13

Podcasting during the Pandemic and Beyond

Tristan R. Grunow

The coronavirus pandemic has had an undeniable impact on higher education. Many schools have quickly pivoted to online teaching as a way to prevent the spread of the virus through vulnerable student populations, forcing educators to adapt their courses to unfamiliar online teaching platforms and techniques, sometimes with limited institutional infrastructure or support. The results have not been entirely encouraging. At the same time, many academics have found it impossible to stay productive during the pandemic, overwhelmed by demands of adjusting to new teaching environments, increased caregiving responsibilities at home, and the heightened stress and anxiety of a deadly global virus. With so many more pressing issues—caring for sick relatives; social distancing; having enough toilet paper, food, or prescription medications—teaching and staying productive naturally took a back seat. To make things worse, the closure of primary and secondary schools has placed new burdens on parents, especially mothers. Statistics from journal editors have borne out the labor inequities many have long suspected: even as the number of overall manuscript submissions increased during the pandemic, submissions by women decreased precipitously. In many ways, the pandemic has highlighted and intensified long-existing inequalities in higher education, from differing levels of reliable access to high-speed internet, to gender imbalances in labor demands.

Yet, we should not too quickly assume that systemic shortcomings within academia will go away once the pandemic is over. Even after medical experts

develop a vaccine for COVID-19, scholars will still need to address the lack of adequate training in digital skills or online teaching resources that has made the transition to distance learning so difficult, along with rigid tenure and promotion guidelines that do not accommodate the unique personal circumstances that have affected both teaching and scholarly productivity. In other words, the current pandemic has exacerbated a number of crises that already beset Asian Studies and are still in need of collective responses. As educators and scholars consider best practices for teaching about Asia in this moment, we should be mindful that our ideas and solutions do not simply address the pandemic, but also tackle more deep-seated problems within the field and lay the groundwork for improving our larger academic environment.

With this in mind, one digital tool scholars can use to maintain rigorous learning environments, whether during a time of global pandemic or not, is podcasting. I have actively employed podcasting both inside and outside my classroom since 2017: assigning podcast episodes as substitutes for course readings, giving students opportunities to produce their own episodes as alternatives to written work, and producing multiple podcast series as platforms for presenting new research in Japanese Studies to both specialists and the broader public around the world. In this chapter, I offer preliminary thoughts on the benefits of incorporating scholarly podcasting into our pedagogy, suggesting that podcasts can offer highly accessible conduits for asynchronous online learning and unique exercises for students to explore new methods of scholarly creativity. In this way, podcasting not only allows scholars to remain active and engaged during moments of crisis, but also to learn new digital skills that will enhance their teaching and research beyond the pandemic.

The popularity of podcasts as a media form has exploded in recent years. As of April 2020, the Apple podcast store boasted over one million individual podcast series, with the total number of available podcast episodes surpassing twenty-nine million. For comparison, just two years ago, there were only 550,000 active podcasts on Apple podcasts. Likewise, the percentage of the US population who has listened to at least one podcast has more than doubled in the last ten years, reaching 55 percent this year. Today, not only has 37 percent of the population reported listening to podcasts within the last month, but the average podcast consumer regularly listens to as many as six different podcasts each week. And podcasts are most popular amongst the student-aged population, with nearly half (49 percent) of twelve to thirty-four-year-olds reporting in 2020 that they had listened to a podcast within the last month.[1]

With so many of our students already consuming podcasts on a regular basis, scholars should make the most of this previously untapped pedagogical resource in our classrooms. This is especially important when considering how

Photo courtesy of the author.

we as educators can maintain rigorous learning environments when teaching asynchronously or from a distance. Writing for the Podcast Host website in 2017, professional podcaster and podcasting advisor Colin Gray outlined a number of pedagogical benefits to incorporating podcasts into the classroom, noting that students will listen longer than they will read and can use podcasts for lecture review or to make up missed classes. First and foremost among the benefits, according to Gray, is the "flexible availability" of podcasts: students can choose to listen to lessons when it is convenient for them, and they have the extra level of autonomy that comes from being able to stop and rewind when necessary for review.[2] Writing for *Education about Asia* in the same year, Jared Hall added that podcasts might serve as "a jumping-off point for further individual exploration" by students pursuing new research topics.[3] But these are only the beginning of the benefits of incorporating podcasts and podcasting into the virtual classroom.

In my own courses before the pandemic, podcasts were most effective when used as (1) substitutes for traditional print-based reading assignments, and (2) as flexible, virtual alternatives to written assessments. Teaching for several years at a major urban R1 institution with only a small percentage of on-campus residents, I quickly learned that many of my students commuted long distances to school by car, bus, subway, or some combination of private and public transit—as long as one-and-a-half hours or more each way for some students! What's more, because of unprecedented extracurricular demands on students' time in the form of jobs, caregiving, athletics, and other activities, students had very tight commuting and

class schedules. Indeed, more than one student sheepishly confessed to me that they took one of my classes simply because it was the most intriguing option that fit into their narrow window of availability. Such demands greatly limited the amount of time students could devote to scrutinizing assigned readings or meeting in person with classmates for collaborative projects.

