

# Trend Alert: A History Teacher's Guide to Using Podcasts in the Classroom

Kathleen Owings Swan and Mark Hofer

**Often as educators we feel like** we are in the fashion industry as we try and keep pace with latest “it” in technology—before we are even accustomed to the *PowerPoint* line, the seasons change and we are expected to be decked out in moviemaking. Now, among other trends, educators are assumed to be podcasting savvy. A “podcast” (an amalgam of the word broadcast and the iPod digital audio player) is essentially a broadcast of digital audio files on the web that users can listen to on their computer or digital audio player (e.g., iPod). It's relatively simple: “Users simply connect their portable audio devices to their computer, log on to a podcasting subscription service, and subscribe to that site's feeds. Audio content is then “pushed” from the original source directly and automatically to the user's iPod or MP3 player.”<sup>1</sup> Podcasts can be automatically delivered to an iPod or computer whenever new content is available. This unique feature of podcasts frees teachers from having to surf the web to seek out new episodes. Additionally, past episodes may be accessed from the websites that serve as searchable digital archives. While still relatively new to many teachers, educators offer multiple ways to help understand podcasts as well as strategies for

creating podcasts.<sup>2</sup>

## Trends in Podcasting

The good news for history teachers is many of the sites already providing downloadable primary sources and teaching resources have expanded their inventory to include podcasts by historians and historical figures. For example, *The History News Network* features interviews with historians, press briefings, and conference presentations that might be of interest to educators, particularly those with an interest in political history. The episodes reflect and examine recent trends in scholarship and range in focus from Pamela Cochran's lecture on “Biblical

Feminism” to David Greenberg's “The Conservative Invention of the Liberal Media” to Michael Burlingame's “Did Lincoln Lie Us Into War in 1861?”

Academic and amateur historians are increasingly leveraging the power of the podcast to disseminate their own research. A popular history podcast, routinely ranked one of the top five educational podcasts on iTunes, is *12 Byzantine Rulers* by Lars Brownworth. An amateur historian and former high school history teacher, Brownworth provides captivating 45-minute lectures on 1,200 years of war, power, religion, sex, and violence in the Byzantine Empire. Following in

these footsteps is current high school history teacher, Theodore Capkanis. In *World History Podcast*, Capkanis provides downloadable lectures for students who need to review for a test, missed a class, or simply want to hear it again.

Because of their many applications for social studies, we suspect that podcasting is not a passing fad but a substantive and practical reinvention of existing teaching strategies—the guest speaker, the field trip and the primary source. While the existing scholarship on podcasting, and in particular the documented costs and benefits of incorporating into the middle and high school setting, is limited, we will provide a starting place—a general overview of a resource that will most likely be part of the teaching vernacular, if not now, in the very near future. We offer a brief overview of podcasting as well as a guide to the more credible, functional and engaging podcasts available on the web. Lastly, we consider classroom applications, specifically how teachers might incorporate podcasts into their history curricula.

## Evaluating Podcasts for Classroom Use

As with any resource taken from the web, not all podcasts are created equal. The quality, credibility and applicability to the classroom can vary widely. To assist

Figure 1: **Center for Media Literacy Guidelines**

Key Word	Five Key Concepts	Five Key Questions
<b>Authorship</b>	All messages are contradictions.	Who created this message?
<b>Format</b>	Messages are not representations of social reality.	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
<b>Audience</b>	Individuals negotiate meaning by interacting with messages.	How might different people understand this message differently than me?
<b>Content</b>	Messages have economic, political, social and aesthetic purposes.	What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
<b>Purpose</b>	Each form of communication has unique characteristics	Why is this message being sent?

teachers in selecting podcasts for classroom use, we provide a rating scale that includes five key dimensions. We began with the Center for Media Literacy’s (CML) *Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions for Media Literacy*.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 1)

