

Robert Rozema

## The Book Report, Version 2.0: Podcasting on Young Adult Novels

Robert Rozema promotes the educational potential of the student-produced podcast—a genre with an authentic audience and out-of-school applicability. Podcasting allows students to cultivate creative, efficient writing when delving into literary works. Students write, revise, collaborate on, and produce book-talk podcasts about young adult novels such as *Feed* by M. T. Anderson.

Over the past five years, the Web has undergone subtle but important shifts in structure and function. Taken as a whole, these changes mark the emergence of a new Web, generally called Web 2.0 by its proponents. Unlike the early Web, in which expert users, called Webmasters, developed sites with unchanging content, Web 2.0 is characterized by frequently updated sites, publicly constructed and shared information, and easy-to-use online applications, most of them free. If the early Web gave us the online Encyclopedia Britannica, Web 2.0's most heralded achievement is Wikipedia, a user-created encyclopedia that anyone can edit. In other words, as *Time* magazine proclaimed, Web 2.0 is all about you—the Web user (Grossman 41). New Web 2.0 applications—blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and more—offer educators exciting ways to publish student work to the Web. Of these, the podcast is particularly useful for reinforcing the goals and practices of literature instruction.

Simply defined, a *podcast* is audio delivered over the Web in serialized episodes. You might think of a podcast as a blog in audio form: Like the blogger, the podcaster publishes content to the Web on a regular basis, only the content is recorded rather than written. Listening to a podcast requires media software such as iTunes, Windows Media Player, or an RSS aggregator such as Google Reader. Once installed, this *podcatching* software finds, downloads, and plays podcasts. Podcasts may be transferred to a personal MP3 player for portable

listening, but this hardware is not necessary. In fact, the idea that podcasting requires an iPod is a persistent misconception, perhaps because *pod* is associated with the iPod, the ubiquitous MP3 player with the trademark white earbuds and snazzy television spots. I recommend thinking of *pod* as an acronym for *personal on-demand*, a good description of the highly individualized and instantly available content that podcasts offer.

As with blogs, podcasts can take a variety of forms and can cover an enormous range of subjects. Many mainstream media outlets now offer complete or supplemental programming via podcast: National Public Radio, for example, now podcasts its award-winning “This I Believe” essay series; the *New York Times* offers, among others, a podcast that summarizes the major headlines of the day. Some podcasts provide alternative takes on the mainstream media. The Alive in Baghdad podcast, for instance, is produced by a team of Iraqi and American journalists and aims to “counter the sound-bite driven” news by recording the real stories of Iraqis living through the war. But podcasting goes well beyond mainstream topics: special-interest groups use podcasts to advocate their causes, and individuals publish podcasts on pet topics. The podcasts archived at iTunes alone seem to cover nearly every subject imaginable, from Harry Potter (MuggleCast) to hairstyles (Secrets of Style with Kim Foley) to hairballs (Purina Animal Advice Podcast Series). And iTunes is only one of hundreds of podcast directories. Other popular sites include Podcast

Alley and Podcasting News. Some podcasts are enhanced with video, and in the ever-evolving language of the Web, these are known as *vodcasts*.

Teacher- and student-produced podcasts are becoming more and more popular at every instructional level, as educators explore the medium as a new way of teaching and learning. The Education Podcast Network lists hundreds of podcasts intended for a range of educational disciplines. A sampling from the ever-growing category of English language arts yields Shakespeare by Another Name, a scholarly podcast on the Shakespeare authorship debate; Podcast Bangladesh, a student-produced podcast featuring sixth graders from Bangladesh reciting their poetry; and The Daily Idiom, a guide to American English intended for second language learners. Vibrant, often entertaining, and nearly always informative, these examples illustrate just some of the potential of the podcasting genre.