Needless to say, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated these demands and presented new challenges in online teaching and learning for both educators and students. Now students are spread across different time zones, attending lectures asynchronously, finding time to review lecture recordings and assigned materials while navigating unfamiliar routines. How can we as educators make our lecture content and course materials more flexible and mobile to fit students' new daily schedules? How can we assign collaborative work for students living in different parts of the city or the country? How can students complete assigned readings or review lectures while they are in their car, doing daily household chores, or walking around their neighborhood? Or, how can they contribute to group projects virtually using a medium they are already familiar with and excited about? Podcasting fits the bill on all accounts.

To be sure, substituting podcast episodes for traditional print readings entails some challenges. First is the availability of relevant episodes. As a Japanese historian, I have been lucky. Not only are there several expertly produced and well-documented, lecture-based podcasts about Japanese history, such as Isaac Meyer's *History of Japan Podcast*, but there are also several interview-based series covering a wide range of topics, including the *Japan Forum* and *Michigan Talks Japan* podcast series. My own *Meiji at 150 Podcast* includes 120 episodes of interviews with scholars of Japanese Studies discussing their recent publications, ongoing research projects, and teaching methods. In other words, there is no shortage of relevant content to choose from for Japanese Studies, while the *New Books in East Asian Studies, East Asia for All,* and *East Asia Now* podcasts are just a few series that will be useful for those outside Japanese Studies (See Appendix 1 for a partial list of Asian Studies podcast series). A second challenge concerns how much students engage with and retain the podcast content. However, this is no different than any assigned reading, and podcasts are most effective as learning resources when educators directly address the content in classroom lectures, discussions, and exercises.

I also brought podcasting into my classroom even before the pandemic by offering students the opportunity to produce their own episodes as an alternative to written assessments. In this regard, I have experimented with a number of student podcast formats, listed in order of the time commitment and student-teaching interaction required: (1) one-on-one interviews about pop culture topics of the students' own choosing, such as J-Pop, horror movies, and video games;

(2) thematic podcasts covering current events, including homelessness in Tokyo, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, or ongoing territorial disputes in East Asia, which I assigned to individual groups and published on *Japan on the Record*; and finally (3) individual episodes groups produced under my direction for a longer documentary-style series about the 1907 Anti-Asian Riots in Vancouver that we published as *The Wildest Night in Vancouver*. Each format requires different amounts of coordination, from agreeing on questions beforehand for one-on-one pop culture interviews to revising episode scripts multiple times for documentary episodes. While I was present in the university sound studio to facilitate the recording, students were responsible for conducting their own research, writing and revising scripts, recording the audio, doing the sound editing, and producing the final episodes.

Without question, the pandemic has changed how such collaborative podcast production exercises will work. For one, students will no longer have access to professional-quality recording studios or equipment on campus, nor will they be able to work in groups during class time to author and revise scripts. Still, students will be able to work together to draft and revise narrative scripts using Zoom and Google Docs from a distance on their own time. They can then record audio clips using their phones or built-in computer microphones and share files with groupmates online using cloud-based services like Google Drive or Dropbox. Meanwhile, free VOIP recording websites like Zencastr make remote interview recording simple, while free audio editing software like Audacity allows students to efficiently produce high-quality podcast episodes with zero associated costs. In short, because of its digital nature, collaborative podcasting is an exercise that can be easily adapted to asynchronous online completion.

As with any nontraditional exercise, using podcasts as an alternative to written work raises questions about the pedagogical value and learning outcomes of such assignments. Below, I outline six pedagogical benefits of introducing podcasting exercises into the classroom based on my own experiences and on feedback from students:

1. Because the "nuts and bolts" are the same when writing either an essay or narrative podcast script, podcasting builds research skills in a way no different than conducting research for a written essay. Students analyze primary and secondary sources to construct an original argument and then marshal evidence to support their arguments.

2. Listening to podcasts reminds students to think critically about source material and media credibility, offering opportunities for classroom reflection on how to assess the reliability of provided evidence and arguments.

3. In writing their own podcast scripts, the spoken format allows students to practice verbalizing their arguments cogently and concisely in a more conversational tone. This enhances writing skills by encouraging students to consider their audience and how to most powerfully organize and convey their arguments.

4. In a related way, producing a scholarly podcast episode encourages students to reflect on different modes of scholarly production and how different forms of scholarship target different audiences.

5. Producing a podcast episode provides students an opportunity to learn new digital skills, or to apply skills they already have, that they might not expect to experience in a classroom. In this way, podcasting not only engages students' interests, but also builds new skills applicable outside the humanities classroom.