While these guidelines provide a useful starting place, we wanted to structure the evaluation criteria to the unique attributes of podcasts. To create our assessment rubric (please see page 98), we used the CML guidelines as the foundation. We collapsed two criteria (Audience and Purpose) and added one other (Functionality of Website) for greater connection to classroom practice. In addition, we reconceptualized the criteria to better characterize podcasts as follows:

- **Credibility of Source** (e.g., creator is clearly identified, biographical or organizational information and relevant credentials included, time and date stamped)
- **Engagement** (e.g., music, humor, images, video)
- **Applicability to Classroom** for use with students or as a teacher resource (e.g., appropriate duration, connection to K-12 curriculum, age-appropriate language)
- **Content of Podcast** for use with students or as a teacher resource (e.g., accuracy, balanced viewpoint, evidence-based, detailed description of strategies/resources)
- **Functionality of Site** (e.g., navigability, transcripts provided, age-appropriate reading level, additional materials)

With these criteria in mind, we wanted to systematically select the most popular history-related podcasts and evaluate how well they connect to teaching history in K-12 classrooms. We decided to select podcasts produced by the five groups most commonly available online: professional historians, organizations, amateur historians, K-12 teachers, and K-12 students. We then identified the top 20 podcasts with the highest subscription rates in two of the most widely used podcast directories: the *iTunes* Music Store and *Podcast Alley*. We then selected the podcasts that appeared on both sites, then those that appeared highest on either list, and finally selected six “author’s choice” podcasts—those with which we were already familiar but did not appear in either list. Please see Figure 2 for a summary of selected podcasts:

In order to rate the selected podcasts using our rubric, we listened to the five

Figure 2: **Podcast Selection Summary**

Podcasts Appearing in Top 20 in both iTunes and Podcast Alley	Highest Podcasts Appearing in Either List	“Authors’ Choice” Podcasts
British History 101 (amateur) 12 Byzantine Rulers (K-12 teacher) The History Network (organization) Military History Podcast (K-12 student) Teaching American History (organization)	History Timeline (amateur) Speaking of History (K-12 teacher) Hank’s History Tour (K-12 student) History According to Bob (historian) History 132 (historian) Matt’s Today in History (amateur) Our City Podcast (K-12 student) The History of Rome (amateur) iHistory (K-12 teacher)	Colonial Williamsburg (organization) A Moment in Time (historian) Great Moments in History (historian) Gilder Lehrman (organization) Presidential Archives Uncovered (organization) History Hints with Larry Krieger (K-12 teacher)

most current episodes for each site. We scored the podcasts independently and then discussed any discrepancies until we reached consensus for each podcast. Please see Figure 3 for a summary of the ratings:

### General Themes

Not surprisingly, there was a wide range of quality in the five dimensions we explored in the podcasts we reviewed.

For example, the podcasts averaged a total score of 16.6 out of 25 points. However, two of the podcasts scored a 23 and two scored a 13. Organizations were strongest as a category overall with an average of 19.7 out of 25, and yet the individual podcasts in the category ranged from 23 to 15. The podcasts created by historians represented the largest range, from 13 to 22 points.

Across all the podcasts, the content

dimension received the highest average score (an average of 4 out of 5 points). The podcasts produced by teachers, historians and organizations scored particularly well in this category. In general, the podcasts were fairly strong in terms of accuracy of information presented, balanced viewpoint, and providing evidence of sources. On the other hand, engagement (perhaps one of the most critical criteria for using podcasts with students)

