

eTools: Using Audacity in the Classroom

Shane Tilton, Ohio Northern University

Introduction

A need exists for students and communication educators to go beyond the traditional concepts of literacy. Students enrolled in our communication courses are expected to be proficient in verbal communication through traditional face-to-face forms of engagement and more mediated/electronic modes of interaction. Practitioners of communication must be able to archive their speeches and other relevant oral presentations for future consumption. This skill set will be equivalent to mastering word processing and information gathering as a measure of being a successful graduate in the field of communication.

What is Audacity?

Audacity is a free audio editing program that is cross-platform and open source, which I introduce to my students as the “Microsoft Word for audio editing.” One of the major strengths of this software is its ability to copy and paste audio content in a similar manner to word processing software. It allows for the quick editing and addition of metadata to any audio file as well as for the adding of layers/tracks to an audio file to compose a complete audio work. Compared to other audio editing software packages, Audacity handles most of the basic editing functions needed to produce digital audio content and can help enhance soft audio to the point of being easily heard by the

casual listener.

How can I get Audacity for use in the classroom?

Go to Soundforge at <http://audacityteam.org/download/> to download this software for Windows, Macs, and Linux systems The LAME MP3 encoding software will need to be installed as well in order to work with and save MP3 files in the Audacity environment; this software is available at <http://audacityteam.org/download/plugins>. The LAME MP3 encoding will normally install itself easily once Audacity is installed on the computer. Both pieces of software must be installed before the program can work with, edit, and save MP3 files.

How do I use Audacity in the classroom?

Audacity can be used in most communication courses that teach verbal communication or media production, and is one of the first pieces of software I install when setting up a new computer. There needs to be a logical implementation of the software, however. Students should first begin with a basic "bootcamp" of the software that trains them how to use the basic functions of the software. Audacity can then be used:

1. *as a means to create archived versions of lectures or other classroom presentations.* Audacity can be a "go-to" tool for creating short lectures for flipped classroom and web-based learning environments. If you have a good microphone, Audacity becomes an easy way to record and edit a lecture and post it to a content

management system (CMS) for future review.

2. *for recording speeches to be graded at a later date or for recording speeches for the digital-learning/ flipped classes setting.* If there is a verbal component to the course, students can record their presentations outside of class, edit it with Audacity, and submit their presentations via a CMS (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle). One advantage of this use is creating an archive of previous speeches; another advantage is giving instructors another tool with which to provide students with feedback. Instructors can review the speech one-on-one with the student and provide feedback by pausing the speech and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the speech.

3. *for recording journal assignments.* This use has replaced journal entries in my interpersonal communication courses. In these courses, students are assigned a prompt based on a focal point of a lesson and asked to create a short (i.e., no more than 5 minutes in length) podcast as a response to that point. Subsequent podcasts should follow the same format throughout the course of the semester, which is established during the first podcast assignment.

4. *for recording peer-evaluations of other students' work.* During a production or performance type of class, Audacity can be used as a peer review platform. Students are given both a basic rubric for the assignment and a primer on good practices when conducting a peer review (e.g., use "I" language when giving feedback, provide positive and negative feedback during the review, point to specific examples in the work, provide

a specific rationale why this element is important to focus on in the review). Students can record their reviews outside of class and submit them via the CMS.

5. *for recording stories*. Considered to be a basic skill set for a journalism class, students are assigned to record interviews, natural sounds, and other effects in order to tell a story. To facilitate this use, Audacity, the inverted pyramid style of writing (McKane, 2006), and the natural progression outline for narrative writing (Baechtel, 2004) are introduced during the early part of the semester.

Conclusion

Audacity is a good tool for the beginner in the field of audio production. The translation of information is a vital skill for students to possess as the archiving of information is becoming a necessary function in the era of social networks, flipped classrooms, and distinct communication practices. By introducing students to Audacity, they can begin to learn this skill that ultimately will provide them with an advantage over those individuals who are unaccustomed to working with audio.

References

- Baechtel, M. (2004). *Shaping the story: A step-by-step guide to writing short fiction*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- McKane, A. (2006). *News writing*. London, England: Sage.