Podcasting and Professional Development: How Podcasting Forms More Questions Than Answers for Educators

Author: Ben Hazzard

This is the story of a professional journey that began with a simple inquiry. Joan and Ben stood in a crowded lunch line waiting for warm Diet Coke and the remains of a decimated sandwich tray in a Redmond, Washington conference centre. A collaboration project between their students that had taken learning to new levels and created more critically aware, blogging students led them to present at Microsoft's International Innovative Teaching Conference.

During dinner the evening before, the speaker had asked the question that had both of their minds occupied, "Have you guys thought of podcasting?" This question was being expanded upon in that food line. Joan wondered what podcasting really was. Ben, who is a curriculum consultant for his district and has taught grades four through seven, wondered what they would talk about, and would anyone care? The idea began to take form over lunch when Joan, a grade six teacher and technology integration specialist, asked Ben how many teachers really collaborate and share their ideas. Is there a way to bring a professional dialogue to the teachers, outside of the walls of classrooms, schools, giant and expensive conferences, or dusty pages of professional books? Maybe podcasting, distributing an audio file of user created content that can be downloaded automatically or manually from the internet, could offer this opportunity.

Getting Started
Over the next six months Joan and Ben developed the purpose, logistics, and framework that would guide their podcast launch in January of 2006. They settled on a specific goal, to share lesson ideas that use technology to engage students in learning with a focus on [SmartBoards](). Each podcast episode would feature a lesson, user comments, and useful internet resources for the classroom. The goal wasn't to find the perfect lesson. The goal was to first model collaborative sharing between the two instructors, and then encourage listeners to share their own ideas. The more teachers share, the more their tools and engaging lesson ideas would grow for their students.

The first few episodes were mainly enjoyed by family and close friends. Their major feedback was that Ben interrupted too much, and that the two of them had much to learn about being broadcasters. But this inauspicious start has produced a podcasting phenomenon. In the 12 months since the first episode, 27000 unique listeners have tuned in from around the world, and the podcast (pdtogo.com/smart) features the voices of many different educators sharing their lesson ideas.

Using Podcasting to Share Big6
The conversation continues to grow, and this has created a vital network of teachers and learners. Routman (2002) states "even the best professional development may fail to create meaningful and lasting changes in teaching and learning–unless teachers engage in ongoing professional dialogue to develop a reflective school community." Colleagues, conference contacts, and listeners all began to contribute to the professional dialogue.

One of the most popular contributions came from Nell Ududec, teacher librarian at Bairdmore School in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She created a series of lessons to help grade six students, who had no previous Big6 instruction, understand the process of information problem solving through the Big6. The project began with a problem she herself had faced, "How does a family decide which breed of dog would best suit their lifestyle and preferences?" Through a Power Point presentation the students were introduced to how she and her family used the Big6 to make this decision.

The students were then presented with their own problem. In small groups they were to "spend" $1000.00 or less, but not a penny more, on whatever they could agree on. It had to be a big ticket item like a trip, sports equipment, electronics, computer equipment but no pets. It was emphasized that the students had to carefully consider the criteria they expected in their purchases. These criteria would then be used to decide whether or not they had made a good purchase at the end of the project.

The Big 6 Skills
A Systematic Approach to Information Problem-Solving

Group Members:

Date:

The Challenge

Your group has up to $1000.00 to spend on anything you can agree on like computer equipment, audio/visual equipment, sports equipment, jewelry, furniture or anything else you can think of.

Your goal is to find the best deal possible - not just the best price but the best quality as well. You will do this by using the Big 6 approach to information problem solving. Your group will then present a brief report to the class about your final purchase.

Fill in the templates on the following pages to keep track of your project.

Good luck and have fun!
Ms Ududec
Teacher Librarian

Using a laptop computer the students were to organize their work on a SMART Notebook software template. Each page of the template mirrored one of the Big 6 strategies. They had to answer each of the Big6 questions and keep a detailed account of their purchases – model numbers, specifications, colour, size, etc. and compare them to their initial criteria. When completed the students presented their purchases, and the accompanying SMART Notebook template, to the class. Nell and Joan Badger, the classroom teacher, evaluated student work according to a Big6 rubric. The students identified a number of interesting issues during the project; "What should we do if what we want to buy costs more than $1000.00?" "We can't meet all of our criteria." "We can't decide what we want to buy." The students learned the importance of compromise, both in dealing with their partners and in deciding which criteria were the most important to them. The project was engaging and the students had fun while completing this task. It was planned for the beginning of the school year so that the students could use what they learned about information problem solving throughout the year.

Sharing What Works

Traditionally, teaching ideas, such as this information problem-solving lesson, have not been shared beyond the walls of a teacher's classroom, or their school and professional networks. This podcast allows colleagues to share ideas by recording a conversation about a lesson and the process of implementing the ideas in their classroom. Downloadable files are available on the website, and the lesson can be recreated in thousands of other classrooms. Conversations can be recorded on a variety of software, mixed with music, and uploaded to a blog to allow other colleagues to leave a comment or share their ideas. This simple process has allowed Joan and Ben to develop 27,000 unique listeners to their community of learners over the podcast's first year of existence. The lesson ideas began with Joan and Ben sharing their own lesson ideas and files. Over time a community of learners began to develop and share their ideas too. Voices and plans from other educators around the world who were listening to the podcast were incorporated into the discussion.

The initial inquiry focused on how to collaborate with educators from across hemispheres about common pedagogical practice. Podcasting allowed teachers to engage in a collaborative environment

through shared stories about how students engage, learn, and interact with content. The stories of success, common experience, and peer encouragement continues the inquiry and the journey of professionals. These questions keep developing as the community grows into an ever louder chorus of voices pursuing collaboration.

We've heard a chorus of positive feedback from podcast subscribers. For instance:

I presented at a small conference and sang your praises. I was even pressuring some of our creative teachers to submit some of their files. You are by far one of my favourite Podcasts and I use your tips, tricks, and links all the time! People always ask how do you know that and I simply say, "PDTOGO.COM, you should listen!" – Carmen

I just got the Smart Board and am still going through the basics. But I will definitely share one. Someday. Thanks for all the support. The podcast is more helpful then you will ever know. – Mark

In terms our own experience, we've found that the model of providing professional development through podcasting shifts the power from the expert to the learner. Instead of hearing what they need to be told, the learner can chose what they need to hear, when they have heard enough, and what their next step is. It is professional learning on demand, truly mobile, and is controlled by the learner.

References

Routman, R. (2002) "Teacher Talk." *Educational Leadership 59*(6).