

Finding Joy and Making Connections through Podcasting

Feature



by Melissa Thom, March 2023

This school year has been full of challenges. Many of us experienced moments, or days, of hopelessness, and may have wanted to give up. As a recent editorial in *Rethinking Schools* aptly stated,

"The world is broken. But instead of giving up, instead of resigning, teachers [and librarians] need to pivot to make teaching an act of defiance, a declaration that the only way forward is through lessons that teach students to remember joy, to activate their muscles of imagination, kindness, laughter, playfulness, and solidarity" ("Recommitting" 2022, p. 4).

This powerful quote inspired a reflection on the past year to identify projects, programs, and connections that brought me joy. A few included "that time when...":

- A seventh grader told me that coming to the library to see me was the best part of her day.
- My *optional* book club that met once a week during lunch scripted, composed, and performed *Itty Bitty Kitty Corn: The Musical* for groups of younger students. (*Itty-Bitty Kitty Corn* by Shannon Hale and LeUyen Pham is my favorite picture book of all time!)
- I was working with a student on his ELA podcasting project about climate change and renewable energy and he enthusiastically told me that he was going to do something to stop climate change in his lifetime.

It is important for each of us to take time to reflect on the good things happening in our libraries and schools and to remember joy. Some explanations of joy in literature I've collected include:

- "Joy is a form of resistance. Passion is a form of activism."—*Key Player* by Kelly Yang
- "Joy in the midst of oppression is its own kind of bravery."—*The Cost of Knowing* by Brittney Morris

- "Maybe the answer...is doing something that brings us joy even if it means facing what scares us most."—*The Cost of Knowing* by Brittney Morris

Joy is not always easy or without stress. Oftentimes, there is joy *within* or *as a result of* the stress and struggle of a new endeavor. Facing these challenges alongside others can make all the difference. Pharrell Williams connects joy to "collaboration and congregation," and says, "schools must not only create joyful ethos, but also sustain it to activate the human spirit" (Muhammad 2023).

Sustaining joy can be challenging when everything feels like an uphill battle. However, connections with people and ideas make difficult circumstances feel less challenging and stressful while bringing more joy to your life. We can find emotional connections, as well as new and creative ideas via text messages, phone calls, social media, and podcasts.

Podcasts Connect Us

Podcasting has been around since 2005, and has steadily gained popularity across a wide range of topics, interests, and subjects. There are "over two million [podcast] shows and 48 million episodes" (Jabeer 2021).

The podcast format is a current iteration in a long history of communication. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats "addressed the American people in some 30 speeches broadcast via radio.... Millions of people found comfort and renewed confidence in these speeches" (<https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/fireside-chats>).

Just as those presidential radio chats by FDR brought a sense of comfort and hope to listeners in times of turmoil and unrest, podcast audiences find inspiration, connection, and entertainment from the hosts of their favorite shows in these once again tumultuous times.

The Journey of the Joyful Learning Podcast

It was this need to share ideas, connect listeners, and spread joy that motivated Carrie Seiden, an elementary school librarian at Totoket Valley Elementary, and me to launch the Joyful Learning Podcast in the summer of 2022.

The idea of a podcast came from Carrie, an avid podcast listener. Three years ago, I shared with her that I really wanted to take my book blog to the next level; she suggested I start a podcast and model it after the That Sounds Fun podcast with Annie Downs. It took a few years (and a global pandemic) for the project to come to fruition, but the process of researching, brainstorming, creating, and promoting the show was one of my most joy-filled projects of the past year.



In June 2022, we jumped in with both feet and started investigating the best way to get started. Some initial questions included:

- What platforms were ideal both for cost and ease of use?
- Would we need extra tools such as microphones?
- How would we edit the raw recordings to produce a polished episode?
- What was the process for pushing out our podcast?

I began by reading, *So You Want to Start a Podcast* by Kristen Meinzer. Carrie tackled the platform issue and found Anchor, Spotify's free podcasting platform. It was easy to learn, allowed us the flexibility and mobility to record clips or entire interviews with our phones via the app, edit recordings on the web-based platform, and allowed us to push out new episodes via multiple channels with ease.

