

# For Kids, By Kids: Our City Podcast

Tony Vincent and Mark van't Hooft



**An eager student speaks excitedly into a microphone,** “This is the Our City Podcast! I’m Sophie, a third grader at Willowdale Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska. We’re going to tell you about our outstanding city: Omaha!” Sophie continues by telling listeners that they can expect a great show—all about the place she calls home. Her audience? Other kids from around the world who listen online or on portable devices such as iPods and handheld computers.

## Why Podcasting?

Sophie worked with other third graders in Mrs. Haller’s class on the audio program as they were studying communities, especially their own. Instead of writing a report only the teacher would read, students produced and published an audio program called a podcast that has been heard by thousands of people. Knowing that their product has an authentic audience guided and motivated the students as they worked on the project; it took Sophie and five of her classmates about a week to produce the podcast about Omaha.

So what exactly is a podcast? It is an audio or video file that is posted on the web, can easily be cataloged and automatically downloaded to a computer or mobile device capable of playing back audio or video files. That means that once Sophie’s podcast has been published online, anybody can search and browse for it. Currently the podcasts are distributed to hundreds of users who subscribe to the Our City program. The

file is stored on subscribers’ computers to be listened to at their convenience.

Because Sophie and her classmates are working on something meaningful to them, they are engaged in every aspect of producing a podcast. They believe their work is important because they have a real audience outside of the classroom. In fact, the Omaha episode of Our City Podcast is listed in the iTunes Music Store, just three clicks away from music by Green Day and television shows like *Friends*. As a result, the students have carefully edited out mistakes, and have added catchy music and transitions to make the podcasts sound professional and entertaining.

Podcasting is a powerful tool for educators to get students involved in activities that are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active.<sup>1</sup> It involves planning and organizing, research, writing, editing, and the use of technology where necessary and appropriate. We all know how important it is to get students involved in their

own learning. Today’s Net Generation is very connected and technology savvy, and sees technology as an essential part of their lives.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, digital tools can and should play an important role in learning.<sup>3</sup>

## Creating Podcasts

Because students are so engaged in learning when they podcast, thousands of educators are putting kids in front of microphones and creating audio and video programs for the web. You might be surprised to know that podcasting software and equipment can cost little to nothing. You probably already have the equipment you need, and the software is free. Whether your computer runs the Windows or Macintosh operating system, you can download and use the free software Audacity. If you are a Mac user, you can also use GarageBand (included on every new Mac). Both Audacity and GarageBand are easy to learn (see screenshots on pages 126 and 127).

A second-grade student at Willowdale Elementary School in Nebraska is researching “Children’s Day” in Japan as part of her preproduction work.