6. Finally, because of the public-facing nature of podcasts, students can take ownership and pride in a memorable finished product that they can immediately share with friends around the world in a way they might not feel compelled to with a traditional written report.

Assigning podcast exercises also requires the articulation of a detailed rubric for evaluating the finished product. Because students will be unfamiliar with nontraditional assessments such as podcasts, the absence of such a rubric will cause unnecessary confusion and anxiety, particularly around grading. Much like traditional assessments, podcasting exercise rubrics should prioritize the originality and strength of the argument, along with the effectiveness of the delivery. Yet, where podcasting rubrics differ is that delivery will be evaluated not on writing style, but on the organization and "listenability" of the episode in terms of sound quality, sound editing, and other factors (see Appendix 2 for a rubric template for podcasting exercises).

Now that the pandemic has brought to light the systemic challenges scholars and educators of Asian Studies at all stages and career levels have faced in recent years and forced many of us around the world to "go virtual," podcasts are even more vital as pedagogical resources. Not only do podcasts allow for asynchronous instruction in the form of recorded lectures, but they also afford students a new level of flexibility in their learning. Because of their digital format, moreover, podcasts can be quickly integrated into the virtual classroom, both as required listening for group discussion and as collaborative exercises students can contribute to remotely. Engaging with podcasting also encourages the acquisition of new digital skills that will allow us as scholars and educators of Asian Studies the agility to respond to the ever-evolving circumstances and expectations of higher education and to alleviate some of the long-standing inequities afflicting the profession. As

we confront a new academic environment, one where distance learning, social distancing, and self-quarantine are regular parts of our academic identities, I urge scholars of Asian Studies to consider podcasting as a tool to maintain their rigorous classroom learning environments and active research portfolios, both now and beyond the pandemic.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to sincerely thank Paula R. Curtis and Jooyeon Hahm for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

Notes

[1] The Podcast Host, "Podcast Stats in 2020: Latest Industry Growth & Listening Trends," https://www.thepodcasthost.com/listening/podcast-industry-stats (accessed July 14, 2020).

[2] The Podcast Host, "Podcasting in Education: What Are the Benefits?" https://www.thepodcasthost.com/niche-case-study/podcasting-in-education (accessed July 14, 2020).

[3] Jared Hall, "Podcasting Asia," *Education about Asia* 22:3 (Winter, 2017), https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/podcasting-asia (accessed September 7, 2020).

Appendix 1: Partial List of Asian Studies Podcasts

Inter-Regional

New Books in East Asian Studies
https://newbooksnetwork.com/category/east-asian-studies

East Asia for All
https://www.eastasiaforall.com

East Asia Now
https://eastasia.wisc.edu/podcast

East Asia Hotspots
https://nrc.elliott.gwu.edu/east-asia-hotspots-podcast

Postcards from Asia
http://ceas.ku.edu/postcards-asia

New Books in Central Asian Studies
https://newbooksnetwork.com/category/peoples-places/central-asian-studies

New Books in South Asian Studies
https://newbooksnetwork.com/category/peoples-places/south-asian-studies

Southeast Asia Crossroads Podcast
https://soundcloud.com/seacrossroads

Center for Advanced Study of India Podcast
https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/podcasts

University of Chicago East Asian Studies Podcast
https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/east-asian-studies/id391209825

China

Harvard on China Podcast
soundcloud.com/fairbank-center

UPenn Center for the Study of Contemporary China Podcast
https://cscc.sas.upenn.edu/podcasts

Chinese Literature Podcast
https://www.chineseliteraturepodcast.com

Japan

The Meiji at 150 Podcast
https://meijiat150.podbean.com

Japan on the Record
https://jotr.transistor.fm

Hokkaido 150
https://hokkaido150.transistor.fm

Michigan Talks Japan
https://ii.umich.edu/cjs/podcast.html

Japan Forum
https://soundcloud.com/soas-university-of-london/sets/japan-forum

History of Japan Podcast
http://isaacmeyer.net/category/podcasts/history-of-japan-podcast

Appendix 2: Podcast Exercise Grading Rubric Sample

30% **Research and Argument**

The episode presents an original argument supported by sufficient evidence drawn from primary and secondary sources. Contains a balance of analysis and a citation of sources.

20% **Presentation**

The episode is compellingly organized, content is cogently presented, and the episode contains all required elements (introduction, content, "sign-off").

20% **Listenability**

Is the podcast well edited, removing gaps, extraneous noises/sounds, avoiding blips, etc.? Does the episode use background music and sound effects to punctuate topics? Are the music/sounds relevant to the content?

15% **Groupwork**

Did each group member contribute to the episode in some way (research, scripting, editing)? This score may change depending on individual contributions.

15% **Referencing**

Does the podcast write-up correctly list consulted sources and provide citations for quoted materials? Have appropriate sources been consulted?