Next, we reached out to friends and colleagues who had podcasting experience. Tom Bober, a school librarian from Missouri, suggested the Riverside.fm platform to record interviews. Riverside was another Spotify tool and offered both free and subscription options. It has proven to be user-friendly and perfect for recording long-distance interviews.

A fun and unexpected discovery was that a local public library had a "Library of Things" collection, including a podcasting kit. To learn more on developing your own library of things, check out *Audio Recorders to Zucchini Seeds: Building a Library of Things* edited by Mark Robison and Lindley Shedd.

By the end of the summer, we had a basic understanding of the process, tools to get started, topic ideas for season one, and four recorded conversations. One of the many highlights from that first season included an in-person interview done at my house with middle-grade author Lisa McMann (Episode 5: "The Joy of Author & Reader Connections"). The episode was co-hosted by Jennifer Halbur, a 6th-grade English teacher from Minnesota who I met through #Bookposse, an ARC-sharing group I met via Twitter. (Stay tuned for a future episode featuring this fun bookish group!)

To date, we have produced ten episodes and have over one thousand listens!

Podcasting with Students

The journey of creating and publishing the Joyful Learning Podcast gave me the confidence to introduce podcasting in my middle school, and I was ready when the seventh-grade, English-language-arts department invited me to collaborate on a podcasting unit. I worked closely with both the classroom teacher and the district's two middle school librarians to determine the best podcasting tools and develop and deliver applicable lessons. The work the teacher and I did to guide students to plan, research, script, and record a podcast was both exciting AND daunting.

Guiding young people through podcast creation has many benefits. To begin, they will gain a variety of academic skills including:

- Digital storytelling skills as they plan and design the content of their podcasts.
- Collaboration skills as they work with partners or groups to complete their assignment.
- Communication skills as they present and record their work, which may involve skills of interviewing, speaking, and effective and persuasive communication.
- Audio production skills as they record, edit, and upload their product.
- Creativity as they are allowed to design and present the podcast in any way they like (Purcell 2011).



Additionally, "learning to read, write, listen, speak, research, critically analyze information, and communicate ideas using a variety of formats is vital for children of all ages...Podcasting can increase students' motivation to learn through the integration of a technology they already love" (Purcell 2011).

Providing learners with these skills amplifies student voice while also giving them an opportunity to share topics and ideas they value and enjoy for an authentic audience. It's joyful learning at its best!

My personal experience with podcasting was helpful, but guiding students through the process in a school setting was somewhat different. A resource that proved to be a great starting point was the "Writing For Podcasts" webinar by the New York Times Learning Network.

Create a Podcast

1. Choose a topic
2. Select a format
3. Conduct research
4. Create an outline
5. Write the script
6. Record
7. Edit
8. Publish

Tools to Create Podcasts with Students

Creation and recording

- Screencastify—able to record a screen and download only the audio to an mp.3 file: <https://www.screencastify.com>.
- WeVideo—has an amazing template for a podcast and includes multiple tracks which makes editing audio much easier: <https://www.wevideo.com>.
- SoundTrap—a powerful tool that can help with all aspects of the podcasting process: <https://www.soundtrap.com>.
- GarageBand—Apple app able to edit multiple tracks and includes built-in music and sound effect options.
- Flip—able to record your screen and narration, but unable to download audio only: <https://info.flip.com>.
- Vocaroo—Web-based audio recorder: <https://vocaroo.com>.

Music/sound

- Soundzabound—free and paid versions available: <https://soundzabound.com>.
- Incompetech—royalty free music: <https://incompetech.com/music/royalty-free/music.html>.
- Free Music Archive—free and paid versions available: <https://freemusicarchive.org/home>.

The librarians chose the technology to produce the podcast and created screencasts to help students learn how to use it. Since our school did not have access to formal podcasting platforms such as Anchor (or a budget to purchase one), we had to be creative. We decided to utilize the tools we had access to: Google Slides, the full version of Screencastify, and the free version of WeVideo. We taught research lessons about databases, keywords, credible and reliable sources, and email etiquette for scheduling an interview. Lastly, we provided support to students who chose to enter their final products in the student podcasts contests from National Public Radio or the *New York Times*.