Figure 3: Podcast Ratings

Podcast	Credibility of Source	Engagement	Applicability to Classroom	Content of Podcast	Functionality of Site	Overall Score
Amateur						
The History of Rome*	3	2	3	4	3	15
British History 101**	3	2	2	3	3	13
Matt's Today in History*	2	2	3	3	3	13
History Timeline*	2	2	2	3	2	11
K-12 Student						
Our City Podcast*	2	5	5	3	5	20
Military History Podcast**	2	2	3	4	4	15
Hank's History Hour*	2	2	5	3	3	15
K-12 Teacher						
Speaking of History*	3	4	5	4	4	20
iHistory*	3	3	4	4	2	16
History Hints with Larry Krieger	3	2	5	3	2	15
12 Byzantine Rulers**	3	1	3	4	3	14
Historian						
A Moment in Time	5	4	4	5	4	22
Great Moments in History	3	4	4	5	3	19
History According to Bob*	2	2	3	4	2	13
History 132*	3	1	2	4	3	13
Organization						
Colonial Williamsburg	5	4	4	5	5	23
Presidential Archives Uncovered	5	4	5	5	4	23
Gilder Lehrman	5	1	3	5	5	19
Teaching American History**	5	1	4	5	2	17
The History Network**	1	3	2	4	5	15
Averages	3.2	2.6	3.6	4	3.5	16.6

\*\* in top 25 of both iTunes and Podcast Alley

\* in top 25 of either iTunes or Podcast Alley

*Note:* Podcasts, like all technologies, tend to change and evolve quickly. However, despite the fact that this review was conducted during the fall of 2007, nearly all of the podcasts reviewed in this article remain near the top of both iTunes and Podcast Alley's list of history-related podcasts. So, while new popular history podcasts have come on the scene (e.g., Stuff You Missed in History Class and the American Experience), the podcasts reviewed here remain popular with listeners.

## Podcast Scoring Rubric

	1 Point	2 Points	3 Points	4 Points	5 Points
<b>Credibility of Source</b>	Unable to identify creator	Creator identified, but no biographical or organizational information is readily available	Creator is identified including basic biographical or organizational information	Creator is identified including substantive biographical or organizational information	Creator is identified including substantive biographical information and clearly articulates purpose
<b>Engagement</b>	No strategies beyond speech to engage listeners	One additional strategy to engage listeners	Two strategies to engage listeners OR an interactive Website	Two strategies to engage listeners AND an interactive Website	Multiple strategies to engage listeners AND an interactive Website
<b>Applicability to Classroom</b>	Format and content of podcast does not lend itself to the classroom	Format and content could work in the classroom with significant teacher modification OR provides few applicable resources and/or ideas	Format and content of podcast could work in the classroom with some teacher modification OR provides applicable resources and/or ideas for teachers	Format and content of podcast could work in the classroom with little teacher modification OR provides applicable resources and ideas for teachers	Format and content of the podcast clearly lends itself to classroom use
<b>Content of Podcast</b>	Credibility of content is questionable OR provides unsuitable instructional strategies and/or resources	Content provided is credible OR provides instructional strategies and/or resources	Content provided is credible and balanced OR provides sound instructional strategies and/or resources	Content is credible, and either explores multiple perspectives or larger themes in history OR provides sound instructional strategies and resources	Content is credible, and explores multiple perspectives and larger themes in history OR provides exemplary instructional strategies and resources
<b>Functionality of Site</b>	There is no accompanying Website	A basic Website with links to audio files is provided	A Website with links to audio files and information for each episode is provided	A rich Website is provided with some additional materials	An extensive Website is provided with multiple additional resources

was the dimension with the lowest overall average (2.6 out of 5). The organizations were strongest in this category with amateurs scoring the lowest.

Of the categories of podcasts we explored, only those produced by organizations (e.g., Colonial Williamsburg, the National Archives) had strong scores for credibility. In many cases, the other podcasts were rated lower due to relatively little explication of authorship and biographical or organizational information—information that could help teachers judge the credibility of information presented.

While this general overview may help note trends, it is important to remember that some of the dimensions (e.g., engage-

ment or content) may be more important to you than others (e.g., functionality of site). We follow with a discussion of more specific trends of podcasts that help point to how they might best be used in the classroom.

### Discussion

Many of the podcast sites we reviewed were a good resource for history buffs, but very few sites actually catered to a K-12 audience. For example, only one podcasting site provided materials that teachers could immediately use in a classroom. *Presidential Archives Uncovered* broadcasts clips from the National Archives collection and allows subscribers to hear and read the speeches and brief-

ings from President Hoover through President Clinton. The episodes reflect both policy decisions as well as informal communications and include the following audio clips: President Roosevelt’s Day of Infamy speech, President Kennedy’s launching of the Peace Corps as well as a discussion between President Nixon and the First Lady on Nixon’s trip to China in 1972. These materials are easily downloadable and are particularly applicable to the typical U.S. history core curricula. The other sites reviewed required a bit more vision, coordination, or preparation for use within the K-12 setting.