This potential is most evident when students produce podcasts themselves: like keeping a blog, publishing a podcast gives student writers a real audience, a new opportunity for purposeful writing and revision, a chance to collaborate with peers,

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and—unlike the fusty book report—a genre that actually exists outside of the English classroom. These attributes transfer well to the literature classroom, where students can podcast about literary works in a number of interesting ways. In my literature methods course, for example, stu-

dents use free recording/editing software called Audacity to create short podcasts based on young adult novels. I tell students to consider their podcast as a book talk in audio form: its main objective is to interest adolescent readers in a particular book. And like a book talk, the podcast must include an engaging opener, key excerpts from the text, the name of the author and the title, and credits for any copyrighted music used in the podcast. Achieving all of this in four to five minutes presents a challenge of economy for students, who may work individually or collaboratively on the project.

During a recent semester, four students worked together to create a brilliant podcast on the

YA novel *Feed* by M. T. Anderson. A perennial favorite among my students, *Feed* is set in a futuristic world where everyone has a computer implant that feeds them information continuously. In the words of Titus, the teenage protagonist of the novel:

People were really excited when they first came out with feeds. It was all *da da da, this big educational thing, da da da, your child will have the advantage, encyclopedias at their fingertips, closer than their fingertips, etc.* That's one of the great things about the feed—that you can be supersmart without ever working. Everyone is supersmart now. You can look things up automatic, like science and history . . .

But the braggest thing about the feed, the thing that made it really big, is that it knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you even know what those things are. . . . Everything we think and feel is taken in by the corporations . . . and they get to know what it is we need, so all you have to do is want something and there's a chance it will be yours. (39–40; italics in original)

*Feed* tells the story of Titus and his friends, and what happens when one of them, Violet, loses her feed during an ill-fated excursion to the moon. The novel is an incisive satire of our dependence on technology, our culture of consumption, and the corruptive power of the mainstream media. As such, it is the perfect companion to *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and a fitting choice for a podcast—a sort of audio feed that we can, thankfully, turn off without risking harm to ourselves.

As part of the podcast assignment, students write scripts for their podcasts. Many podcasts are off-the-cuff, but I want students to craft their podcasts with care, paying special attention to mood, form, selection of key quotes, perspective, and audience. Figure 1 is an excerpt from the *Feed* script, co-authored by Benny, Bethany, David, and Julie, exemplifying how the podcast assignment can elicit rich, text-centered student writing. Note that the italicized text is taken directly from the novel.

Even in the short excerpt here, it is evident that students are working to capture the essence of the novel. Their music selections match the mood of the story: the background tracks sound futuristic and are as hypnotic as the feed itself would be. In our attempt to teach the concept of mood, we often

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**FIGURE 1.** Excerpt from *Feed* Podcast
 

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**Characters (voices)**

Titus  
 Announcer 1  
 Announcer 2  
 Announcer 3  
 Announcer 4  
 Policeman  
 Violet  
 Violet's father

[Music begins: medium tempo trip-hop, "The Sound" by Lunatic Calm]

**0:01****Titus:** What's the Feed?

*I don't know when they first had feeds. Like maybe fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body. They carried them around outside of them, in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe.*

*You can be super-smart now without ever working. Everyone is super-smart now. You can look things up automatic, like science and history.*

*Everything that goes on, goes on on the feed. Feedcasts, instant news . . . all the entertainment.*

**0:45**

**Titus:** . . . *it knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you even know what those things are . . . everything we think and feel is taken in by the corporations and the feed . . . so all you have to do is want something, and there's a chance it will be yours—*

**Announcer 1:** [cuts off Titus's voice] . . . *attracted to its powerful T44 fermion lift with vertical rise of fifty feet per second—and if you like comfort, quality, and class, the supple upholstery and ergonomically designed dash will . . .* [fades off into Announcer 2]

**Announcer 2:** [fades in during Announcer 1] . . . *only on Sports-Vox—take a man, take a gas sled, take a chlorine storm on Jupiter, and boys it's time to spit into the wind with Alex Needtham, the hardest, hippest, hypest . . .* [fades off into Announcer 3]