Students could choose any social issue topic of interest to them and were tasked with creating an informational podcast episode. Each student or group was expected to identify someone to interview and develop appropriate interview questions. After they located two reliable and credible sources, took notes, and conducted an interview, they wrote the script in a Google Slide presentation. Students who wanted to grab audio clips from their interview used Screencastify editor or WeVideo. Lastly, they inserted intro and outro music into the template and used Screencastify to record their screen while reading their script and playing the sound clips.

One of the most powerful aspects of the project was the interview component. The majority of students set up and conducted an interview. Some of the interviewees included family members, friends, the school safety officer, the talented and gifted teacher, and an employee from the MIT Lincoln Laboratory, which

researches and develops a broad array of advanced technologies to meet critical national security needs.

Our highlights include:

- One student chose to focus on why it is important to stay updated on the news and interviewed the editor of a local news source.
- A pair of students focused on why and "how professional athletes end up broke." The classroom teacher suggested they interview someone in the finance field and when they came to me for suggestions, I sent a text message to my financial advisor, who agreed to a brief interview via Google Meet.
- A group conducted a phone interview with an associate soundkeeper about environmental pollution in the Long Island Sound.
- A trio who were concerned with dress-code policies interviewed Carrie Firestone, the author of the middle-grade novel *Dress Coded*.

Conclusion

Overall, I am very proud of both the student-created podcast projects and the first two seasons of the Joyful Learning Podcast. Podcasts have been a great way for all of us to connect and to "remember joy, [and] to activate [our] muscles of imagination, kindness, laughter, playfulness, and solidarity" ("Recommitting" 2022, p. 4). Everyone can take time to appreciate the positive parts of each day—nothing is too small or insignificant. All those small moments add up to bigger moments and have an impact. This doesn't mean pretending that everything is okay, but rather remembering you are not alone in these challenging times. Build your network, make connections with others to find joy, and remind yourself you don't need to know how to do everything to start something that will make a difference for yourself and those around you.

Recommended Podcasts for Librarians

- Leading from the Library with Shannon McClintock Miller, Future Ready Schools: <https://all4ed.org/podcast/leading-from-the-library>.
- The Primary Source *Podcast* with Tom Bober: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-primary-source-podcast/id1530140365>.
- School Library Research Chats with Joyce Valenza: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sG85ia3E8Ps>.
- School Librarians United with Amy Hermon: <https://schoollibrariansunited.libsyn.com>.
- Truth for Teachers with Angela Watson: <https://truthforteachers.com>.

Recommended Podcasts for Students

- Sound Carrot by Jeff Glade—Library of student-friendly podcasts: <https://soundcarrot.com>.
- BooksRUs Podcast by Beth Campbell and her students: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/books-r-us/id1256870388>.

- Dear Hank and John by John and Hank Green:
<https://open.spotify.com/show/6e4HNBdPvjDOHKVf82oMEk>.
- Radiolab: <https://radiolab.org/episodes>.
- What's Good Games: <https://whatsgoodgames.com/podcast>.

Other Resources

- Podcasting with The California Report challenge: <https://learn.kqed.org/challenges/teachers/podcasting>.
- Podcast search engine Listen Notes: <https://www.listennotes.com>.
- ational Literacy Trust research report: "Young People's Engagement with Podcasts in 2021":
https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Young_peoples_engagement_with_podcasts_in_2021.pdf.
- *Writing For Podcasts* webinar by the New York Times Learning Network:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky-FK8ydX6s>.
- NPR podcast challenge: <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/14/1141665744/student-podcast-challenge-contest-npr-2023>.
- *New York Times* podcast contest: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/19/learning/our-fifth-annual-student-podcast-contest.html>.
- *So You Want to Start a Podcast: Finding Your Voice, Telling Your Story, and Building a Community That Will Listen* by Kristen Meinzer

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