A majority of the sites reviewed provide a rich informational resource for teachers wanting to brush up on a particular time

## Podcast Listing

Podcast	Website
Amateur	
The History of Rome	<a href="http://thehistoryofrome.blogspot.com">thehistoryofrome.blogspot.com</a>
British History 101	<a href="http://britishhistory101.blogspot.com">britishhistory101.blogspot.com</a>
Matt's Today in History	<a href="http://mattstodayinhistory.blogspot.com">mattstodayinhistory.blogspot.com</a>
History Timeline	<a href="http://www.historytimelinepodcast.blogspot.com">www.historytimelinepodcast.blogspot.com</a>
K-12 Student	
Our City Podcast	<a href="http://learninginhand.com/OurCity">learninginhand.com/OurCity</a>
Military History Podcast	<a href="http://www.militaryhistorypodcast.blogspot.com">www.militaryhistorypodcast.blogspot.com</a>
Hank's History Hour	<a href="http://hankshistoryhour.com">hankshistoryhour.com</a>
K-12 Teacher	
Speaking of History	<a href="http://speakingofhistory.blogspot.com">speakingofhistory.blogspot.com</a>
iHistory	<a href="http://ihistory.wordpress.com">ihistory.wordpress.com</a>
History Hints with Larry Krieger	<a href="http://www2.ccooe.com/publicinfo/historyhints.cfm">www2.ccooe.com/publicinfo/historyhints.cfm</a>
12 Byzantine Rulers	<a href="http://www.anders.com/lectures/lars_brownworth/12_byzantine_rulers">www.anders.com/lectures/lars_brownworth/12_byzantine_rulers</a>
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Colonial Williamsburg	<a href="http://www.history.org/media/podcasts">www.history.org/media/podcasts</a>
Presidential Archives Uncovered	<a href="http://www.archives.gov/presidentiallibraries/research/podcasts">www.archives.gov/presidentiallibraries/research/podcasts</a>
Gilder Lehrman	<a href="http://www.gilderlehrman.org">www.gilderlehrman.org</a>
Teaching American History	<a href="http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org">www.teachingamericanhistory.org</a>
The History Network	<a href="http://www.hnn.us">www.hnn.us</a>

period or to extend their current historical understandings. *British History 101* and *History of Rome* are podcasting sites produced by amateur historians who discuss various aspects of European history including episodes on the Magna Carta and a three-part series on wars between the Romans and the Samnites. These informational podcasts employ an audio lecture format that range anywhere from a minute (see *A Moment in Time* podcast) to an hour and a half (see Gilder Lehrman podcast). While the format of the *Moment in Time* podcast seemed perfect for a daily class opener, the lectures on most of the other sites were often too long and too dry for the typical K-12 history student.

The top sites, according to our rubric,

were ones that moved away from the lecture format and tried to engage the K-12 teacher/student in a unique way. Many sites were created with the intention of providing professional development for history teachers. For example, Gilder Lehrman's *Historian's Forum* features podcasts led by well-known scholars, historians, and authors including Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gordon Wood. While these lectures may not capture the interest of the average high school history student, the episodes give educators an opportunity to enhance their own knowledge of historical events and can keep them up to date on the latest historical scholarship. In addition, the Gilder Lehrman site also includes lesson plan ideas, professional

development opportunities, and student research guides for use in conjunction with their podcasts. *Teaching American History*, a site specifically designed for U.S. history instructors, allows visitors to download 1- to 2- hour lectures categorized by the following eras: Founding, Expansion, Civil War, Progressive, Post World War II, and General Resources. While the lectures provide additional expertise to instructors, they can also inspire interesting guiding questions and discussion topics for classroom use. Entire lessons could be planned around episode titles such as "What is Citizenship?" or "Republicanism: Cynicism and Nobility in Theory and Practice."

