

January 2008

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Recommended Citation

Engen, D. (2008). Extraordinary Everyday Stories: Audio Resources for the Communication Instructor. *Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal*, 35, 102-105.

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ON THE WEB

Extraordinary Everyday Stories: Audio Resources for the Communication Instructor

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ABSTRACT

Communication instructors often supplement course texts with artistic works such as feature films, short stories, and memoirs. A less common form of supplementary material is the audio documentary/story. The discussion below introduces several audio resources likely to help students deepen their understanding of communication in general and interpersonal and intercultural communication in particular. I also offer a few ideas to those instructors wishing to help students create their own small-scale audio productions.

Audio Resources

American Radio Works (<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/>)

American Radio Works produces outstanding full-length audio documentaries on a range of topics. The website includes clips and, often, photographs to go along with the sound. Many of the documentaries will not be relevant for most communication classrooms, but features such as “Married to the Military” (<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/homefront/>) offer unique perspectives on the complexities and challenges of interpersonal interaction. I often find it helpful to look for clips from featured documentaries. For example, when I teach about the power of labels, I play a story called “Scraping by” from the feature “Hard Time: Life After Prison” (<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/hardtime/>). The story deals with the response to the word “felon” and makes a nice five minute introduction into discussions about language and labels. Similar features can be found to suit personal teaching needs.

Radio Diaries (<http://www.radiodiaries.org/>)

Radio Dairies offers a range of unique perspectives and stories. Their mission is to “...find extraordinary stories in ordinary places.” The website features first person stories from

teenagers, senior citizens, prison inmates, and blue-collar workers—among others. Radio Diaries offers students the chance to listen to diverse individuals tell about their lives; the work archived here allows students the opportunity to have a sort of conversation with individuals different than themselves. Projects of particular interest include “Teenage Diaries” where teenagers explore identity development (<http://www.radiodiaries.org/teenagediaries.html>), the “New York Works” Project in which individuals in “vanishing” professions tell their stories (<http://www.radiodiaries.org/newyorkworks-home.html>) and “The Last Place: Diary of a Retirement Home” (<http://www.radiodiaries.org/radiodiaries.html>) in which personal and intimate reflections on aging are offered.

Sound Portraits (<http://www.soundportraits.org/>)

Home to the work of well-known audio producer David Isay, Sound Portraits features everything from a documentary about lobotomies to shorter recordings of the last words of condemned prisoners. Two especially compelling works are “Ghetto Life 101,” a Peabody Award winning documentary made by two teenagers growing up on the South Side of Chicago (http://www.soundportraits.org/on-air/ghetto_life_101/) and “The Sunshine Hotel,” a documentary focusing on a flophouse in New York City (http://www.soundportraits.org/on-air/the_sunshine_hotel/).

StoryCorps (<http://storycorps.net/>)

StoryCorps is a national listening project created by David Isay. The project invites ordinary Americans to tell and capture their not so ordinary stories. StoryCorps maintains two recording booths in high traffic areas within New York City (one in Grand Central Station) and has two mobile recording studios traveling the country collecting stories. The idea is deceptively simple. Individuals come to a StoryCorps location and conduct a 40 minute interview with a friend, neighbor, family member, etc. A trained facilitator helps the participants as needed and makes two broadcast quality recordings of the interview; one copy is given to the participants and one is sent to the Library of Congress which maintains a StoryCorps archive. StoryCorps describes its work as follows:

To us, StoryCorps celebrates our shared humanity and collective identity. It captures and defines the stories that bond us. We’ve found that the process of interviewing a friend, neighbor, or family member can have a profound impact on both the interviewer and the interviewee. We’ve seen people change, friendships grow, families walk away feeling closer, understanding each other better. Listening, after all, is an act of love...

The StoryCorps website offers a number of resources for communication instructors. The site posts powerful excerpts from recorded conversations (usually just a couple of minutes

long), the site offers advice on how individuals can conduct their own StoryCorps-like interviews with friends and family (a possible classroom assignment), and, through its “question generator” feature, the website will even help users generate specific questions for use in an interview.

**As detailed, each of the websites above presents a range of audio storytelling—instructors will find projects ranging in length from a couple minutes to a couple hours. Many longer works on these websites are divided into shorter vignettes that can often be used separately in the classroom.

Other Audio Resources of Interest...

- ***This American Life*** (<http://www.thislife.org/>): A popular public radio program featuring unique storytelling. Each one hour episode is divided into “acts” ranging from approximately 10-20 minutes—often one of the acts works well for classroom use.
- ***Public Radio Exchange*** (<http://www.prx.org/>): A site featuring audio work from independent producers across the country and world
- ***Public Radio International*** (<http://www.pri.org/>): A major source of non-commercial radio
- And, of course, ***National Public Radio*** (<http://www.npr.org/>): A source for a wide variety of complex and interesting audio work.

From Listening to Doing: Tackling Small-Scale Audio Production

The more I used audio work in my classroom, the more interested I became in learning how to help students (and myself) learn how to create audio projects. What follows is intended not for the production classroom, but for those instructors in interpersonal courses who may want to have students create small-scale audio work for a class assignment. For example, students might conduct and edit an audio interview with an elder or an individual from a culture different than their own. Students might assemble an audio collage featuring photos and comments from family members about interpersonal communication. And so on. This kind of audio work is exiting for students, fairly easy to produce, and can be done with fairly limited expense. The resources below help get you started.

A How-To Guide to Audio (http://www.soundportraits.org/education/how_to_record/)

This portion of the Sound Portraits website offers advice about conducting interviews, purchasing inexpensive equipment, and getting the best possible sound. This guide will prove helpful to students and instructors.

Transom.org (<http://www.transom.org/>)

Billed as “a showcase & workshop” for new public radio, Transom.org offers valuable resources for the novice and experienced audio producer. The site features reviews of audio equipment, editing tips, and helpful links. The site also features a variety of unique programming.

Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>)

Audacity is free open-source audio editing software for the PC and Mac. More elaborate programs such as Adobe Audition and Pro-Tools can also be used, but students in any course involving an audio component can easily download and make use of Audacity.

Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University (<http://www-cds.aas.duke.edu/>)

The Center for Documentary Studies offers courses in audio production. I attended the beginner class in the summer of 2005 (Hearing is Believing) and Hearing is Believing II in the summer of 2006. Both classes were, in my opinion, outstanding. Instructors or students with an interest in learning and teaching about audio work may find the Center’s courses of value.

Audio-Related Assignments

There a number of ways audio can be incorporated into communication courses. I’ll mention general ideas here—ideas that could be modified for use in a wide variety of communication courses.

- Have students conduct audio interviews with community members. Instructors decide the on the focus. Examples include an interview with an individual whose job centers on interpersonal communication (e.g., a counselor) or an interview with an individual from a culture different from the student doing the interview.
- Have students create short audio essays (e.g., audio piece about identity for an interpersonal course)
- Students create short audio documentaries (e.g., communication in parents’ card group...or a day in the communication life of another student in the class)
- Have students write a paper applying communication concepts to a full-length audio documentary heard on one of the websites mentioned earlier.
- Invite students to explore some of the audio resources mentioned here and find examples of audio work depicting communication concepts or philosophies being discussed in the course.