## Creating Podcasts with Audacity



1. Click the record button.

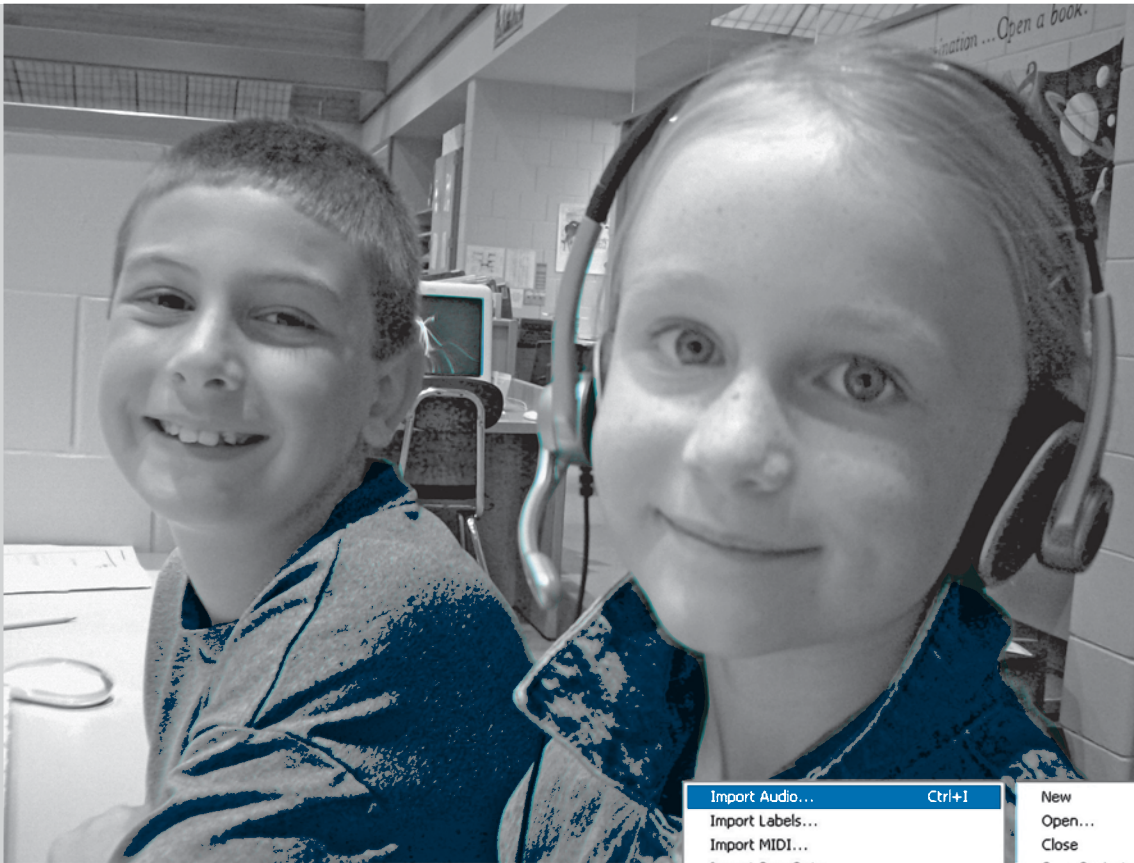


2. Talk into the microphone.

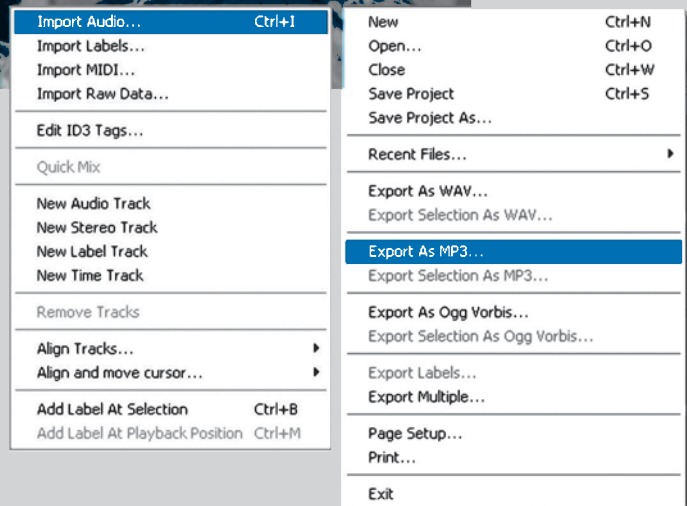
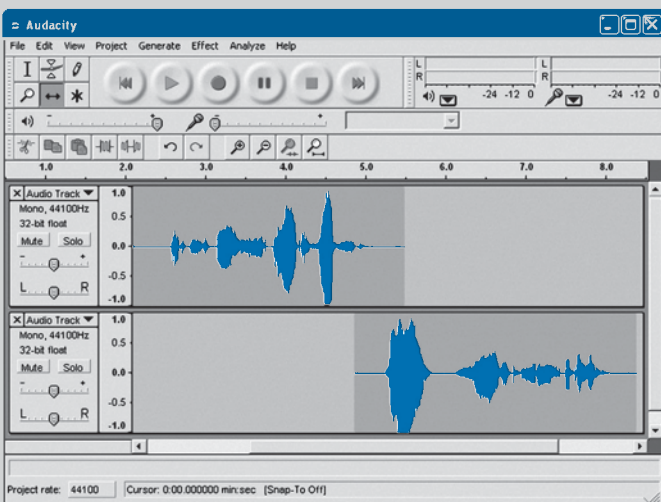
However, podcasting does not just consist of creating simple audio files. Before students even think about stepping up to the microphone, much planning must be done. In fact, most of the time spent making a podcast is in the preproduction phase. Students plan out the entire podcast, write scripts, and practice speaking. This is where most of the learning happens. Students each take a segment or two, such as “Famous Friends” and “History Corner,” conduct research for their segments, and explain what they know and learned in ways that listeners can understand. Willowdale’s third graders did a great amount of research about Omaha. They interviewed family

members, read books, and searched the Internet to find out more about their community, deciding what to share with the audience and how to present it. Some of the work was done individually, other tasks were performed in groups, but the entire class was working towards the same goal: a podcast about their city.