Of the sites dedicated to the profes-



sional development of K-12 teachers, we were most intrigued by *Speaking of History*, a podcast created by a middle school history teacher who shares ideas and tips for engaging students in the study of U.S. history. In an October 2008 episode, 8th grade social studies teacher, Eric Langhorst describes his methods for teaching the Declaration of Independence. In a 20-minute clip, done originally in audio and later updated to include video, he describes how he stages a scenario in which he finds a “break up note” seemingly between two middle school sweethearts. He creates gossip buzz among the students and draws them into an analogy of the dreaded school break up and the one between America and the British Empire. Within the podcast, however, he does more than just explain—he records his own teaching and the student reaction to the activity. The blend of descriptive dialogue mixed with classroom excerpts creates a more complete example from which other teachers can build. Other epi-

sodes include additional curriculum ideas, technology tools and resources, his own conference presentations, and other professional development opportunities.

Two of the podcasting sites reviewed were created by teachers who used the medium as an extension of the classroom. Larry Kreiger, an Advanced Placement (AP) history teacher, created *History Hints* to assist his students in studying for the AP U.S. history examination. In his podcasts, Kreiger narrates short (less than 3 minutes) segments that begin with the first settlers of the New World and ends in 1850 with the United States on the brink of Civil War. In contrast, *iHistory* is produced by Australian history teacher Dave Fagg as a means to engage his students in concepts and ideas from his class. In short and focused segments, he uses the podcasts as a way to make the content a little more relevant for students. For example, in one episode he compares and contrasts the modern justice system in medieval Europe and then allows

students to post comments through the use of a blog. This interactive feature demonstrates the potential for a podcast to increase student-teacher interaction online using podcasting.

Although rare among the sites we evaluated, two podcasts used the medium in creative and engaging ways—*Colonial Williamsburg* and *Great Moments in History*. While virtual field trips pale in comparison to actually visiting historical sites, podcasts such as *Colonial Williamsburg* allow students to travel back in time. Students can watch as journeymen make saddles and tools, listen to costumed interpreters speak on eighteenth-century clothing, or study the role of religion in the colonies with religious specialist John Turner. With a rich and easily navigable website that includes pictures, slide shows, videos, maps, and music, the Colonial Williamsburg site has taken the podcast far beyond the typical history lecture. Similarly, *Great Moments in History* has also employed

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a creative approach to their podcasts by recreating 10 momentous events in world history from the original series written by historian John G. Stockmeyer. Using professional sound effects and on-the-spot newscasters, listeners can charge with the Athenians at Marathon, relive the Battle of Hastings or experience the sinking of the Spanish Armada. The first-hand perspective of these podcasts is quite engaging and offers an example of how an audio track can become more compelling for students.

With a few exceptions, most of the podcasts we reviewed were created by historians, amateurs, or teachers. We wanted to end the section with podcasts produced by students for students. Most notably, *Our City* podcast is an excellent example of what can happen when educators turn the technology over to the students. In this podcast, classes of elementary and middle school students from across the United States produce episodes about the cities in which they live. For example, in the

podcast on Omaha, Nebraska, entitled *Outstanding Omaha*, students provide an engaging collection of reports including, “Famous Friends,” “Landmark Spotlight,” and “History Lesson.” Other classes can listen to the episode and download the script as a guide for creating their own podcast. Currently, there are approximately 16 episodes that feature a myriad of places, from Honolulu, Hawaii, to Lynbrook, New York.