**Announcer 3:** [fades in during Announcer 2] . . . *month's summer styles, and the word on the street is "squeaky" . . .*

**1:30****Titus:** *We went to the moon to have fun . . . but the moon turned out to completely suck.*

*After your first few times there, when you get over being like, Whoa, unit! The moon! . . . instead there's just the rockiness, and the suckiness, and the craters all being full of old broken shit, like domes nobody's using anymore and wrappers and claws.*

*But I met a girl unlike anyone I'd ever met before . . . She was the most beautiful girl, like, ever. She was on the moon all alone. Here it was spring break and she was on the moon, where there was all this meg action, and she was there without friends . . .*

*Her name was Violet.*

[Music changes to rapid techno, "Two Telephone Calls and an Air Raid" by Shaun Imrei]

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ask students to describe the emotional feel of a literary text, all the while knowing that the *mood* of a piece is hard to define and highly subjective. I happen to think that Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," for example, is quite tongue-in-cheek; one student finds the opening scene of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* to be darkly comic.

Asking students to match music to language gives them a more concrete way to understand and

talk about mood. With their nearly universal love of music, students are astute at finding the perfect musical accompaniment to a text: their podcasts have married *The A-List* by Zoey Dean to the lush melody of "Bittersweet Symphony" by The Verve; *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares to the melancholic "In Your Eyes" by Peter Gabriel; and *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers to the intense beat of "Clubbed to Death" by Rob Dougan.

Another interesting literary element of the *Feed* podcast is its form. Quite astutely, students chose to mimic the effect of the feed by interrupting their main narrative with a barrage of advertise-

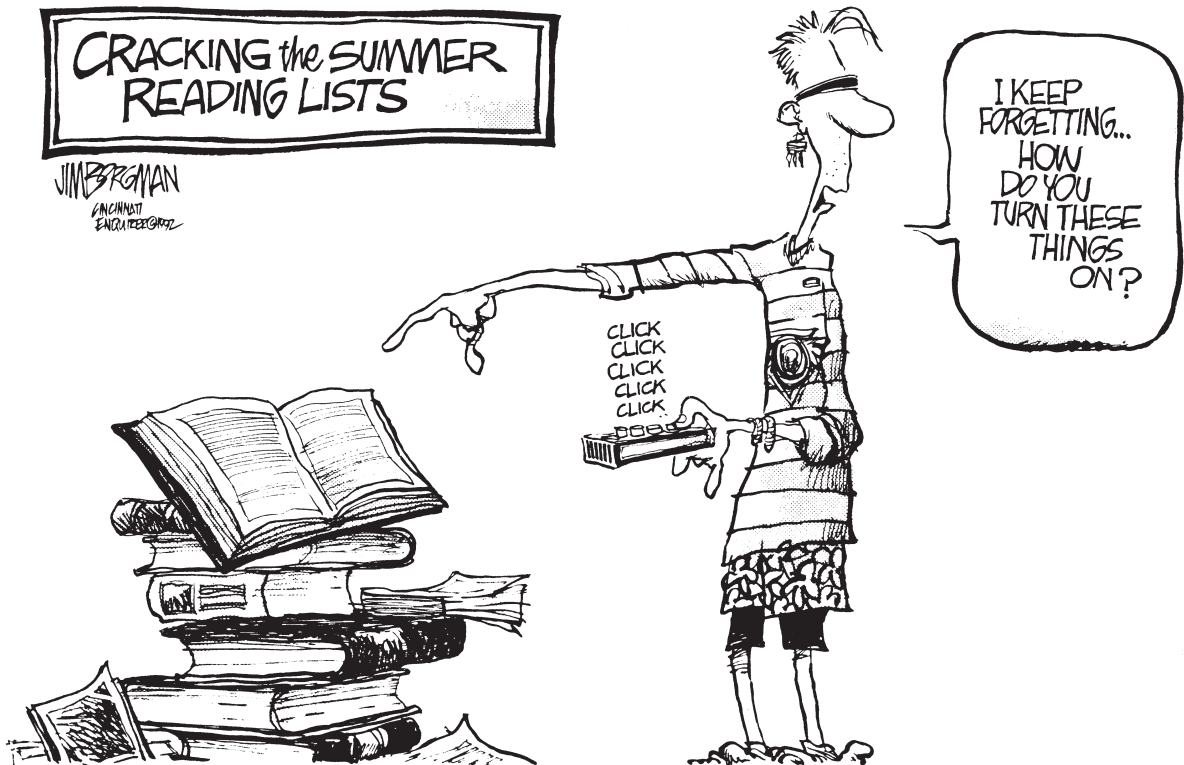
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ments for automobiles, clothing, vacations, dance clubs, and more. No doubt, they drew their inspiration from the novel: Anderson repeatedly inserts feed fragments into the main storyline, subjecting the reader to a textual version of the feed. Arguably, the *Feed* podcast intensifies this effect by translating the feed into an audio format. As the podcast is interrupted again and again by obnoxious commercials, listeners get a sense of what living with the