After the preproduction process comes the recording phase. If students have practiced reciting their scripts, recording takes very little time. What’s nice about software like Audacity is that mistakes can be edited out after recording is done. Also, recordings can be made in segments, and they do not have to



Two third-grade students at Willowdale Elementary School are recording their podcast about Omaha.



3. Add another voice to the podcast on a new track.

4. Import music to separate segments or as background.

5. Export the finished audio as an MP3.

be done in a certain order. A student can read a few sentences at a time and pause the recording before proceeding.

Recording is followed by postproduction. At this point, audio segments are arranged into the proper order (including student narration and interview segments), and sound effects and music can be inserted. Volume levels are adjusted, and audio is edited to achieve the desired sound. After the recording is perfected, the audio is converted into an MP3 file (Video podcasts can be formatted in several different ways, including MPEG-4 and AVI).

The final stage of producing a podcast is publishing. First,

the MP3 file must be placed on the web. In the case of Our City Podcast, teachers can submit the file via email ([learningin-hand@mac.com](mailto:learningin-hand@mac.com)). It is then posted to the Our City website, so the file has a URL, and web surfers can download it or listen to it right inside their browsers.

In our example, Sophie was involved in the preproduction and recording of her Our City podcast. With the school technology teacher's help, she spent some time editing and mixing audio in postproduction, while the teacher submitted the podcast to Our City Podcast. The final steps tend to be more technical and would have been difficult for Sophie

## How to Submit Podcasts for Our City Podcast

1. Listen to examples of Our City podcasts.
2. Download the Planning Packet from [learninginhand.com/OurCity/resources.html](http://learninginhand.com/OurCity/resources.html).
3. Record and edit audio for the podcast about your city.
4. Add copyright friendly music.
5. Export the podcast as an MP3 file and email it to [learninginhand@mac.com](mailto:learninginhand@mac.com).
6. Also email the requested information found on page 2 of the Planning Packet.
7. Within a few days, your podcast will be posted to [learninginhand.com/OurCity](http://learninginhand.com/OurCity) and be available in iTunes.
8. Enjoy newfound fame!

or other third graders to do alone. In addition, the real learning occurs in the preproduction phase of podcasting.

### Podcast Subscriptions

At this point, the MP3 is just simple audio on the web. However, a podcast can also be catalogued and automatically downloaded. This is done through the magic of RSS, or “Really Simple Syndication.” A podcast must have an RSS feed, which is really a specialized web page that includes information about the podcast, including links to audio or video files, and when the podcast was last updated. Feed aggregators like iTunes, SharpReader, or FeedReader periodically check the RSS feed to see when it was last updated. If the RSS code has been updated since the last check, the aggregator downloads the new podcast episodes.

There are many ways to create an RSS feed. Our City Podcast takes care of this part for participating teachers and students, so all they have to do is create and submit the MP3 file. A benefit of RSS feeds is that they can be submitted to podcast directories online. Sites like Yahoo! Podcast ([podcasts.yahoo.com](http://podcasts.yahoo.com)), Podcast Alley ([www.podcastalley.com](http://www.podcastalley.com)), and The Educational Podcast Network ([epnweb.org](http://epnweb.org)) all access RSS feeds and list them in their directories. Sites like these catalog thousands of podcasts using RSS. When the feeds are updated, so are the directories.

When a user subscribes to a podcast like Our City, iTunes will automatically check for, and download, new episodes. When the user wants to listen, there’s no waiting to download new content, it is

waiting to be played on the user’s hard drive. If an MP3 player is connected to the computer, new podcasts are automatically copied to the device.

There are currently more than 30,000 podcasts available for anyone to download, and that number continues to grow daily. Podcasts can be found online, listed in directories like Podcast Alley and Yahoo! Podcasts. Most directories have a category for educational podcasts, but with tens of thousands of programs, there are podcasts about almost every subject you can think of—like knitting, cats, or reality television—and some searching may be required. Also, be aware that podcasts are not regulated by the FCC, so watch out for a multitude of explicit programming.

The most popular podcast directory is the one built into iTunes, free software from Apple that runs on both Macintosh and Windows platforms. Although you will find many podcasts in the Store section of iTunes, virtually all podcasts are free. Like other directories on the web, iTunes has an education category, and you can also easily search for podcasts on a particular topic.