We also reviewed two other podcasts created by students. Interestingly, these students created these podcasts based on their love of history rather than as an assignment connected with a class. High school senior Hank Nelson broadcasts weekly European history lessons in his podcast *Hank’s History Hour*—a top 10 history podcast on *iTunes*. He structures the podcast around the AP European history curriculum, offering one-hour shows on topics including the Enlightenment, constitutionalism, and the Age of Exploration. High school stu-

dents from across the country listen to his podcast and leave comments on his blog. Similarly, George Hageman’s *Military History Podcast* was born out of his love of history. In the 10- to 20- minute episodes, he explores interesting anecdotes, military tactics and technologies, and key historic battles. The material is well referenced and rich in detail. The interactive nature of this site allows listeners (students, adults, and historians alike) to post comments and responses. The podcast is sponsored by the Navy Reserve and *Armchair General* magazine and has been downloaded more than two million times from listeners around the world. Both of these podcasts demonstrate the engaging nature of this medium for students to express their love of history.

If we could offer advice to new podcasters or to the existing sites, we would recommend the following. First, the easiest “fix” for many sites is to include more biographical and sourcing information. On most of the sites, we found



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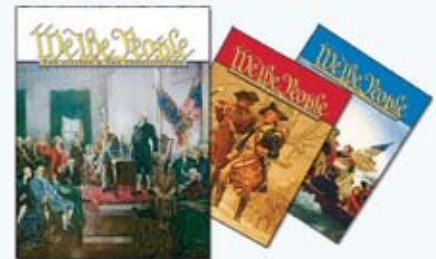
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ourselves digging for author information and other resources, like transcripts, blogs, etc. Generally, the websites themselves need work in terms of navigability so that teachers can easily find the podcast episodes most useful for their students and to be assured that those podcasts are produced with credibility. For new education podcasters, we also recommend allowing students to create their own podcasts, including designing the purpose, format, and content, given the teachers' instructional objectives. As we noted, we were thoroughly impressed with the quality and the enthusiasm that was generated from student-created podcasts. Lastly, we hope that educators might follow in the footsteps of *Colonial Williamsburg*, *Great Moments in History*, and *Our City* which have pushed the medium beyond the traditional lecture format into something really engaging, while remaining focused on typical history content.

## Conclusion

While we see podcasting as a technology “do,” as educators, we also want to consider the “don’ts” of instructional use. Like any resource, technology or otherwise, the teacher must determine how to make them work in the classroom. In other words, a lecture, whether in digital or analog form, is still a lecture and has the same pedagogical constraints. We might argue that podcasts represent a reinvention of video and audiocassette tapes. Yes, podcasts may provide additional utility, but we still need to consider the instructional purpose and context with which they are used. The important point is that, no matter how current, engaging, or relevant, podcasts don’t teach, teachers do. 📺

## Notes

1. Engage, University of Wisconsin, “What is Podcasting?” [engage.doit.wisc.edu/podcasting/whatIsIt/index.html](http://engage.doit.wisc.edu/podcasting/whatIsIt/index.html); Common Craft, “Podcasting in Plain English,” [www.commoncraft.com/podcasting/](http://www.commoncraft.com/podcasting/); Educause Learning Initiative, “7 Things You Should Know about Podcasting,” [net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7003.pdf](http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7003.pdf)
2. Shaun Else, Podcasting in Education, [chatt.hdsb.ca/~magps/boylit/Podcasting%20in%20Education/](http://chatt.hdsb.ca/~magps/boylit/Podcasting%20in%20Education/); Engage, University of Wisconsin, “Teaching and Learning with Podcasting,” [engage.wisc.edu/podcasting/teaching/index.html](http://engage.wisc.edu/podcasting/teaching/index.html);
3. Center for Media Literacy, “Five Key Questions Form Foundation for Media Inquiry,” [www.medialit.org/reading\\_room/article677.html](http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article677.html)

**KATHLEEN OWINGS SWAN** is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. She can be reached at [kswan@uky.edu](mailto:kswan@uky.edu). **MARK HOFER** is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. He can be reached at [mark.hofer@wm.edu](mailto:mark.hofer@wm.edu).

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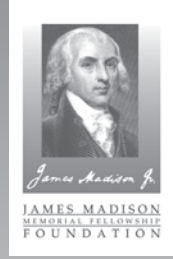
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