feed would be like. The *Feed* group found the perfect form for their podcast; other students discovered that existing genres worked well for their texts—

genres that included the radio interview, the television courtroom drama, and reality programming. As they craft their podcasts, students are generally careful to observe the conventions of these genres, particularly as they translate a visual genre to an auditory genre. The podcast assignment, then, serves as one way to get students thinking about another important literary idea—genre.

At the heart of the *Feed* podcast are selections from the novel—selections that have been truncated and pieced together for maximum effect. If there is a single mantra in literature study, one phrase we repeat ad infinitum to students, it is *support your ideas with details from the text*. As every literary critic knows, this means locating meaningful passages and ignoring less-important ones. The condensed format of the podcast puts the selection of excerpts at a premium. What quotes best represent characters or settings? Key moments in the plot? And how can these quotes be integrated into the podcast without seeming abrupt or forced? Creating podcasts requires students to consider these questions. It also gets students thinking about the difference between dramatization



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and narrative. The *Feed* group relied on dramatization: their podcast is almost entirely direct quotes from the text. The risk here is that the quotes fail to hang together and the final product seems disjointed. A more narrative approach glues quotes together with bits of summary, and in doing so, also risks losing some of its dramatic punch. Students must find a balance by looking into their texts. *Monster*, for example, is told as a screenplay and lends itself to a more dramatic approach. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, however, has a large cast of characters and is better suited for a more narrative podcast.

Writing a podcast also involves another important literary idea: perspective. Students must decide how to talk about their texts—as outsiders to the story, as the characters themselves, or as both. The *Feed* podcast is told from a first-person perspective, with the voice of Titus retelling the story's events. Others, though, employ both a third-person narrator and first-person characters. In these cases, students must indicate when the switch in perspective occurs. Usually this means introducing a new voice, modifying a voice through a special audio effect, or changing the music to tell the listener that a new speaker is taking over. These audio indicators are analogous to the devices that writers use to inform readers that a change in perspective has occurred—the start of a new chapter, for example, or the use of italics.

### Writing for a Real Audience

As with all forms of online publishing, podcasting about books gives students a real audience. My students write their podcasts for an adolescent audience, creating short and appealing podcasts after the movie-trailer model. Their podcasts must begin with an engaging hook, reveal details about the plot but not say too much, and move toward a dramatic conclusion that leaves the audience wanting more. The students know that a podcast without an interesting opener will quickly lose its audience; a podcast without well-chosen excerpts and multiple voices will bore its audience; and a podcast without brisk pacing and an overall emotional impression will leave its audience flat. They write with adolescents in mind—young readers easily distracted by all the trappings of modern adolescence.