### Conclusion

Sophie concludes her podcast by exclaiming, “You should think of at least visiting our lovely city.” The same should be said of Our City Podcast. Teachers and students are encouraged not just to visit, but to also create and submit podcasts about their very own cities. Examples, scripts, segment planning guides, submission guidelines, and support forums for Our City Podcast can be found at

[www.learninginhand.com/OurCity](http://www.learninginhand.com/OurCity). Using Our City Podcast is a great way to start podcasting with students. Because the technical aspects are taken care of after the podcast is submitted, teachers and students are able to focus on the content. At the same time, using digital tools they are familiar with, kids can learn from other kids about the places in which they live. 🎧

### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1998).
2. See, for example, “Listening to Student Voices—On Technology: Today’s Tech-Savvy Students are Stuck in Text-Dominated Schools.” (Education Evolving, 2005), [www.educationevolving.org/studentvoices/pdf/tech\\_savvy\\_students.pdf](http://www.educationevolving.org/studentvoices/pdf/tech_savvy_students.pdf); Amanda Lenhart, Mary Madden, and Paul Hitlin, “Teens and Technology: Youth are Leading the Transition to a Fully Wired and Mobile Nation” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005), [www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Tech\\_July2005web.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf); “NetDay’s 2005 Speak Up Event for Teachers and Students: Highlights from National Findings” (Irvine, Calif.: Netday), [www.netday.org/downloads/NetDay\\_2005\\_Highlights.pdf](http://www.netday.org/downloads/NetDay_2005_Highlights.pdf).
3. See, for example, Jim Daly, “Editorial,” *Edutopia* 1, no. 7 (October 2005): 7; Mark van’t Hooft and Karen Swan, *Ubiquitous Computing in Education: Invisible Technology, Visible Impact* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2006). There are also an increasing number of blogs on the Internet that discuss the importance of using current technologies for teaching and learning. Just a few examples include Vicki Davis’s [coolcatteacher.blogspot.com](http://coolcatteacher.blogspot.com), Wesley Fryer’s [www.speed-ofcreativity.com](http://www.speed-ofcreativity.com), Eric Langhorst’s [speakingofhistory.blogspot.com](http://speakingofhistory.blogspot.com), and Will Richardson’s [www.weblogg-ed.com](http://www.weblogg-ed.com).

**TONY VINCENT** recently left Willowdale Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska, where he taught fifth grade and was the school’s technology specialist. He is now a freelance education and technology consultant, offering presentations and workshops. [Learninginhand.com](http://Learninginhand.com) is his creation, and he can be reached at [learninginhand@mac.com](mailto:learninginhand@mac.com). **MARK VAN’T HOOFT** is a technology specialist and researcher for the Research Center for Educational Technology at Kent State University in Ohio and a former social studies teacher. He can be reached at [mvanthoo@kent.edu](mailto:mvanthoo@kent.edu).

## Resources for Podcasting



Learning in Hand:  
Podcasting  
([learninginhand.com/podcasting](http://learninginhand.com/podcasting))

Apple-Podcasting  
in Education  
([www.apple.com/education/solutions/podcasting](http://www.apple.com/education/solutions/podcasting))

Audacity ([audacity.sourceforge.net](http://audacity.sourceforge.net))

FeedForAll ([www.feedforall.com](http://www.feedforall.com))

FeedReader ([www.feedreader.com](http://www.feedreader.com))

iTunes ([www.apple.com/itunes](http://www.apple.com/itunes))

Podcasting @ The University of Wisconsin ([engage.doit.wisc.edu/podcasting](http://engage.doit.wisc.edu/podcasting))

SharpReader ([www.sharpreader.net](http://www.sharpreader.net))

## Sample Podcasts for Social Studies



Colonial Williamsburg  
([www.history.org/media/podcasts.cfm](http://www.history.org/media/podcasts.cfm))

The Education Podcast  
Network (EPN)  
([epnweb.org/index.php?openpod=11#14](http://epnweb.org/index.php?openpod=11#14))

GeoQuiz Podcast  
([www.theworld.org/?q=node/6410](http://www.theworld.org/?q=node/6410))

History Podcast ([history-podcast.blogspot.com](http://history-podcast.blogspot.com))

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

Our City Podcast ([learninginhand.com/OurCity](http://learninginhand.com/OurCity))

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