments of interdisciplinary understanding through its use of fanfiction. Students were provided with a real (while fictionalized) exigency and writing situation that demanded application of the genre and rhetorical strategies. Further, it had students think about how writing conventions changed between genres as well as for medium and discipline.

An analysis of the observations and student reflections reveals elements of transformative pedagogy (Biggs & Tang, 2011). There are a number of values associated with transformative pedagogy, including collaboration and exploration as well as student agency and autonomy. This type of self-direction underlies the project. Though certain boundaries existed within the assignment, it enabled students to intentionally explore the world of the

novel, granting them agency and ownership of the project. The project and the text were the two main supporting pillars in creating an affinity space that facilitated the students' ability to integrate skills, knowledges, and habits of mind from podcasting and fanfiction, specifically "explaining a phenomenon" and "creating a product": the news report. In addition to both of these outcomes, The Wasteland Radio project set the stage for skills, writing conventions and moves relevant to traditional academic writing, such as concise use of language, utilization of sources, and creating strong hooks.

Podcasting, in the case of the Wasteland Radio project, provided two affordances for students that they do not normally experience with writing projects: 1) It provided students with a new mode to experiment with, offering them opportunities to "play"; and 2) it was an artifact that, at least for the students, was more concrete than a traditional writing project, but it was also an artifact that they "built." Typically, play is conceived of as belonging to the realm of children; however, play as it relates to technology and pedagogy serves as a student-directed practice where the instructor serves as coplayer or demonstrator. The Wasteland Radio project provided a context for this type of relationship between teacher and student and student and assignment to emerge. As Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012) argued, play and learning are inseparable early in a child's life, but learning doesn't end. What they do not go on to say is that neither does play. Play serves to facilitate deeper engagement with course texts and the classroom community through building a more natural affinity space within traditional learning environments.

Bruffee (1984) wrote, "collaborative learning also provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community—a community of status equals: peers. Students learn the 'skill and partnership' of re-externalized conversation" (p. 642). In my writing class, the use of podcasting moved the students onto a similar, or equal, foundation, while also reducing the risk and fear associated with more traditional writing assignments—risks and fears that were further mitigated by an unconventional learning context of having students essentially produce fanfiction, instead of a traditional essay, to develop their writing skills. The Wasteland Radio project thereby promoted deeper student engagement through the creation of affinity spaces that allowed for interdisciplinary understanding of text, writing, and thinking.

Foremost when considering the inclusion of fan-like affinity spaces and podcasting is whether they further the specific learning outcomes of a course and curriculum. The first of these threads, podcasting, can easily be adapted as an assignment to assess student knowledge and skills. However, there may be a number of obstacles to the inclusion of assignments that require recording and editing audio.

1) The skills needed to record and edit a podcast could be a barrier. Unless an opportunity is provided through faculty development, the instructor must find time to learn these skills. Furthermore, students in a composition course are not expected to know the necessary hardware and software to produce podcasts, so teaching these would take up class time.

2) Another concern is access to technology and software needed to record and edit a podcast. Some universities have labs equipped with audio editing software and even have high-end field recorders and microphones for students to check out (my institution does not). But even in those cases,

students typically are not familiar with how to use the technology. However, while there is a technological barrier to professional quality podcasting, there are low/no-cost alternatives to producing fairly high-quality work. Programs like Audacity are free to download and use and offer a robust audio editing program. And while microphones can be found relatively cheaply, most students already have access to a sufficiently strong recording device: their smartphone, which often comes preloaded with voice recording apps, and the files recorded on these apps can easily be uploaded into existing audio editing programs.

Underlying the student's engagement and learning with the Wasteland Radio assignment is space. A space for experimentation and imagination. A space that gave students the ability to play with new technology, new modes of composition, and new ways to learn and think about writing. The Wasteland Radio project transformed *Station Eleven* from a course text to be analyzed into a text of fanfiction, and, it could be argued, the project altered the classroom space into a more organic affinity space that fostered genre and rhetorical knowledge as aspects of interdisciplinary understanding.

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