The podcasts are also useful for future students who listen to them as they search for interesting books to read. At the beginning of the semester, I play podcasts to entice students into reading superb YA novels such as *Feed*, *Monster*, *The Chocolate War*, and others and to give them a sense of the podcast requirement, which in turn shapes the way they read the novel. Over the past few years, I have accumulated over thirty student podcasts. Listening to five or six one day early in the semester, one student said that she “wanted to make hundreds of these for my own students.” It would take a few years, but it is conceivable for a teacher to collect a rich audio archive of hundreds of student podcasts, all readily available for download and listening.

To broaden the audience even further, I publish the best student podcasts to iTunes at the end of every semester. Together, these exemplary podcasts make up YA! Cast, which, like all podcasts at iTunes, is free to download. YA! Cast now has over a dozen individual podcasts, including the *Feed* podcast described in this article. The process of publishing YA! Cast is fairly simple. First, I upload the podcasts (in MP3 format) to my Wordpress blog, which supports file upload (some free services such as Blogger do not offer this feature). Then I use a free Web service called Odeo Studio to turn the uploaded MP3s into a single RSS feed—a format that enables the podcast to be syndicated for subscription. There are other services similar to Odeo Studio, but few offer as many easy-to-use features. Odeo Studio provides, for example, an online recording studio that lets users create podcasts in one simple step.

Once the RSS feed is created, Odeo Studio also allows me to tag each episode of the podcast with descriptors and images that make the podcast easy to find. I tag each book podcast with its title, author, student writers, and an image of the book cover. Finally, I submit the RSS feed to iTunes, which reviews the content of the podcast for copyright violations and, if the podcast passes muster, makes it available for download. Both Odeo Studio and iTunes provide in-depth explanations of this process.

The best way to understand the potential of podcasting in literature instruction may be to listen to the podcasts I have described, along with other educational podcasts available at iTunes and the Education Podcast Network. Using the podcast as



an audio book talk is just one idea. Students might also create an audio research report on an author, record a discussion of a short story, dramatize a Shakespearean scene, create a walking tour of the setting of a novel, or dozens of other possibilities. As one student wrote at the end of the project, “A podcast would be so much more interesting compared to a boring book report . . . students would most likely enjoy this sort of assignment since it involves creativity and technology. I also think podcasting could reach out to a lot of students who aren’t necessarily the good students because it’s giving them so many choices. They get to choose what they say about the book, what music to use, the pacing, the tone . . . . The podcast would be my number one alternative to the book report.”

Podcasting is just the beginning. Other powerful 2.0 applications include the blog, the online journal that many English teachers use to teach writing; and the wiki, a powerful collaborative writing platform most famously manifested in Wikipedia, the enormous online encyclopedia that also happens to be written and edited by ordinary Web users. Online word processors such as Google Documents facilitate collaborative writing and potentially eliminate the need for expensive word-processing software. Social bookmarking services such as Furl and Del.icio.us allow users to organize online resources in more democratic, more collaborative, and more useful ways. At Comicvine, graphic novel fans can create and share their superheroes. And of course there is YouTube, the site that now hosts hundreds of thousands of amateur videos. In the right hands, all of these 2.0 applications can be powerful tools for the teaching and

learning of literature. I hope this article has given you a few ideas for podcasting—and in true 2.0 spirit, I leave the rest up to you.

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**Robert Rozema** is assistant professor of English at Grand Valley State University, where he teaches methods courses in the secondary English education program. He is interested in integrating technology into the English language arts in creative and meaningful ways, and he is grateful to his students for their excellent work. *email*: rozemar@gvsu.edu.

### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Rozema took a traditional literature experience—writing a book report—and married it with new technology—creating a podcast. “Audio Broadcasts and Podcasts: Oral Storytelling and Dramatization” teaches students to make similar connections. Orson Welles’s broadcast of H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* in October 1938 provides perhaps the most well-known example of listeners’ imaginations leading to a vivid experience. After exploring the historical information surrounding Welles’s famous broadcast, students create criteria for effective audio dramatizations and then compose a dramatization of a group-selected scene from a recent reading. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=901](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=901)